

Introductions for Students of New Testament Literature

Jesus and the Law

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It is common to hear the theological statement that Jesus came to "end" or "fulfill" the law. This is sometimes understood that either Jesus rejected the Law (and, thus, Judaism) or that his followers stopped observing the rituals of the Law (and, thus, rejected Judaism). In Christian tradition, the "Law" has become the adversary of "Grace." The Gospels, however, indicate that this was largely not the case, and that the separation of Law and Grace should be examined a bit more closely, especially in regards to Paul's writings. Although this is a complex topic, the following will serve as a necessary introduction to *Jesus and the Law* for students.

What is the "Law"? The term "Law" as it appears in the New Testament is the Greek word *nomos*. It means: "anything assigned, a usage, custom, law, ordinance" (*Liddell & Scott*). But the Greek term used in the New Testament is not as important as the Hebrew word the Greek intends to translate. You see, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *nomos* (law) is utilized to translate the Hebrew word *torah*. *Torah* means "direction, instruction, established, particular instruction, rule" (Kohler & Baumgarten). The Hebrew term sheds light on the way we should understand *nomos* and its use in the NT. Therefore, "Law" is not intended to mean a list a rules the require punishment when broken. Rather, the "Law," that is the Torah, is God's instruction for the Jewish nation on how one is intended to live in relationship with God (perhaps an oversimplification) and far exceeds a simple list of do's and dont's. In that sense, the Law is not the antithesis (or the opposite) of grace. In fact, both Grace and Law are intricately intertwined. Furthermore, during the time of Jesus the practicing of the so-called "Law" permeated all areas of life—religious, home, scholarly, familial and neighborly relations, etc.

Returning now to Jesus, they are stories that seem to indicate that he had no intention of "fulfilling" the Law in the sense to end it or cease it from being. Rather, it appears that he was a proponent of *observing the commandments* (this is synonymous with "observing the Law"). For example: Matt 5:17-18 "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill (*plerow*) them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished [RSV]. Here the Greek word *plerow* which can mean "fulfillment" or "make full" does not fit the context of Jesus' saying. If he intended to "fulfill" the Law, thereby leading to its end, why would he then say in verse 19: "Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them (i.e. observes the Law) and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Therefore, the meaning that best fits the context for *plerow* is "to bring realization" or "fulfill God's will" (*Thayer*). In other words, Jesus is not bringing an end to the Law but a realization of God's will that his people live in relationship to him through their observing (of fulfilling/doing) of the Law. Jesus is not

attempting to satisfy a requirement, but instead, live and practice Judaism.

In other cases, Jesus is quite clear. "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read?' And the lawyer answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered right; do this, and you will live.' (Luke 10:25-28). In a parallel account it reads: "And behold, one came up to him, saying, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'All these I have observed; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" (Matt 19:17-21)

In both accounts Jesus is posed the same question, "What must be done to attain eternal life?" The lawyer's response in the first account is the so-called "double-commandment," which is a combination of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:17. These two great commandments are not a newly formed Law but rather a common summation of the entire Law known from other Jewish texts. The second account is a bit more obvious. Although Jesus does not enumerate the 600+ commandments from the Old Testament, it is clear what he is talking about. The final commandment of "giving to the poor" is actually a legal development that has its roots in the Bible and develops into giving alms during the era of Jesus' life. Therefore Jesus' attitude towards the Law for his own practice and the practice of others is a positive one. Moreover, we shouldn't presume that Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees and others over matters of observing the commandments is anything nothing more than disagreements over interpretations of the Law and not whether anyone should cease practicing them.

In conclusion, when examined closely the gospels preserve an overwhelmingly positive view of the Law, though the same may not extend to the portrayal of Pharisee and even less so, the Sadducees (or the priests). The stories that preserve Jesus' statements regarding observing the commandments indicate that he was observant and encouraged others to be as well.