

THE TORAH OF YESHUA

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Jesus and the Law. It is a subject that often evokes a sense of incompatibility and conflict. But Yeshua (Jesus) interacted with the commandments of the Torah (Law of Moses) and He taught godly ways of observing them, while condemning the faulty, burdensome way that they were being mandated by outwardly religious people.

In order to understand the way Yeshua related to the Torah, we have to begin with a key Messianic prophecy found in the writings of Moses. At the end of his life, Jacob gave his blessing to his twelve sons. When he came to Judah, he foretold that the kings of Israel would descend from the tribe of Judah, and their reign would continue until the ultimate king arrived:

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes” (Gen 49:10 KJV).

The Hebrew word *Shiloh* means “to whom it belongs.” So to restate the verse, “There will be rulers over Judah continually until the one comes whom the rule ultimately belongs.” Or, in simpler terms, “a final king is coming.” Jewish sages always interpreted this verse as a Messianic prophecy.¹ Their conclusion was that the kingdom of Judah would retain its ability to govern itself until the Messiah came.

And indeed history shows that to be true, because Judah held its scepter, symbolic of kingly rule, until Archelaus was dethroned as the last Judean ruler in 6 A.D., a short time after Yeshua was born. That means the scepter had literally departed from Judah, and the one to whom the reign belongs—the Messiah—had actually come. So history supports the reality of Yeshua being the Messiah because He literally fulfilled the prophecy of Genesis 49:10, and that is something that could occur only once in history.

With that Messianic foundation established, the specific details of this prophetic verse become relevant. In this case, the Messiah is described as being a “lawgiver.” The Hebrew term is *חַקֵּן* (*haqqaq*), which, in the culture of ancient Israel, refers to someone who enacts laws, symbolized by possession of a ruler’s staff. Thus there was an expectation regarding the Messiah that He would be a lawgiver, or to put it in Hebraic terms, He would give His own Torah.

Isaiah 42 is another passage that is prophetic in nature and the ancient Jewish interpreters understood it as referring to the Messiah.² This passage literally reads in verse 4: “the desirable

¹ This belief is reflected in the writings of the Targums, which were translations of the Hebrew Scriptures into the common language of Aramaic during the Second Temple period before the birth of Yeshua. The Targums were similar to amplified translations in which the translators added words and phrases to help the reader understand the passage. They were written to an audience that had lost not only familiarity with the Hebrew language, but the meaning behind the Hebrew terms. So the writers would consistently interject the term, “the Messiah” in Messianic passages, even though the words were not in the original Hebrew text. And that is what was done in Gen 49:10. These Jewish writers wanted non-Hebrew, Aramaic speakers to know it was a Messianic passage.

² *Targum Yonatan, Isaiah 42:1* reads, “Behold, My servant the Messiah, whom I bring, My chosen one in whom one delights; as for My Word, I will put My Holy Spirit upon him.”

places will await His Torah.” So just as in the case of Genesis 49:10, this passage shows that an indicator of Messianic credentials was the ability to teach godly laws. In the extra-biblical Jewish writings, there were two interpretations of this subject. Either the Messiah would come up with a brand new Torah,³ or He would strip away all of the rabbinic additions and restore it to the purity of its original state.⁴

This issue, then, has relevance to Yeshua. Since He fulfills all of the other Messianic prophecies, these two prophetic passages about the Torah of Messiah must be applied to His life as well. And when we consider what the Gospels record, we can then determine if Yeshua taught a new Torah or restored the original one. The first indication is found in a passage that is part of the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:17-19).

The term translated as “abolish” literally means “to loosen down,” which has the sense of throwing something down and smashing it to pieces. Then in keeping with the Hebraic style of repetition for the sake of emphasis, He affirmed the continuity of the Torah by declaring, “the smallest letter or stroke shall not pass away from the Law.” The smallest letter of the Greek alphabet is the ι (*iota*, equivalent to the English letter “i,” KJV “jot”). And the word translated as “stroke” is κεραία (*keraiā*, literally meaning “horn,” KJV “tittle”).

Even though Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek, you have to think about the Hebrew nature of the terms because that is the language of the Torah. The equivalent letter to the Greek ι (*iota*) is the Hebrew י (*yud*). And although it is a tiny character when written, it is just as important as any other letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, if you take away the י (*yud*) at the beginning of the name Yeshua (meaning “salvation), you end up with *shua* (meaning “crying”).

The importance of little things is manifested in many situations of life. Perhaps the most poignant of them involves the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986. The explosion of the spacecraft, killing everyone onboard, was traced to a failed O-ring that connected two sections of one of the solid rocket boosters. That O-ring was less than a quarter-inch in diameter, yet its failure brought down the rocket. That is the kind of importance Yeshua emphasized about the smallest letter of the alphabet. It is as important as all of the larger letters.

What about the *keraiā*, meaning “horn?” Hebrew letters have different kinds of horns. For example, the letters ב (*bet*) and כ (*kaf*) are very similar, but the base of the ב (*bet*) is offset slightly to the right, with a little horn extending past the right edge (marked by the arrow below).



Likewise, the letters ד (*dalet*) and ר (*resh*) below are also similar to each other, but the

³ *Yalqut Isaiah 26, siman 296.*

⁴ *Pesikhta Rabbati 89,6.*

top stroke of the **ד** (*dalet*) is offset slightly to the right, creating a horn shape.



That tiny distinction can make a great difference in meaning, such as the difference between **אֶחָד** (*echad*, meaning “one”) and **אֲחֵר** (*acher*, meaning “other”), simply by exchanging the last letters that look so similar.⁵ That illustrates the importance of a simple thing like the horns on Hebrew letters.

Yeshua was using a common Hebraic way of reasoning called *kal v’homer*, meaning light and heavy, in which something that is true in a light or simple sense will be true in a heavy or complex one. The *iota* and the horns are light, and the commandments themselves are heavy. The point Yeshua was making is that just as every letter and stroke is important, every aspect of the Torah is important and meaningful, not just those you pick and choose to uphold.

The question, then, is how long is that true? Yeshua gave two clauses about its duration that are tied to the word “until” (*heôs*)—“until heaven and earth pass away” and “until all is accomplished” (v. 18). Since the universe is still intact and the implementation of God’s plan has not fully been accomplished, every foundational principle of the Torah remains meaningful. What has changed, however, is the way we relate to it because of the way Yeshua impacted the Torah theologically.

He proclaimed that He came to fulfill it. The Greek word *πληρόω* (*pleroo*) is generally translated as “fulfill.” The word picture for *pleroo* is a container that is filled to the top or even overflowing. Yeshua is overflowing the Torah—He is filled with every aspect of it.⁶ So when we consider the different sections of the Torah, we can identify how Yeshua fulfills them in that manner:

- His life is our example regarding the aspects of Torah that are concerned with godly living.
- We must acknowledge His death as satisfying the aspects of the Torah that are concerned with sin and sacrificial atonement.
- We can use the elements of the Torah that are memorial in nature, like the feasts, to acknowledge and to proclaim God’s redemptive plan for this world.

In so doing, all of these Scriptures are neither smashed to pieces and meaningless, or impossible to keep on our own, because they find their fulfilled or overflowing meaning in Yeshua. Moreover, it does not require legalism to do so. That was the downfall of the Pharisees and others who mandated observance of the Torah on their terms and diminished the role of faith. That explains why the concept of the Torah (literally meaning “instruction”) had become hardened into the concept of the “Law” during the late second temple period, and thus at the time

⁵ For that reason, careful consideration has traditionally been given to the way the *Shema* (the Hebrew declaration of God’s identity from Deuteronomy 6) is written and verbalized. The “d” sound of the **ד** (*dalet*) is strongly enunciated to avoid misunderstanding it as a **ר** (*resh*) because it would be highly inappropriate to say the Hebrew equivalent of “the LORD our God is another” instead of “the LORD our God is one.”

⁶ The same is true regarding the teachings of the prophets—whatever the prophets foretold, Yeshua is likewise filled with that truth completely.

of the writing of the New Testament.

That legalistic approach is not true righteousness. As Yeshua went on to declare, we must have a righteousness that surpasses or is greater than any religious person (v. 20). It is the righteousness that Yeshua gives to us when we believe in Him, transforming us from the inside out, giving us true godly motivation that arises from the heart. It is consistent with the prophecies of Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 that God would write His Law on the hearts of the redeemed. And we are given the ability to live out the principles found in the Torah in even more spiritually mature ways than mere religious observance. Fulfilling or overflowing means more, not less, fresher not stale.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua went on to show how people can be faithful to specific commandments given by God in this fulfilling way:⁷

- Yeshua affirmed the prohibition in the Torah, “You shall not commit murder” (Mat 5:21; cf Ex 20:13). But instead of leaving the issue only in the legal realm, He showed how hatred is at the heart of murderous acts. Then in the next two verses He gave the solution to the problem of hatred by calling us to be reconciled to others when hatred occurs. So by confronting the sinful source of the problem, Yeshua fulfilled or overflowed the commandment by expressing the importance of not killing relationships with others because of anger.
- The Torah forbids adultery. Yeshua affirmed a standard that overflowed from the heart calling us to avoid even thoughts related to adultery (v. 27).
- The Torah makes divorce easy (all that was need was for a man to give a woman a dismissal certificate called a *get*). But Yeshua gave an exhortation not to be so hasty in pursuing divorce, admonishing people to think through the implications, which are damaging. (v. 31).
- The Torah forbids false vows but permits legitimate ones. Yeshua said it is better just to be true to your word and not to embellish it with vows that can complicate matters (v. 33).
- The Torah called for justice based on equitable punishment—“an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20). That was not a call for vengeance, but equivalent monetary compensation. The offender would have to pay the proper value of the loss, exemplified by the value of the loss of an eye or a tooth. That was how the commandment was applied in a legal sense.

But Yeshua overflowed that superficial legality in Matthew 5:38-40. He taught that we ought not to demand justice because that inevitably leads to resentment and broken relationships. And so He said that when someone “slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” That symbolizes an attitude that does not demand justice. In the same way, when someone wants your money by suing you, He challenges us to give even more to that person. Like an eye for an eye, a payment is also made. But in an overflowing way, Yeshua calls those who are offended to pay the price, not the offender. That is a radical concept. But it is a truly godly one because that is how God treats us. We are the ones who offend God by virtue of the sins that we commit. Yet He is the one who paid

⁷ At each point He taught with authority, as indicated by the phrase “You have heard...” coupled with the words, “But I say to you...” That is a marker that He would give a teaching on a particular subject that would be distinctive from what others were teaching.

the price for them (Rom 5:7-8). Once again, this overflowing approach has the potential of restoring broken relationships between people—something a legalistic approach can hardly do.

- In verse 43 He acknowledged: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’” In this case Yeshua affirmed an aspect of the Torah (Lev 19:18), while correcting a popular misapplication of the commandment. The Torah does say to love your neighbor. But it does not say to hate your enemies. That was a conclusion held by some rabbinical authorities using a misguided form of logic—the opposite of loving your neighbor must be hating your enemies. So just like in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, here Yeshua redirected the focus by simply redefining the term “neighbor” to include people who persecute you—sinners, despised tax-gatherers, and Gentiles—all of whom God blesses with light and rain. In this way, Yeshua upheld the validity of the original commandment, corrected a faulty interpretation of it, and then demonstrated the fulfilling, overflowing way of keeping it.

Continuing to survey the rest of the Gospel accounts would show Him doing the same thing as in the Sermon on the Mount. At no time did Yeshua ever contradict or ignore a commandment in the Torah. Yes, in keeping with the ruling of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 and Paul’s teachings elsewhere, there are abuses of the Torah that need to be rejected. But if you claim that the Torah has no relevance for believers today, that means having to reject all of these teachings from Yeshua.

So did Yeshua come up with a brand new Torah? Or did He just strip away all of the rabbinic additions and restore it to the purity of its original state? Those were the two options considered by the ancient Jewish sages regarding the coming Messiah. But the reality is that neither of those options is entirely true. He did not come up with a new Torah, but He did establish a new way of applying the existing Torah.⁸ He did strip away all of the rabbinic additions, but He did not just return it to the original state that tended to stay on a superficial legality. Instead He consistently brought out the underlying principles related to human nature that Moses rarely did. In that way, the Torah of Yeshua was consistent with the Torah of Moses in terms of substance, but it was applied in a deeper, fulfilling way.

In regard to the question of “what is more difficult—to keep the Law of Moses or to follow the teachings of Yeshua?” many people would probably say that keeping the Law is harder. But is it? Which is more difficult to do—to be angry with people who have damaged your relationship or to be committed to reconciling with them? To want justice or to forgive someone who physically harms you? To hate those who persecute you or to love them?

The Word of God shows that following Yeshua calls for an even higher standard of righteousness than what the Law set forth, not less. In fact, Yeshua said, “you are to be perfect” (Mat 5:48). That’s where grace and forgiveness come in. And that is where we need the power of the Holy Spirit, which you do not have if you are not a believer. All this to say that citizens of the kingdom of God have a higher standard of righteousness to uphold, but also a greater empowerment and ability to live it out, because we have the example and teaching of Yeshua to follow, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to help us when we are weak.

We can indeed live our lives in such a way that is faithful to the teachings of Yeshua. Our

⁸ Even when Yeshua used the term “new commandment” that believers are to love one another (Jn 13:34), it was built upon the existing commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18).

motivation must not merely focus on being Torah-observant, or being so zealous that we fall into the trap of legalism. But neither should we deny the words of Yeshua and act like there is no standard of righteousness to uphold, falling into the trap that grace will simply cover us. There is another way—it is the way of Yeshua. When His Torah is written on our hearts, it is up to believers to live those principles out in the ways that we worship and conduct ourselves in this world, especially in the relationships we have with others. Ultimately we are called to remain faithful, just as He is faithful to us and will continue to do so “until heaven and earth pass away” and “until all is accomplished.”