

minimal number of religious truths.

We may also note how this emphasis upon “doing good works” (the *mitzvot*) moves logically to the next paragraph, in which Yeshua outlines His perspective toward the Torah itself. Since the light that He demands of His disciples is that which comes forth from their doing good works, the accusation that He was teaching the abolition of the Torah must be corrected. Far from abolishing the Torah and the Prophets, Yeshua came to make the *mitzvot* shine forth from His disciples. For our Master, effective evangelism and living in obedience to the Torah go hand in hand.

As salt and light, the talmidim of Yeshua have been given both the ability and the responsibility to take up the challenge given to Israel of old, to be a light to the nations. Matthew’s universalism is once again emphasized, for though the initial mission is to the lost sheep of Israel, the ultimate goal is that all of the nations of the earth should come to the light, and acknowledge Israel’s God to be the One, true, and only God. This is what the Messiah intends to accomplish, and He has commissioned His disciples to be His servants by which the ancient promise to Abraham would come to fruition.

17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Torah or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Verses 17–20 form a natural heading to the larger section (5:21–48) in which Yeshua contrasts His own interpretation and teaching from the Torah with well-known teachings generally received by the Jewish community He addresses. These verses also carry forward the previous teaching of our Master that His talmidim are to shine forth the light of truth through the doing of the *mitzvot*.²

The overall structure of vv. 17–20 is important for understanding their meaning:

Statement/Heading:

Negative: Do not think that I came to abolish the Torah or the Prophets

Positive: I did not come to abolish but to fulfill

Proof: God’s word is eternal

Negative: Until heaven and earth pass not the smallest aspect of God’s word will pass away

Positive: all will be accomplished

Application/Halachah for Yeshua’s talmidim:

Negative: whoever annuls even the least commandment & so teaches others to annul the commandments will be least in the kingdom of Heaven

Positive: whoever does the commandments & teaches others to do them will be called great in the kingdom of Heaven

Conclusion:

Positive: one’s righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees

Negative: else one will not even enter the kingdom of Heaven

This structure helps us see several important points:

1. the concept of “abolish” is further defined by the structure as “annulling” and teaching others to “annul” the commandments

¹Since Matthew 5:17–20 is a *crux interpretum* for the issue of Yeshua and the Torah, the amount of work done on these verses by Christian scholars is enormous. For bibliographies, consult the following:

Allison-Davies, *Matthew*, 3 vols. (in the ICC commentary), 1.502-3.

Donald Hagner, *Matthew* 2 vols. (in *The Word Bible Commentary*), 1.102.

John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (in the NIGTC), p. 216.

²See Samuel Byrskog, “Matthew 5:17–18 in the Argumentation of the Context,” *Revue Biblique*, 104(4) (1997), 557–571.

2. “fulfilling” is further defined by the structure as “doing” the commandments and teaching others to do them
3. those who enjoy membership in the kingdom of Heaven are known for their righteousness
 - a. the standard of righteousness is the eternal word of God: the Torah and Prophets
 - b. the practical benchmark is the righteousness for which the scribes and Pharisees are known

The opening verse of this section therefore makes it clear that Yeshua did not consider His teaching to be at variance with Moses, and He did not ever want His talmidim to think that it did. To interpret the ensuing context (the so-called “antitheses”) as though Yeshua was replacing the words of Torah with His own teaching is completely wrongheaded. As Allison-Davies remarks:

As the introduction or preamble to 5:21–48... it is intended to prevent the readers of the First Gospel from making two errors. First, it plainly states that the six subsequent paragraphs are not to be interpreted—as they have been so often by so many—as ‘antitheses’, ‘antitheses’ that, in at least two or three instances, set aside the Torah. Instead, Jesus upholds the law, so that between him and Moses there can be no real conflict. Then, secondly, and despite the concord declared by 5:17–19, 5:20 tells us that what Jesus requires of his followers surpasses what has traditionally been regarded (by the scribes and Pharisees) as the requirements of the Torah.¹

¹Allison-Davies, *Matthew*, 1.481-2.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Torah and the Prophets The opening negative imperative (Μὴ νομίσητε from νομίζω, *nomizo*) is not rhetorical, as though it means “I surely hope no one thinks.” These opening words of our Master rebuts a real misunderstanding. Apparently there were those who thought Yeshua was speaking against the Torah. But how could this have been the case? On what grounds would Yeshua have been so misunderstood as to require a clear and direct rebuttal to the misunderstanding?

Some have suggested that this opening phrase was redacted by Matthew in the post-destruction era, when the emerging Christian Church was moving toward an antinomian misunderstanding of the Master’s words. They would point to any lack of the synoptic parallel to strengthen this approach. But we have similar language in Matt 10:34 (“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword”) which does have a synoptic parallel (Lk 12:51) and could therefore not be construed as entirely redactional by Matthew. It is far better, then, to see in these words the clear statement of our Master Who was rebutting some misunderstanding that had arisen over His teaching.

It is better to posit such a misunderstanding as springing from the fact that Yeshua was at variance with the standard or familiar interpretation of key Torah texts. In disagreeing with the authorities of His day over exactly how the Torah was to be interpreted and applied, He may have been accused of dismantling the rabbinic opinions and as such, would have been judged as abolishing the Torah. For the ruling interpretations of the Sages were considered necessary for the proper application of Torah. We read in *Perkei Avot* 3.11 a list of those who have no place in the world to come:

¹The Kaufman manuscript has different wording here: והמאדים את פני חברו אפעל פי, “and he who humiliates the face of his companion publically,” but this same idea is given earlier in the paragraph as well and is most likely a textual problem in the Kaufman manuscript. Note b.Sanhedrin 99a, המגלה פנים בתורה, “he who misinterprets the Torah.”

R. Eleazar the Modite says, “(1) He who treats Holy Things as secular, and (2) he who defiles the appointed times, (3) he who humiliates his fellow in public, (4) he who removes the signs of the covenant of Abraham, our father, (may he rest in peace), and (5) he who gives interpretations of Torah which are not according to oral halachah, even though he has in hand learning in Torah and good deeds, will have no share in the world to come.

It is this last item that interests us here: “he who gives interpretations of Torah which are not according to oral halachah” (המגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה אף) (על פי).¹ Here, changing the interpretation of a Torah text, and thus offering a radically different *halachah* based upon the reinterpretation, is considered an egregious error, equivalent with other crimes that cause a forfeiture of a place in the world to come. It is therefore understandable how Yeshua, giving as He does a different interpretation of Torah texts than did some of His contemporaries, might be accused of “abolishing” the Torah. Interestingly, later on Paul would also be accused of teaching against the Torah of Moses (Acts 21:21ff).

We may also compare the note included by Luke in his history of the Apostles (Acts 6:14):

for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Yeshua, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

I came The “I have come/I came” sayings found in the Gospels speak to Yeshua’s self understanding of His mission. We may note the following:

Matt. 10:34 “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. (cf. Lk 12:51)

Mark 1:38 He said to them, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.”

Luke 12:49 “I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!

John 9:39 And Yeshua said, “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”

John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 12:27 “Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.

John 12:46 “I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.

John 18:37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Yeshua answered, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

In summary, Yeshua came:

1. To fulfill the Torah and the Prophets
2. To preach the goodnews of the kingdom
3. To bring judgment upon the earth

4. To give abundant life to His sheep
5. To offer Himself as a sin offering
6. To bring light to those in darkness
7. To testify of the truth

In our immediate text, Yeshua's mission is to "fulfill the Torah and the Prophets." It may well be that this phrase is a broad description of all that His mission entailed.

to abolish The Greek word is καταλύω (*kataluo*) which is most often used to describe the destruction of physical things, such as buildings (Matt 24:2; Mk 13:2; Lk 21:6). The same verb is used to describe the words of Yeshua when He said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19; cp. Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mk 14:58; 15:29). The word is also used in the sense of "nullify" or "render ineffective," especially in reference to laws or decrees (cf. 2Macc 2.22; 4.11; 4Macc 5.33).

Some have suggested that by "abolish" Yeshua means "to wrongly interpret." Young is representative of this view:

The word "abolish" means "to interpret incorrectly." In the Greek the word *kataluo* means "abolish," and its dynamic Hebrew equivalent *batel* is often used in contexts that deal with interpreting Scripture. One cancels Torah when it is misunderstood.¹

While it may be true that misinterpretation was viewed by the Sages as equivalent to abolishing the Torah, it is not clear that the Hebrew word בָּטַל (*batal*) is the dynamic equivalent of Greek καταλύω. In the 40 times καταλύω is found in the Lxx, it is never translated by בָּטַל. In the seven times בָּטַל is found in the Tanach, most often it is translated by καταργέω (*katargeo*, "to nullify," "to become ineffective," cf. Ezra 4:21, 23-24; 5:5; 6:8) and once by ἀργέω (*argeo*, "to linger, stop," cf. Qoh 12:3). Granted, the use of בָּטַל in the Hebrew of the 1st Century may not be reflected by Lxx usage, and it is clear that the verb is found in rabbinic contexts discussing the undoing of rabbinic dictum (e.g., m.*Gittin* 4.1; b.*Avodah Zarah* 32b). Ultimately, the meaning in the sense of "abolish" is best learned from its opposite, "to fulfill." He did not come to render the Torah and the Prophets as useless for His talmidim, but to make the words of the inspired texts all the more applicable and real in their lives.

This does not mean that Jesus was unaware of the fact that his arguments would seem unusual to some of the conformists of his day — but even in these cases he would by no means be described as an innovator. In order to prevent such an impression, he opened his exposition with a preamble (Mt. 5:17–20). His interpretation of the texts that follow this preamble may have appeared quite daring or unconventional to a number of his hearers. Nevertheless he begins by emphasizing that he did not come to undermine the meaning of the Torah by his exegesis, on the contrary he came to establish the true significance of the Torah and place it on firmer ground.²

the Torah and the Prophets Here, the Greek noun νόμος (*nomos*) most certainly means "Torah," being used together with "Prophets" to de-note the Tanach. Some have stressed that the lack of "Writings" (כתובות, *ketuvot*) in the description of the Tanach indicates that Matthew was writing at a time before the canonization of the final section. Note that in Lk 24:44 all three are

¹Brad Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 265. Note also Blizzard & Bivin, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Destiny Image, 1994), pp. 114-15 who take the same view.

See also the comments of David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Magnes Press, 1988), p. 504, n. 40.

²Flusser, *Ibid.*, p. 495.

mentioned: "... that all things which are written about Me in the Torah of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (where "Moses" stands for the Torah and "Psalms" for the *Ketuvot* or Writings). But earlier in the chapter (24:27) we read: Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." Here, as elsewhere (cf. Matt 11:13; 22:40; Lk 16:16, 29, 31; John 1:45), the common phrase "Torah and Prophets" stands for the entire Tanach.

But why does Yeshua include the word "Prophets" here? In the next verse, He speaks only of the Torah without mentioning the Prophets. It is possible that the word "Torah" is used broadly in v. 18 to include all of Scripture. More probable, however, is the idea that by including "Prophets" in the opening verse of the section, Yeshua intended to emphasize the "fulfillment" aspect of His ministry. Allison-Davies suggest this as the reason why the word "Prophets" is included:

But there here must, we fancy, be an important motive. And it is probably this: for Matthew, who has seen in the coming of Jesus Messiah the fulfilment of the OT prophecies, not only is the prophetic portion of the Scriptures no less important than the five books of Moses, but 'the law and the prophets' together constitute in his eyes a united prophetic witness: 'the prophets and the law prophesied until John' (11:13). So Matthew cannot simply let it be said the Jesus fulfilled the law or that Jesus fulfilled the prophets: he must tell us that he fulfilled both.¹

but to fulfill As everyone recognizes, the meaning given to the verb "to fulfill" (πληρώω, *pleroo*) in our verse is key to understanding the entire section. For if Yeshua clearly did not come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, but to "fulfill" them, in understanding what He means by "fulfill" we discover a central emphasis of His mission and work.²

It has been a fairly standard Christian understanding to interpret the meaning of "fulfill" here as "to finish, to complete." The interpretation of the verse is then that Yeshua fulfilled the Torah in every way and as a result, it not longer is a functioning component of God's will in the lives of Christians. While its precepts and wisdom are still valuable, the Torah has ceased to have direct application to the life of faith for followers of Yeshua. If our verse stood in isolation of any larger context, such an interpretation of the word "fulfill" would be within the realm of possibilities. But such a meaning cannot stand here, for the obvious reason that the following verses (which are explanatory of the opening verse), Yeshua clearly admonishes His talmidim to "do" and to "teach" the Torah. Moreover, the appeal to the enduring creative order ("until heaven and earth pass away") makes no sense if in this opening verse Yeshua has declared the Torah and Prophets to be finished. Furthermore, the fact that "fulfill" must append not only to the Torah but also to the Prophets renders this interpretation impossible. No one would claim that the words of the Prophets have been "finished" in the sense of no longer having an active and direct application to the lives of believers.

Others note that most often in the Apostolic Scriptures, the verb *pleroo* is used in the fulfillment formula introducing prophecy: "that the words of the prophet X might be fulfilled" (or similar verbiage), and that it should be so interpreted here. Carson is representative:

The best interpretation of these difficult verses says that Jesus fulfills

¹Allison-Davies, *Matthew*, 1.484.

²For a fuller discussion on the meaning of "fulfill" in Matt 5:17, see my paper "What Does Πληρώω Mean in Matthew 5:17" available at www.torahresource.com.

the Law and the Prophets in that they point to him, and he is their fulfillment. The antithesis is not between “abolish” and “keep” but between “abolish” and “fulfill.” ‘For Matthew, then, it is not the question of Jesus’ relation to the Law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him!’... Therefore we give *pleroo* (“fulfill”) exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations, which in the prologue (Matt 1–2) have already laid great stress on the prophetic nature of the OT and the way it points to Jesus.¹

There is a significant problem, however, with this interpretation, and that is simply that in the quotation formula, the verb “fulfill” is always in the passive mood: “that the words of prophet X *might be fulfilled*.” Yeshua, however, does not say that the Torah and Prophets are “fulfilled” (passive) in Him, but rather that He came “to fulfill” (active) them.

Of course, there is surely the sense that all of God’s purposes find their fulfillment in Yeshua: “For as many as are the promises of God, in Him [Yeshua] they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us” (2Cor 1:20). But to understand “fulfill” in our verse as entirely enveloped in the work of Yeshua Himself does not fit with the following context. For there He admonishes His talmidim both “to do” and “to teach” the Torah, meaning that His having come to “fulfill” the Torah is seen in the way the Torah would be active in their lives and the lives of those they would teach.

A number of commentators² have pointed to the fact that the Hebrew term that most likely stands behind the Greek *pleroo* is the hifil of קָמַם, i.e., הִקְמִים (*qum, haqiyim*). The verb *qum* has the meaning “to arise, get up, stand up” and in the hifil “to erect, establish, confirm.” We find this form of *qum* used regularly in covenant contexts of the Tanach. For example, God promises to “establish” a covenant with Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11, 17), with Abraham (Gen 17:7, 9), with Isaac (Gen 17:21; 26:3), and with Israel (Ex 6:4). In each of these examples, the hifil form of *qum* is used. This regular use of the verb *qum* to mean “establish, confirm” is thus believed to be the background for Yeshua’s use of *pleroo* in our verse, thus to give the meaning, “I came to establish or confirm the Torah and the Prophets.” However, a significant problem with this view is that in the Lxx, *pleroo* never is used to translate the verb *qum*. Moreover, *pleroo* is most often used to translate the Hebrew verb מָלֵא (*mala’*), “to be full, to fill up, to complete something.”³ Further, (so it is argued), the verb *mala’* is not used in the sense of “establish” or “confirm.”

If we do place weight upon the Lxx use of *pleroo* as the normal translation for *mala’*, “to be full, fill up, complete,” and thus postulate that our Master used this Hebrew word when He proclaimed His purpose to “fulfill” the Torah and the Prophets, there remains the question whether *mala’* can have the sense of “establish or confirm,” a meaning that would best fit the overall context of our passage. And in fact, there are several instances where *mala’* does have this meaning.

Note Jer 44:25:

‘As for you and your wives, you have spoken with your mouths and fulfilled it (מָלֵא) 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 drink offerings to her.” Go ahead and confirm (קָמַם) your vows, and certainly perform (עָשָׂה) your vows!’

¹Carson, *Matthew*, pp. 143-44.

²Note Brad Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, p. 265.

³The DuTillet has מָלֵא in 5:17 as does the Münster. The Even Bohan has: אל תחשבו שבאתי להפיר תורה אלא להשלים, using the hifil of שָׁלַם, “to complete.”

What is striking in this text is the combined use of *מלא* and *עשה* (“to do”), which exactly parallel *πληρώω* (*pleroo*) and *ποιέω* (*poieo*, “to do”) 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” (*הקיה*) it.

Another text also uses the verb *mala’* in the sense of “establish” or “confirm” — 1Ki 1:13–14. Here, Adonijah has declared himself king at the prospect of David’s soon demise. The prophet Nathan goes to Bathsheba and alerts her of the situation, and then gives his counsel:

“Go at once to King David and say to him, ‘Have you not, my lord, O king, sworn to your maidservant, saying, “Surely Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne”? Why then has Adonijah become king?’ “Behold, while you are still there speaking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm (*מלא*) your words.”

Once again, the use of *mala’* in connection with one’s words takes on the sense of “confirm” or “make more certain.”

In both of these instances (Jer 44:25, 1Ki 1:14), the Lxx translates the Hebrew *mala’* with *pleroo*, the same verb used in our Matthew text. It seems entirely warranted, then, to understand *pleroo*, “to fulfill” in our text to mean “establish, confirm.” Not only is there good lexical warrant for interpreting *pleroo* in this manner, but it also fits well with the following context. Yeshua’s purpose in terms of the Torah was to bring it back to its original intention, and thus to “establish or confirm” it in the lives of His talmidim. For through the many rabbinic fences that had been added to the written Torah, it had become so encumbered as often to be a burden. What is more, having adopted the theology that Jewish status was the basis for righteousness before God, the rabbis had shifted the Torah from its original purpose to that of establishing their Jewish identity. Yeshua’s purpose was to unravel the Torah from the web of man-made laws, and bring it back to its original purpose—to aid, protect, and guide the people of God, and to constantly bring them to a greater reliance upon and faith in Him.

We may thus understand our verse in this way:

“Do not think that I have come to render the Torah and Prophets in any manner as ineffectual. On the contrary, I have not come to render them ineffectual, but to confirm their words and establish them in your lives.”