

TREASURES NEW AND OLD:
MATTHEW'S EXEMPLARY READING OF REVELATION FOCUSED ON JESUS

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Jesus sifts and transcends the First Testament¹ to refocus God's revelation on himself. Paradoxically, even the parts sifted out are fulfilled in Jesus. In portraying Jesus' teaching and story, Matthew urges his readers and hearers to follow him in following Jesus' hermeneutic.

Not abolished but refocused on Jesus

In the first century, Jewish teachers thought to be Torah-abolishers could face severe consequences along with their followers. Jewish writings frequently declare the permanence of the law and warn against attempts to alter even the smallest portion.² The writers of 2 and 4 Maccabees considered Jewish Hellenization and adjustments to the temple cult during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes an attempted abolishment of the law that provoked divine wrath.³ Josephus blamed Jerusalem's fall on Zealot actions against the temple precinct and cult that he viewed as abolishing the law and bringing divine judgement upon the people as a whole.⁴ If Matthew's gospel originated shortly after AD 70, it came from a time when Jews were questioning who had abolished the law and unbridled God's wrath. If written earlier, the lessons of the Antiochan persecution and rising tensions with Rome ensured that those marked out as undermining Torah faced opposition from the highest levels within the Jewish cult.

At the same time, rabbis had modified many aspects of the law beyond its literal sense. They substituted handwashing for ritual baths, enacted procedures for circumventing the seventh-year release of slaves, and did not follow the bitter water trial for women accused of adultery.⁵

1. Given this paper's focus on the intertestamental relationship, I am using my preferred (though nonstandard) terms of "First Testament" and "New Testament" that I encountered through Regent College audio lectures by Marva Dawn. This avoids "Old" (insinuating obsolescence) and "Second" (insinuating secondary importance).

2. See Deut. 4:2; 18:20. The *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* states that anyone who "prophesies so as to eradicate a law of the Torah" shall be killed (folio 90a). The enduring nature of the law is declared by Philo's *Life of Moses*, 2.3; the Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch*, 77.15; Baruch 4:1; Wisdom 18:4; and 2 Esdras 9:37. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 61.

3. Matthew Thiessen, "Abolishers of the Law in Early Judaism and Matthew 5,17–20," *Biblica* 93, no. 4 (2012): 545–48. See especially 2 Macc. 2:19–23; 4:9–11 and 4 Macc. 4:15–26; 5:14–38.

4. Thiessen, "Abolishers of the Law," 549–51. See Josephus' *Jewish War*, 2.391–94; 4.171, 258, 348, 381–82, 388.

5. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 63.

They softened the *lex talionis* commanding exact retribution to financial penalties.⁶ In spite of this, “later Rabbis certainly did not consider these changes in the tradition an abrogation of the law.”⁷ These alterations stood alongside praise of the Torah’s enduring, unchanging nature without perceived contradiction.

Matthew 5:17–20

Within this milieu, Jesus’ moderation of Sabbath and food laws, his critique of several *halakhic* rulings and the temple cult, and his growing inclusion of gentiles within the people of God posed an obvious question. Was Jesus following the rabbinic practice of applying Torah to present realities, or was he abolishing the law? Although Jesus’ later words and deeds likely prompted this question,⁸ Matthew addresses it early and forcefully near the beginning of his first discourse of Jesus’ teaching: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.”⁹ Jesus reveals a third way, *fulfillment in him*, which explodes the forced choice between abolishing and contemporizing Torah.

Jesus’ statement is provocative. It assumes his coming forces a re-evaluation of God’s past revelation.¹⁰ It elevates the prophets to equal status with the law even as it subordinates the

6. The *lex talionis* appears in Lev. 24:19–20, Exod. 21:23–25, and Deut. 19:21. Num. 35:31 suggests a shift to fines further articulated in later Jewish writings. “The prohibition of a ‘ransom’ for the taking of a life implies that a ransom was paid for other crimes. Fines are clearly taught by later rabbis for at least the ‘tooth for a tooth’ law. Thus, *Mishnah Baba Qamma* 8:1 says: ‘He who injures his fellow is liable to [compensate] him on five counts: injury, pain, medical costs, loss of income, and indignity.’” Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle e-book, under “Lex Talionis.”

7. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 63.

8. “Matthew has not yet recorded any charge that Jesus was breaking the law.” D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 141.

9. Matt. 5:17 (NRSV Anglicised, *passim*).

10. “Jesus is superior to the law and the prophets, since his coming raises the issue of whether they are permanent or coming to an end. His coming provokes a new definition of the current religious traditions and becomes the standard for re-evaluating them.” Élian Cuvillier, “Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel. Matthew and First-Century Judaism: A Contribution to the Debate,” *New Testament Studies* 55, no. 2 (2009): 148, doi:10.1017/S0028688509000101.

“For Matthew, then, it is not the question of Jesus’ relation to the Law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him!” Robert J. Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and interpretation in Matthew 5:17-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 2 (1974): 242.

entire First Testament to Jesus.¹¹ Jesus has come to fulfill, and “fulfillment also implies transcendence.”¹²

In the following verse, Jesus singles out the law with words that both echo and subvert standard Jewish piety: “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”¹³ While the hyperbolic language of pristine endurance echoes other Jewish writings,¹⁴ Jesus uses two “until” clauses as bookends to shift the focus from the law’s longevity to its eventual passing.¹⁵ Only *until* this point will the law endure.¹⁶ By contrast, Jesus later declares, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”¹⁷

The subversion continues in the following verse. Breaking the least commandment makes one “least in the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁸ This epithet is ambiguous. Jesus later elevates the “least in the kingdom of heaven” above John the baptizer, and he receives service given to “the least of these who are members of my family.”¹⁹ Even these “least” lawbreakers are *in* the kingdom.²⁰ By

11. Jewish writings about abolishment (see note 2) typically focused on the law, perhaps written and oral, not the entire First Testament. The pairing of prophets with law reappears in 7:12, forming an *inclusio* for the body of the sermon. Inversely, Jesus pairs law with prophets in a prophetic context in 11:13. Carson, *Matthew*, 142, 144. This pairing reappears in the transfiguration where Moses (lawgiver) and Elijah (prophet) both talk with Jesus (17:3). McKnight, *Sermon*, under “The Claim of Fulfillment (5:17).”

12. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 62.

13. Matt. 5:18.

14. Rabbis voiced similarly hyperbolic language about the law’s preservation (see note 2) even while enforcing sweeping changes in its application (see note 6). “These rabbis maintained that their seemingly innovative rulings were all along contained by implication in the Torah revealed to Moses at Sinai.” David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), Logos edition, 158.

15. Cuvillier, “Torah Observance,” 150.

16. Turner, *Matthew*, 163.

17. Matt. 24:35. Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Matthew: The Early Christian Worldview of the First Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 112n31. On the uniqueness of stating the Messiah’s words will endure forever, see Cuvillier, “Torah Observance,” 151.

18. Matt. 5:19.

19. Matt. 11:11; 25:40. Only the second uses the same Greek word for “least.” See Carson, *Matthew*, 146.

20. Cuvillier, “Torah Observance,” 154. Many commentators disagree. For example, “In other words, ‘least’ in the kingdom is a kind of way of saying ‘suffering eternal judgment.’” McKnight, *Sermon*, under “The

contrast, Jesus concludes the discourse with three views of those inside and outside the kingdom, the last delineated by who obeys “these words of mine.”²¹

The final verse of this section shifts the focus from the law to the superior righteousness the remainder of the discourse reveals.²² Rather than rigid adherence to the law, it is righteousness exceeding “that of the scribes and Pharisees” that allows entrance into the kingdom.²³ These leaders scrupulously obeyed the law’s smallest commands, yet rejected its fulfillment and elucidation by Jesus.²⁴ Jesus does not abolish the First Testament, but they “make void the word of God” and lead many down the road to destruction.²⁵

While this section is open to interpretations that stress greater continuity with the literal sense of the law,²⁶ I believe such readings privilege the words that echo existing Jewish views rather than focusing on what makes Jesus’ words distinct. Further, they do not fully account for how Matthew builds on Jesus’ language in later passages, as shown above. In light of these factors, it appears that Jesus consistently sets himself and his teaching above the First Testament. The law will endure a long time while Jesus’ words endure forever. Disobeying the law is shameful while disobeying Jesus’ words excludes one from the kingdom. The law and the entire

Consequences of the Elucidated Claim (5:19).” However, to interpret “in the kingdom” as meaning “outside the kingdom” does not give Matthew’s wording due weight. Carson, *Matthew*, 146.

Later in Jesus’ teaching, he will give his disciples authority to bind and loose (16:19; 18:18). “Loose” is the same word here translated “break.” This word appears one other time in Matthew, for freeing donkeys (21:2).

21. Matt. 7:13–27. The wise and foolish builders appear after the wide and narrow gates and the good and bad trees. This series of contrasts between two ways shows that the fall of the foolish man’s house should be read in parallel with the road that “leads to destruction” (7:13) and the tree that is “cut down and thrown into the fire” (7:19). It is a destiny outside the kingdom. Turner, *Matthew*, 214, 222–23; McKnight, *Sermon*, under “The Foolish: Hearing and Not Doing.”
22. Cuvillier, “Torah Observance,” 153.
23. Matt. 5:20. Cuvillier, “Torah Observance,” 153–54; Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding,” 240.
24. Matt. 23:23.
25. Matt. 15:6; 7:13–20; cf. 23:4, 13–15.
26. E.g., Turner, *Matthew*, 157–64. Turner suggests that a reading similar to what I have advocated “is tantamount to saying he has come to abolish the law.” Turner, *Matthew*, 157. There is a sense in which Jesus abolishes some portions of the law, but in a deeper sense, he entirely fulfills it as he goes beyond its literal expression to reveal God’s intent. Carson draws a helpful comparison with Jesus’ other “Do not think that I have come” saying (10:34): “Few would want to argue that there is *no* sense in which Jesus came to bring peace (cf. on 5:9). Why then argue that there is *no* sense in which Jesus abolishes the law?” Carson, *Matthew*, 141–42.

First Testament endure, but only when subordinate to and sifted by Jesus.

The fulfillment quotations

Matthew's fulfillment quotations²⁷ reveal the writer's commitment to Jesus' hermeneutic: they view the First Testament through the light of Jesus. Rather than comparing preselected Messianic prophecies to Jesus' life, the writer appears to start with Jesus' life and use Scripture to draw out echoes to God's past acts.²⁸ To ensure a close fit, Matthew evinces some freedom in altering quotations to suit their new context and narrating events to suit the quotations.²⁹

In these quotations Matthew places "cookies on every shelf," spelling out connections to God's past deeds for the illiterate while rewarding those steeped in Scripture with deeper insights.³⁰ For instance, the first fulfillment quotation draws from Isaiah's account of the sign to King Ahaz.³¹ Matthew's quotation of "the virgin will conceive" draws a superficial connection no deeper than a word used by the Septuagint, since the sign for Ahaz does not include a virginal conception.³² However, a profound meditation stands behind the words "they shall name him Emmanuel," a name declaring God's presence with the people. While the child born in Ahaz's day signified God's presence through his name, Jesus reveals God's presence in a person!³³

27. These quotations of the First Testament, each introduced with a variation of "to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet," appear in Matt. 1:22–23; 2:15; 2:17–18; 2:23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10. Matt. 2:5–6 and 13:14–15 are closely related. These quotations are unique to Matthew's gospel. R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter, Devon: Paternoster Press, 1989), 171; Turner, *Matthew*, 19–21.

28. France, *Matthew*, 179; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 183; Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), xxvii.

29. France, *Matthew*, 175–76, 178. The greatest freedom with a quotation is perhaps "He will be called a Nazorean" (2:23), which does not closely match any First Testament text. On other changes, see Turner, *Matthew*, 69; Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 29. Freedom with narration seems most obvious to me in the portrayal of Jesus straddling two donkeys (21:1–7) to fit a hyper-literal reading of Zech. 9:9. The motivation for adding the second animal escapes me, though it must be deeper than misunderstanding Zechariah's parallelism. See Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 210.

30. Rikk E. Watts, "Genealogy and Birth Narratives: Matthew 1–2" (audio lecture, Exegesis of Matthew, Regent College, Vancouver, BC, January 14, 2009); France, *Matthew*, 183–84.

31. Matt. 1:22–23; Isa. 7:10–17. More precisely, it is a sign to the house of David (Isa. 7:13).

32. Turner, *Matthew*, 23, 71. Suggesting the sign was for a later age is unpersuasive; e.g., Carson, *Matthew*, 79–80.

33. Turner, *Matthew*, 72–73. This theme reverberates all the way to Jesus' promise, "I am with you always" (28:20).

In a similar way, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” establishes a surface pattern in God’s actions as Jesus now fills the role of Israel as God’s son.³⁴ More subtly, Matthew sees these words fulfilled by the flight and stay in Egypt rather than the later return to Judea. In this fulfillment, Herod and Judea are in the place of Pharaoh and Egypt as the oppressors: Jesus’ escape *to* Egypt fulfills the historical exodus *from* Egypt.³⁵ This shocking subversion of Israel’s defining story provides another foreshadowing of the radical redefinition of Jew and gentile categories as the people of God form around one’s response to Jesus rather than ethnicity.³⁶

Had the aim of Matthew’s fulfillment quotations been to demonstrate the predictive accuracy of the First Testament, they would have severely missed the mark. Even a sympathetic reader would struggle to see any of them as fulfilled prophecies. However, as seen in the two examples above, Matthew achieves something greater. It uses Scripture as a teaching tool to reveal how God’s radical designs culminate in Jesus. Rather than seeing Jesus’ role confirmed by the Scriptures, Matthew refocuses the Scriptures on Jesus. The First Testament must no longer be read without recognizing its fulfillment in Jesus. According to Stephen Westerholm,

The point is rather that all Israel’s history – from Abraham through Moses, David, and the Babylonian exile – is summed up and reaches its climax in the life and proclamation of Jesus. The moment for which the faithful have waited has arrived.³⁷

Sifting and transcending Scripture

To grasp Jesus’ perspective on the First Testament as revealed in Matthew, it is necessary to look beyond his words about Scripture to how he uses Scripture. Even as Jesus insists that the

34. Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1. Turner, *Matthew*, 23; Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, New Testament for Everyone (London: SPCK, 2004), Logos edition, 1:15.

35. Jesus’ trip *to* Egypt evokes the exodus where God’s people escaped their oppressors. Jesus’ return trip is not prompted by any oppression in Egypt; the only threat again comes from Judea (2:19–22). Turner recognizes that Herod fills Pharaoh’s role, but stops short of considering the implications for what land now fills Egypt’s role. Turner, *Matthew*, 90–91.

36. Matthew’s first chapters further anticipate this theme through including gentiles in Jesus’ genealogy (1:5–6) and presenting foreign magi who “serve as an antitype for Balaam, a diviner who came from the mountains of the East [...] and prophesied that a star would arise from Jacob” (2:1–12). Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 28.

37. Westerholm, *Understanding Matthew*, 78.

First Testament will endure in its entirety, he reshapes its message to conform to his own.

Prioritizing and summing up

Jesus has unsurpassed authority to reveal God's will. God sent Israel righteous people with prophetic words, culminating with John the baptizer.³⁸ Jesus is not merely the next in the sequence who bears the latest chapter of revelation. When Moses (the lawgiver) and Elijah (the prophet) appear with Jesus, God's words to the disciples are not "listen to them" but "[t]his is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"³⁹ Jesus supersedes the law and the prophets so that only through him are they rightly heard. The events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection unfold "as it is written of him" to fulfill the scriptures, though Matthew rarely provides specifics.⁴⁰ Instead, Matthew underscores that these events occur "as he said."⁴¹

Jesus uses his authority to prioritize and sum up God's message in the First Testament.⁴² First, Jesus prioritizes the commands to love God and neighbour.⁴³ He does not uniformly condemn accretions to the law, but rejects any reading or expansion that loses sight of "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."⁴⁴ Prioritizing ensures that lesser laws are subordinate to greater themes when their applications overlap. Vows and offerings, for

38. Matt. 11:13; 23:29–37.

39. Matt. 17:3–5; cf. 23:8–10. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 64; McKnight, *Sermon*, under "What about the Old Testament and War?"

40. Matt. 26:24, 54, 56. The few specifics include Jesus' quotation from Ps. 22 in Matt. 27:46 and the repurposing of parts of Zechariah in Matt. 26:31 and 27:9–10. The other gospels spell out more echoes to the First Testament in these events than Matthew records. Matthew front-loads the fulfillment formulas in the early chapters.

41. Matt. 28:6. See 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:1–2, 11–13, 21–29, 31–32, 34, 61, 64, 75; 27:62–63; 28:6–7.

42. Rabbis also engaged in these activities, sometimes with similar conclusions to Jesus. However, "For the later Rabbis, the interpretation of the law is a process that never concludes. Jesus closes the issue; the law means this and only this." Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 64.

43. Matt. 22:36–39; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18. While the highly regarded Shema elevated the command to "love God," the command to "love your neighbour" largely remained buried among the 613 until the time of Jesus. McKnight, *Sermon*, under "The Misunderstood Love-of-Neighbor Command."

44. Matt. 23:23. Tithing spices exceeds what the law clearly required (Lev. 27:30; Deut. 14:22). Jesus does not reject this expansion for those who felt it proper, but neither does he mandate it for a wider audience. Turner attempts to limit Jesus' rebukes to what had emerged through "hundreds of years of interpretation and developing oral tradition," but this does not adequately address the evidence. Turner, *Matthew*, 166–67.

instance, cannot justify an unloving treatment of one's parents.⁴⁵ Second, Jesus sums up the First Testament as entirely dependent on the great commandments.⁴⁶ To “do to others as you would have them do to you [...] is the law and the prophets.”⁴⁷

While prioritizing leaves room for minor laws so long as they do not conflict with something more central, Jesus' summation demands that *all* laws and teaching flow from this core to be valid. Given the diversity of the First Testament, this poses questions about parts that do not fit this focus. Matthew repeatedly provides Jesus' response to this conundrum.

Refocusing and setting aside

The law contained both commands for inner purity and teaching that touching or eating the wrong things caused one to sin.⁴⁸ In Matthew, Jesus elevates and extends the former while dismissing the latter.⁴⁹ Beyond teaching that “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,” Jesus' willingness to touch or be touched by a leper, a menstruating woman, and a corpse confirm that he rejects external causes of impurity.⁵⁰ His commissioning of the disciples to similar healing ministries suggests they also did not need to fear becoming unclean through touch.⁵¹ Rather than externals, “what ultimately defiles a man is what he really is.”⁵² Jesus

45. Matt. 15:3–6. But loyalty to Jesus takes precedence even over honouring parents (8:21–22; 10:34–38).

46. Matt. 22:40.

47. Matt. 7:12 (emphasis mine).

48. For instance, the command to not covet goes beyond externals of stealing and adultery to the heart condition (Exod. 20:17). The rest of the First Testament develops this focus (e.g. Isa. 29:13; Ps. 24:3–4; 51:6–12, 16–17). Turner, *Matthew*, 381.

Touching unclean objects caused a person to be unclean and guilty of sin, necessitating an offering “for your sin” (Lev. 5:1–6). Under the law, certain foods were “detestable to you and detestable they shall remain,” so that even touching the carcass of such animals made people and objects unclean (Lev. 11:11, 24–25, 32–35; cf. the entire chapter and Deut. 14:3–21). The law explicitly commanded, “You shall not make yourselves detestable,” “You shall not defile yourselves,” “You shall not eat any abhorrent thing”; to do so committed sin, unlike actions or situations that caused ceremonial uncleanness (Lev. 11:43, 44; Deut. 14:3; cf. Lev. 12–15).

49. Matt. 15:10–20; cf. 5:21–22, 27–28. Carson, *Matthew*, 350–52.

50. Matt. 15:11; 8:3; 9:18–22, 24–25; cf. 8:16–17. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 161–62. Differences between Matt. 15:10–20 and Mark 7:14–23 are not enough to soften this conclusion, contrary to Turner, *Matthew*, 383–84. While Matthew applies Jesus' teaching directly to handwashing (15:20), “the application can be no more valid than the broader principle on which it is based.” Carson, *Matthew*, 351.

51. Matt. 10:1, 8.

refocuses what the law reveals about purity through privileging some texts while contradicting others that he leaves unspoken.⁵³

Jesus also challenges purity laws that barred certain people from Yahweh's assembly. The law excluded illegitimate children and their descendants, those with genital deformities, and certain gentiles.⁵⁴ Priests with deformities, disabilities, or blemishes could not approach the altar in the sanctuary to offer sacrifices.⁵⁵ As the rest of the First Testament applied these laws to temple worship, one strand of texts universalized the exclusion of gentiles while another argued that the restrictions deviated from God's will.⁵⁶ Even as Jesus predicts a closer relationship between God and people than the temple could deliver,⁵⁷ he sides with this second strand in seeing gentiles, eunuchs, and the disabled fully embraced as God's people.⁵⁸ Jesus calls out the exemplary faith of a Roman centurion and "Canaanite" woman and declares that foreigners will eat with Israel's patriarchs "in the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁹ Three times he suggests self-mutilation may further one's entrance into the kingdom!⁶⁰ He heals the blind and lame who enter the temple once he purges its true impurities.⁶¹ Jesus has the authority to declare who may assemble in

52. Carson, *Matthew*, 351.

53. In Matt. 15:7–9, Jesus privileges the focus on the heart over externals found in Isa. 29:13. In Matt. 5:21–28, Jesus elevates the law's commands about murder and lust to encompass the heart issues that precede these acts. Matthew never cites the purity laws Jesus sets aside.

54. Deut. 23:1–6.

55. Lev. 21:16–24.

56. Compare Neh. 13:1–3 (cf. Ezra 9–10; Neh. 9:2; 10:28–31) and Isa. 56:3–8.

57. Matt. 5:3, 8–10; 18:19–20; 24:1–2.

58. Matt. 28:18–20; 19:12; 21:14. Matthew hints at gentile inclusion from the opening genealogy that highlights the mixed blood of both David and Jesus (1:5–6) and the portrayal of worshipful foreign magi as a foil to Jerusalem's leaders (2:1–12). While Jesus at first limits his ministry to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5–6), he soon signals a change. He quotes Isaiah 42 as signifying the hope he brings to gentiles (12:15–21), commends the Ninevites and queen of the South for their superior response to a lesser revelation (12:39–42), and openly ministers and multiplies food in apparently gentile territory where many "praised the God of Israel" (15:29–38; see also 4:13–16; 24:14; 25:31–46). It is hard to imagine the writer of Ezra–Nehemiah approving!

59. Matt. 8:5–13; 15:22–28; cf. 27:54.

60. Matt. 5:29–30; 18:8–9; 19:12. Recognizing hyperbole in the statements does not remove their force.

61. Matt. 21:12–14.

God's presence, and his answer shocked those steeped in the law.

In treating oaths, Jesus sets aside certain written laws and develops one approach found in contemporary Jewish teaching. The law enjoined oaths in Yahweh's name and treated vows more seriously than other pronouncements.⁶² However, oaths and vows encouraged two tiers of truthfulness. Jesus rejects the Pharisee's teaching that capitalized on these distinctions.⁶³ On the other hand, several Jewish writings downplayed oaths and vows to emphasize the importance of unvarying truthfulness. The Essenes considered their word stronger than an oath; Philo suggested that swearing an oath "casts suspicion on the trustworthiness of the man."⁶⁴ Jesus takes this principle to its extreme. He "forbids what the Scriptures permit," saying, "Do not swear at all."⁶⁵

Perhaps the most contested area of Jesus' teaching regarding the law is his perspective on enemy love.⁶⁶ Following Scot McKnight, my understanding is that Jesus consistently set aside the law's demands to "show no pity" by substituting an exhortation to "be merciful."⁶⁷ First, mercy overwhelms retaliation. The law's *lex talionis* did not merely limit retribution when one party injured (or attempted to injure) another; it *required* retribution: "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."⁶⁸ Jesus revokes both the right and duty

62. Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Num. 30; cf. Ps. 76:11. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 70; Carson, *Matthew*, 153.

63. Jesus also rebukes other Jewish teaching on oaths; see Matt. 23:16–22.

64. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 71.

65. Turner, *Matthew*, 174. Matt. 5:34–37. Turner wrestles with this passage in light of his earlier stance that Jesus only contradicts what the Pharisees had added to the law, not the law itself. In the process, he ends up redefining the law to be its spirit rather than its written form. I believe it is more forthright to call a spade a spade and accept that Jesus contradicted the law. He had the authority and insight into God's wisdom necessary to do so.

Carson points out that "Jesus himself testified under oath (26:63–64)." However, Jesus responds truthfully to the high priest's demand that he swear the truth. He does not respond with an oath that what he says is true. There is evident hyperbole in Jesus' saying in Matt. 5:37, but as Carson concludes, "It must be frankly admitted that here Jesus formally contravenes OT law." Carson, *Matthew*, 154.

66. As such, this will by necessity be a high-level view.

67. McKnight, *Sermon*, under "Jesus' Kingdom Vision: Nonresistant Love," and "Show No Mercy." McKnight affirms that the law also contained this "latent theme," as did the remainder of the First Testament (e.g. Lev. 19:18; Prov. 20:22; 24:29). Jesus' refocusing ensures it is no longer stifled by the opposing texts.

68. Deut. 19:21, regarding a false witness who attempted to bring harm on another. Likewise, "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered" (Lev. 24:19–20; cf. Exod. 21:23–25). McKnight, *Sermon*, chap. 9.

to retaliate, substituting provocative measures that expose injustice and grace offenders with the opportunity to dig in their heels or repent.⁶⁹ Second, mercy treats enemies – even foreigners – as neighbours.⁷⁰ A major plotline of the First Testament comprised the bloody conquest of Canaan in which the Israelites offered entire cities to God as a *herem* sacrifice.⁷¹ Matthew does not refer to it once, even as Jesus’ pervasive talk about judgement provides many opportunities. Yet Matthew highlights Rahab the Canaanite in the lineage of David and Jesus and anachronistically labels a woman with surprising faith a Canaanite.⁷² Twice Jesus elevates a somewhat obscure text from Hosea, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”⁷³ He connects being a child of God with peacemaking and enemy love.⁷⁴ It is difficult to say whether Jesus relegates killing on God’s behalf to a past era or repudiates the idea that it was ever God’s intention. Either way, this plotline is set aside in favour of a higher ethic that imitates God.⁷⁵

Modern audiences may find it hard to reconcile a First Testament that endures in its entirety with a process of sifting and setting aside. However, rabbis devoted to the law had already begun this work.⁷⁶ While the rabbis deliberated tentatively, Jesus pronounces with finality. The First Testament would indeed endure, but only when reshaped to conform to him.

69. Matt. 5:39–41. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 72–76; McKnight, *Sermon*, under “Jesus’ Kingdom Vision: Nonresistant Love.”

70. In the law, “The neighbor is carefully defined as the fellow Israelite, although it is also extended to the resident alien (Lev 19:18, 33–34; see Deut 10:18–19).” Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 76. Love towards enemies is approved in Exod. 23:4–5; Ps. 7:3–5; Prov. 24:17–18, 29; 25:21–22. Carson, *Matthew*, 159.

71. “God’s command to exterminate the Canaanites wasn’t an afterthought. As the Israelites tell the story, the Canaanites were doomed from the start,” as seen in Noah’s cursing of Canaan for the action of his father Ham (Gen. 9:20–27). Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014), Kindle e-book, under “Those Wicked, Horrible Canaanites.” Deut. 20:16–18 spells out the command to destroy the Canaanites and the book of Joshua describes the fulfillment.

72. Matt. 1:1, 5–6; 15:21–28.

73. Matt. 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hos. 6:6. This passage “is only one among many from the Old Testament which might have been applied to the same question,” so the authority is not so much in the First Testament but in the one who “claims the right to declare the priority of Hosea’s principle over the strict legal observance which was a hallmark of Pharisaism.” France, *Matthew*, 170–71.

74. Matt. 5:9, 44–45.

75. Matt. 5:45, 48. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 77.

76. See notes 14 and 42.

Critiquing without condemning

Jesus does not drag the First Testament through the mud. He frequently critiques interpretations of the law rather than the law itself.⁷⁷ When he most directly contradicts it, he avoids direct quotation or omits the especially problematic words.⁷⁸

As Jesus sifts the law, he occasionally distinguishes between God's intention and the human or pragmatic elements. While Jesus sometimes appropriates texts speaking of Yahweh,⁷⁹ other times he applies words attributed to God to humans. The sacrifice legislation that "[t]he LORD spoke to Moses" becomes "the gift that Moses commanded."⁸⁰ Moses allowed the Israelites to divorce against God's original design, meaning even lawful divorces disobeyed God's will.⁸¹ Jesus implies that the system of oaths and vows in the First Testament "comes from the evil one."⁸² Even when referring to the Decalogue, his indirectness is palpable. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times" introduces commands recorded as spoken and etched into stone by God!⁸³ The superior force of his repeated "but I say to you" depends on both the written law and its later interpretations being less authoritatively from God.

Jesus' aim is not to recover the original authorial intent of the law. Instead, he moves

77. Especially Matt. 15:1–9, but also 5:22; 9:11–13; 12:1–13; 23:16–23. Even where Jesus' actions were also at odds with the law, the focus appears to rest on the conflict with the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees.

78. For instance, the oaths antithesis could have begun, "The law says to you, 'by God's name you shall swear' " (from Deut. 10:20). The *lex talionis* antithesis could have begun, "You have heard that it was said, 'Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth' " (from Deut. 19:21).

79. France, *Matthew*, 310.

80. Lev. 14:1–32; Matt. 8:4. After breaking one part of the law through touching the leper, Jesus now commands obedience to another part. "But the result is startling: the law achieves new relevance by pointing to Jesus. [...] Thus the supreme function of the 'gift' Moses commanded is not as a guilt offering (Lev 14:10–18) but as a witness to men concerning Jesus." Carson, *Matthew*, 199.

81. Cuvillier, "Torah Observance," 156. See Matt. 5:31; 19:7–8; cf. Deut. 24:1–4. The legislation about divorce is in the section enclosed by Deut. 12:1 and 26:16: "This very day the LORD your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul."

82. Matt. 5:33–37. France, *Matthew*, 193.

83. Matt. 5:21, 27; cf. Exod. 20:1, 13–14; 21:12–14; Num. 35:9, 16–21; Deut. 5:17–18, 22. This may be a "greater to the lesser" argument. If even the Decalogue can be viewed as only indirectly from God, how much more the parts of the First Testament not found in such a revelatory high point? Matt. 19:17–19 shows that Jesus did not view this as necessarily cancelling the present force of the law.

beneath and beyond to reveal God's intention. In this – and thus in him – the law is fulfilled.

Scribes trained for the kingdom

For all its critique of scribes and Pharisees who misused their power and missed God's presence in Jesus, Matthew still esteems their vocation. It describes Jesus' encounter with a scribe who seeks to follow Jesus and apparently proceeds to do so.⁸⁴ Jesus claims that he and the sons of the Pharisees both expel demons by the Spirit of God.⁸⁵ He affirms the scribes' teaching that Elijah must come before the Messiah.⁸⁶ Even as he condemns the Pharisees' blindness, Jesus approves their meticulous attention to righteousness.⁸⁷

Matthew records the failure of most scribes and Pharisees, but concludes they have misused their valid authority. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat."⁸⁸ According to Mark Powell, this means they control access to Moses' scrolls and the rest of Scripture.⁸⁹ They do not have authority to teach, but they possess the authority to read and share Scripture.⁹⁰ Matthew acknowledges the disciples' initial dependence on the scribes for access to Scripture, even though that reality would later change.⁹¹

84. Matt. 8:19–22. Turner suggests the scribe is one of "his disciples," but does not connect this to v. 22, which records what "his disciples" did. Turner, *Matthew*, 239–40. It would be uncharacteristically anachronistic for "his disciples" in one or both of these verses to refer more restrictively to the Twelve. Jesus has not yet marked out a subset of the disciples as the Twelve (10:1–4), since at least one of them is not yet a disciple (9:9)!

85. Matt. 12:27–28. Likewise, Matt. 23:34 includes "scribes" in the list of those sent by Jesus, even though it is within a unit pronouncing woes on "scribes and Pharisees."

86. Matt. 17:10–13.

87. Matt. 23:23–24; cf. 5:20.

88. Matt. 23:1.

89. "Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject." Mark A. Powell, "Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2–7)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 3 (1995): 431–32.

90. Matt. 7:29; 23:8–10. This suggests it is a mistake to include the word "teach" in translations of Matt. 23:3. The Greek words simply refer to speech. In Powell's interpretation, this means the scribes and Pharisees are to be heard when they read Scripture, but not followed in how they interpret it (both in their words and deeds). Powell, "Do and Keep," 421–423, 431. Matt. 2:1–6 provides a key example of scribes functioning as scroll-keepers who correctly cite Scripture in the midst of opposing God's unfolding work. Cuvillier, "Torah Observance," 158.

91. Matthew contrasts with Luke in that "Jesus' disciples are never once presented as possessing any knowledge of

Jesus desires for his followers to exceed the scribes by not only treasuring Scripture but also correctly unpacking it. “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”⁹² Matthew’s gospel uniquely portrays disciples as empowered to bind and loose, words that rabbis connected with deciding what Torah forbids and permits.⁹³ David Garland notes,

The object of the binding and loosing is neuter (“whatever,” not “whoever”). They are not to bind or loose persons. The community is to do whatever is necessary to see that a little one does not perish, but it can make pronouncements on what is or is not sin with confidence. The final judgment of the individual, however, is still left to God.⁹⁴

In Matthew, Jesus gives the disciples the profound responsibility to interpret the First Testament in light of his own teaching and ministry. Like Jesus, they may tighten some portions while they set aside others, but only if they do so *like Jesus*.

An ancient pedigree

The early church appears to have taken this responsibility seriously. The Jerusalem council did not base their decision on any particular proof-text, but rather on what “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”⁹⁵ Paul and other New Testament writers likewise “looked to Jesus’ use of Scripture as the source and paradigm of their own use.”⁹⁶ Whether through allegorical readings, novel typologies, or distinguishing the four senses of Scripture, generations of Christians followed suit in revealing pointers to Jesus and his gospel in every part of Scripture.⁹⁷

These interpreters did not fixate on uncovering the text’s original meaning. Their varied methods shared a presumption that each passage finds ultimate relevance only when conformed

scripture.” Matt. 17:10 suggests “their only knowledge of scripture is what they have heard from the scribes.” Powell, “Do and Keep,” 434–35.

92. Matt. 13:52.

93. Matt. 16:19; 18:18. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 173; Carson, *Matthew*, 372.

94. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 192–93. This contrasts with Carson, *Matthew*, 372–74.

95. Acts 15:28. Earlier Peter had told Cornelius, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10:28).

96. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 187.

97. See Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, chap. 3.

to Christ.⁹⁸ The conclusion was not in doubt; the question was how to show that a particular passage supported it.⁹⁹ This poses an obvious question for Christians today: Can we possibly follow such an unscientific hermeneutic?

Treasures new and old

Richard Longenecker and Richard Hays provide contrasting answers to this question. According to Longenecker, we should accept the interpretations of New Testament writers while viewing their interpretive methods as culturally conditioned.¹⁰⁰ Hays disagrees, arguing that if we do not have confidence in their method, we cannot trust their conclusions.¹⁰¹ “Longenecker would like to pluck and preserve the flower of apostolic doctrine, but severed from its generative hermeneutical roots that flower will surely wither.”¹⁰²

I believe both Richards contribute mutually informing insights. Distinguishing hermeneutical *principles* from hermeneutical *methods* exposes middle ground between their views. Principles such as christocentrism, cruciformity, and upholding God’s faithfulness are part of proper Christian exegesis.¹⁰³ Methods such as peshet, midrash, typology, and allegory should not be slavishly imitated for audiences they would baffle rather than illuminate. However, simply removing these methods makes the principles unachievable. It took such methods for the New Testament authors to reveal the First Testament’s fulfillment in Jesus. I believe this shows that we must also add another principle that undergirds these various methods: creative freedom in

98. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 186; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 184; Enns, *Bible Tells Me So*, 194–95.

99. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, xxvii.

100. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, xxxvi–xxxvii. Outside this preface, he states a view that reduces to following their methods where they agree with “historico-grammatical exegesis.” Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 198. This grants “hermeneutical veto power to a modern critical method of which Paul himself was entirely innocent.” Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1989), 181.

101. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 181–82.

102. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 182.

103. “No reading of Scripture can be legitimate” if it either “denies the faithfulness of Israel’s God to his covenant purposes” or “fails to acknowledge the death and resurrection of Jesus as the climactic manifestation of God’s righteousness.” Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 191. Likewise, Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 232–34.

interpretation.¹⁰⁴ Matthew and the Jesus it reveals use Scripture in ways more artistic than formulaic. We may do likewise, even as our context will cause our methods to differ from theirs. This principle, bound only by its service to the others, allows us to continue a long tradition of drawing new treasure from the First Testament.

Longenecker cautions that appropriating this creativity risks “disastrous results.”¹⁰⁵ This is a precipitous path, and radical misinterpretations litter church history. However, Jesus promises to be with us as we teach.¹⁰⁶ As we cleanse our eyes of self-seeking motives and pride, maintaining a humble sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s enlivening breath, we may receive new light from old texts.¹⁰⁷ Matthew calls disciples to look to Jesus to become scribes trained for the kingdom. To reject this call is even more disastrous. If Jesus fulfills the First Testament so that it only endures through him, readings of Scripture that stop at what the text meant before Christ are seeking a dead and abolished text. Church history is also littered with horrors arising from Christians who dredged up readings of the First Testament that Jesus implicitly or explicitly set aside. From Manifest Destiny to racial segregation and enslavement, this hermeneutic is no less dangerous. To stick to the letter of the text allows a book to usurp the Spirit’s role and resists our mandate to refocus the First Testament on Jesus.

Instead, a pliable hermeneutic can transform the First Testament into a garment that will not tear when united with Jesus.¹⁰⁸ The existing system of Judaism, with its existing reading of Scripture, cannot accommodate Jesus’ new wine. Jesus’ hermeneutic provides a new wineskin, allowing the First Testament to flex and grow in contact with the fermenting power of the gospel.¹⁰⁹ When we imitate Jesus, the First Testament endures, providing treasures new and old.

104. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 189.

105. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, xxxviii.

106. Matt. 28:20.

107. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 192.

108. Matt. 9:16.

109. Matt. 9:17.

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