

# Matthew 5:17-19

## Does Fulfilling the Law Mean That It "Hath an End"?

By Larry and June Acheson

There is one Bible passage where the Messiah establishes that His earthly mission had nothing to do with destroying the law. Ironically, much of the religious world has retooled His words in such a way as to persuade others that, although He didn't come to destroy the law, His fulfilling its requirements simultaneously meant that it nevertheless came to an end at His death and resurrection. Over the years, we have read numerous articles designed to validate the above understanding, but wasn't until we were given a religious magazine that contained an article titled "Should You Keep the Weekly Sabbath?" that we decided it was time to present our insight regarding this very significant passage. As we seek the truth of the matter, we invite you to compare our understanding with that of the author of the magazine article. Before we proceed any further, let's review the passage in question, Matthew 5:17-19:



<sup>17</sup>Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

<sup>18</sup>For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

<sup>19</sup>Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Do these sound like the words of a Man who knew that the law was about to be abolished? If we take the Messiah's words literally, we believe it is safe to say that He cautioned His followers to *not think* that He had come to destroy the law. Yet it is this very thing – the destruction, eradication and elimination of the law – that many of today's religious leaders, including the author of "Should You Keep the Weekly Sabbath?" teach their constituents to believe. Here is what he wrote as his explanation of what Matthew 5:17 "really means":

True, Jesus did say: "Do not think I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I came, not to destroy, but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) But what does the expression "to fulfill" mean? To illustrate: A builder fulfills a contract to complete a building, not by ripping up the contract, but by finishing the structure. However, once the work has been completed to the client's satisfaction, the contract is fulfilled and the builder is no longer under obligation to it. Likewise, Jesus did not break, or rip up, the Law; rather, he fulfilled it by keeping it perfectly. Once fulfilled, that Law "contract" was no longer binding on God's people.<sup>1</sup>

According to the above author, Yeshua didn't actually "destroy" the law; rather, He kept it perfectly, thus fulfilling it. Once He "fulfilled" the law, it ceased to be binding on mankind. In other words, to

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<sup>1</sup> *The Watchtower* magazine, "Should You Keep the Weekly Sabbath?" by Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., Brooklyn, NY, February 1, 2010, p.13.

paraphrase this author’s treatment of Matthew 5:17-19, Yeshua didn’t come to destroy the law; rather, He came to fulfill its obligations and thus bring it to an end. Or, to break it down even further, the author expects us to believe that Yeshua didn’t come to destroy the law; He came to bring it to an end.

From our perspective, it seems as though it should be obvious beyond the proverbial shadow of a doubt that when the Messiah testified that He had not come to destroy, but rather to fulfill the law, He did not intend for His followers to understand that by His keeping the law, His fulfilling its obligations would thus mean that it is no longer binding. If you can, please imagine yourself as the author of the book of Matthew. Keep in mind that the Apostle Matthew, who was one of Yeshua's disciples, most likely heard the words uttered by Yeshua, but by the time Matthew composed his Messianic account, Yeshua had long since been crucified and resurrected. In fact, many scholars do not believe the book of Matthew could have been authored before the year 63 CE, which was at least thirty years after Yeshua's ascension.

If you can imagine that you are the Apostle Matthew and that you are now in the process of composing your account of Yeshua's earthly ministry long after the fact, AND if you can pretend that you "just know" that the law had been nullified at Yeshua's death and resurrection, how would you convey that message to your reading audience? Would you clearly spell it out for them or would you leave it open to interpretation?

Would you just expect your reading audience to understand Yeshua's words to mean that when His job was through, so was the law?

As it now stands, there are two possible ways of understanding what Yeshua meant. On the one hand, references such as *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* plainly assert that by "fulfil," Yeshua meant that He had come to cause Yahweh's law to be obeyed as it should be obeyed. Let’s take a moment to examine the meaning of the word Greek word translated “fulfill” (Greek , “pl r ”), as presented by this lexicon:

Universally and absolutely, to *fulfil*, i.e. to cause God’s will (as made known in the law) to be obeyed as it should be, and God’s promises (given through the prophets) to receive fulfillment: Mt. v. 17; cf. *Weiss*, *Das Matthäusevang.* u.s.w. p. 146 sq. [COMP.: -, -, -, -, -, -, μ- .]<sup>2</sup>

As presented by *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*, Yeshua’s use of the word “fulfill” had *nothing* to do with “completing a contract” that would result in the law being abolished (destroyed), but *everything* to do with causing and demonstrating how the Almighty’s will should be obeyed. In this way, Yeshua not only fulfilled the law, but He also showed us how we should live *our* lives – by following His example of obedience.

June and I wholeheartedly agree with *Thayer's Lexicon* that this is indeed what Yeshua meant. On the other hand, we have religious leaders teaching that by "fulfil," what Yeshua *really* meant was that as soon as His earthly life was over, thus fulfilling His obligation to obey the law, the rest of mankind would be released from having to obey it.

The latter of the two possible interpretations presented above seems incredulous to us, but since many religious leaders accept it as valid, we would like to offer an illustration to further validate the

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1981, p. 518.

understanding as presented by *Thayer's Lexicon*. Since the religious leaders of today are so quick to explain that Yeshua's testimony can only mean that the law would only be in effect until His death and resurrection, it's only fair for us to ask them how they would have written and described Yeshua's words if they had been the Apostle Matthew. If you share the understanding held by those who maintain that the law came to an end when it was fulfilled by Yeshua, we pose you the same questions that we are aiming at today's religious leaders.

One of the primary questions that needs to be answered is why the Apostle Matthew, in composing Matthew 5:17-19, didn't just come right out and explain to his reading audience that by the word "fulfil," Yeshua intended for His followers to understand that the law would be brought to an end. Please keep in mind that from time to time, the Apostle Matthew understood the need to explain things to his readers. For example, in Matthew chapter 17, when Yeshua informed His disciples that Elijah had already come, Matthew made certain that his readers knew who Yeshua was referring to:

<sup>13</sup>Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

Since it was important to the Apostle Matthew that he clarify any possible ambiguous comments from Yeshua, it stands to reason that if Yeshua had intended for us to understand that the law would come to an end with His death and resurrection, Matthew would have clarified His remark by writing something akin to the following:

<sup>17</sup>Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. **Then the disciples understood that the law would come to an end at his death and resurrection.**

Of course, the Apostle Matthew did not add that last part to verse 17, so it is up to us to glean the proper interpretation and understanding of what Yeshua meant. For those who insist that Yeshua's fulfilling the law must mean its coming to an end at His death and resurrection, we might ask them why, according to the Apostle Paul, the law is supposed to be fulfilled *in us*. Here is what Paul wrote in Romans 8:4:

<sup>4</sup>that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

How can the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us if it was "taken away"? And if it truly is supposed to be fulfilled in us, then doesn't that mean that it comes to an end when we die? Does this line of reasoning make any sense?

If you had been the Apostle Matthew, would you have added a clarification to Yeshua's words in Matthew 5:17-19? June and I have visited with various individuals over the years who insist that the way Yeshua worded things in Matthew 5:17-19 was "just fine," and that no further clarification should be needed. If they are truly being honest with this answer, then why are they content to leave us saddled with an incorrect interpretation? Of course, their "just fine" understanding is that the law came to an end at His death and resurrection. In spite of their claim, the fact remains that there is more than one way to interpret Yeshua's words. Moreover, we have strong evidence that those who believe the law was "taken away" would indeed have added a clarification in a heartbeat.

Strong evidence that antinomians – those who are opposed to the law – would have added a clarification supportive of the belief that the law came to an end when Yeshua fulfilled it comes from the Mormons. The Mormons, in their *Book of Mormon*, offer a clarification/interpretation of Yeshua's words demonstrating that if they could take the Apostle Matthew's place and rewrite Matthew 5:17-19, they would specify that Yeshua intended for us to believe that "fulfilling the law" means the law came to an end. Of course, we all hopefully recognize that *The Book of Mormon* is, in fact, an uninspired sham; it is simply the result of Joseph Smith's attempt to produce his own set of Scriptures. However, in producing his misrepresentation of Yeshua's words, Mr. Smith inadvertently produced his personal commentary on Matthew 5:17-19, proving what June and I have known all along: Anyone who would have had the opportunity to take the Apostle Matthew's place as the author of his Messianic account would have added his or her own spin to what Matthew wrote in Matthew 5:17-19. Let's take a look at the interpretational slant that Joseph Smith, in *The Book of Mormon*, put on Yeshua's words. It should be easy to recognize the similarity between Matthew 5:17-19 and *The Book of Mormon's* spin on that passage.

Before we produce the quote from *The Book of Mormon*, a brief overview will help you to become familiar with the setting. *The Book of Mormon* includes a section describing Yeshua's post-ascension visit to the American continent. This appearance is alleged to have occurred in the 34th year after Yeshua's birth. In this account, Yeshua essentially gives His audience a repetition of the teachings found in Matthew chapter 5, including the Sermon on the Mount. It is in the Sermon on the Mount where Yeshua also informed His listeners to not think that He had come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. As we are about to see, when Joseph Smith retooled Yeshua's words, he made certain his readers understood that the law had indeed come to an end. What follows is taken from 3 Nephi 15:1-10:

<sup>1</sup>And now it came to pass that when Jesus had ended these sayings he cast his eyes round about on the multitude, and said unto them: Behold, ye have heard the things which I taught before I ascended to my Father; therefore, whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day.

<sup>2</sup> And it came to pass that when Jesus had said these words he perceived that there were some among them who marveled, and wondered what he would concerning the law of Moses; for they understood not the saying that old things had passed away, and that all things had become new.

<sup>3</sup> And he said unto them: Marvel not that I said unto you that old things had passed away, and that all things had become new.

<sup>4</sup> Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses.

<sup>5</sup> Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, **for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end.**

<sup>6</sup> Behold, I do not destroy the prophets, for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled.

<sup>7</sup> And because I said unto you that old things have passed away, I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come.

<sup>8</sup> For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; **but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.**

<sup>9</sup> Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life.

<sup>10</sup> Behold, I have given unto you the commandments; therefore keep my commandments. And this is the law and the prophets, for they truly testified of me.

There are several problems with *The Book of Mormon’s* reconstruction and manipulation of Yeshua’s words in Matthew 5:17-19. For one thing, the author has Yeshua offering His explanation (that the law “hath an end”) as being a part of a clarification of what “old things have passed way, and all things have become new” means. This verbiage seems to be a reconstruction of Revelation 21:4-5, where we read of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, and all tears having been wiped away from the eyes of the righteous. This passage does not allude to any laws having been “taken away” or otherwise brought to an end. Here is what it says:

<sup>4</sup>And the Almighty shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: **for the former things are passed away.**

<sup>5</sup>And he that sat upon the throne said, **Behold, I make all things new.** And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

The New Testament does not present the “former (old) things are passed away” as being a reference to the law; rather, it is a reference to the new heavens and the new earth in the still yet-to-come future. For us to accept and believe the “all things have become new” reference to the law by *The Book of Mormon’s* Yeshua is to ignore the yet-future promise of a new heaven and a new earth as outlined in the book of Revelation. Since the book of Revelation was given to the Apostle John by Yeshua, it seems reasonable to conclude that either *The Book of Mormon* or the book of Revelation must be a fraud.

Of greater interest to the subject at hand is the fact that *The Book of Mormon’s* Yeshua, as dictated by Joseph Smith, plainly elucidates that “fulfil” means “bring to an end.” We can be certain that *The Book of Mormon* is a fraudulent account of Yeshua, and we can also be certain that its author, Joseph Smith, deliberately put his interpretational spin on the word “fulfilled” so as to cause it to mean “brought to an end.”

Based on the interpretational liberty seized upon by Joseph Smith in his *Book of Mormon*, we can see that anyone who might be led to present Yeshua’s words in Matthew 5:17-19 will invariably incorporate his or her understanding of what Yeshua meant when presented with the opportunity to do so. Certainly, the true author of the actual account, the Apostle Matthew, had every opportunity to clarify that Yeshua meant that the law would come to an end at the time of His death and resurrection, especially when we consider that he authored his account some 30 years “after the fact.” However, he apparently saw no need to comment any further, thereby freeing up his reading audience to take Yeshua’s words at face value.

Antinomian man, in his zeal to remove himself from the obligation of obeying Torah, will seek out whatever pretexts he can find in order to justify eradicating the law. As we mentioned earlier, we can either view “fulfilling the law” as causing the law to be obeyed as it should be obeyed ... OR we can view “fulfilling the law” as bringing the obligation to obey it to an end. Yeshua plainly taught His followers to obey the law. It would make no sense for Him to, in one place, state that he had come to fulfill the obligation to obey that law (meaning that it would come to an end at his death/resurrection), then in another place instruct His followers that if they would enter into life, keep the commandments (Matthew 19:17).

Luke, in describing Yeshua’s treatment of the law, has Yeshua remarking that it is easier for heaven and earth to pass than for one tittle of the law to fail (Luke 16:17). Scholars agree that the book of Luke, in similar fashion to Matthew, could not have been composed prior to the year 60 CE. Thus, if we are to presume that Luke knew that the law had been “done away,” he really needed to do a better job of

explaining that, even though heaven and earth had not yet passed away at the time of his authoring his account, the law had in fact *already* been “taken away” many years prior.

Do we need someone like Joseph Smith to rewrite and redefine Yeshua’s words? Can we not take Yeshua’s words at face value? Why would He tell His followers to not think He had come to destroy the law if He knew in the back of his mind that the law was about to be “taken away”? If the law is destroyed, is it not “taken away”?

Finally, we would like to present yet another piece of reasoning demonstrating how illogical it is to believe that Yeshua’s fulfilling the law could mean that its observance is consequently nullified. At the giving of the law, the children of Israel, in one accord, swore to be obedient:

<sup>7</sup>And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that Yahweh hath said will we do, and be obedient. (Exodus 24:7)

We all know that the Israelites failed to live up to their commitment, but what is eerily missing from the text is any hint that if one man should completely and perfectly keep all the commandments, then the contractual obligation on the rest of Israel would thereby be removed. No such instruction or prophecy is found in all of Scripture. Why, then, are we expected to believe that this was the end result of Yeshua’s obedience?