

Matthew 5:17-20
Yeshua's View of the Law
Some Preliminary Questions & Answers

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Matthew 5:17-20 is a central text for our consideration in the study of “The Believer’s Relationship to the Law.” It is a text over which much debate has arisen, and is a kind of touchstone for one’s views of the Law in general.¹ By way of overview, the issues of these words of Yeshua revolve around the meaning of several key terms, primarily the terms “abolish” (καταλῦσαι), “fulfill” (πληρῶσαι), “accomplished” (γένηται), “annuls” (λύω), “least / great” (ἐλάχιστος/μέγας) and “surpass” (περισεύω) [English from the NASB]. The following are examples of modern translations of the text:

NASB

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. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

NIV

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

REB

Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete. Truly I tell you: so long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter, not a dot, will disappear from the law until all that must happen has happened. Anyone therefore who sets aside even the least of the law’s demands, and teaches others to do so, will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who keeps the law, and teaches others to do so, will rank high in the kingdom of Heaven. I tell you, unless you show yourselves far better than the scribes and Pharisees, you can never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

¹ It is granted that the words of Messiah in this phase of His ministry were expanded and interpreted by the Apostles, and that there may exist on this account a progressive revelation which must be taken into account. But it is the presupposition of evangelicalism that while progressive revelation may complete or further define a given truth, there is no contradiction from one era to the next. I take it as a given that Paul does not disagree with nor contradict the teaching of Messiah in this passage, though I recognize that many scholars believe he does.

Cassirer²

Do not suppose that, if I have appeared, that was with the intention of abolishing the teaching of the law and the prophets. I have made my appearance not to abolish it, but to give full expression to it.

Indeed, I can give you solemn assurance of this: it is not till heaven and earth are removed that anything shall be removed from the law, be it but one letter, but one flourish. What is necessary first of all is that all its purposes should be accomplished.

And so, whoever seeks to do away with one of the law's commandments, even though it may be counted among those of the least significance, and teaches others to do the same, that person will be of least significance in the kingdom of heaven. But he who keeps the commandments, and teaches them, will be esteemed to stand high in the kingdom of heaven.

And one more thing. Unless the righteousness of conduct found in you surpasses that found in the experts in the law and Pharisees, you will never gain entry into the kingdom of heaven.

*“Do not think I came to **abolish**...”*

The word translated “abolish” by most of the English versions is the Greek καταλύω (*kataluo*, #2647³). It is found 3 times in Matthew in addition to our text. These are Matthew 24:2; 26:61; 27:40, all of which interestingly enough refer to the Temple. Matthew 24:2 is Messiah's prediction of the Temple's destruction:

Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down. Matt. 24:2

The other two occurrences are in the words of Messiah's accusers before the Sanhedrin and at Calvary:

and said, “This man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’” Matt. 26:61

and saying, “You who destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross. Matt 27:40

Yeshua Himself did not say that He would destroy the Temple, only that if the nation were to “destroy this temple” (speaking of His body) in three days He would raise it up (Jn 2:19). He used the simple verb λύω (*luō* #3089) rather than the perfective form (καταλύω, *kataluō*) found in our text. In the mouths of His accusers His words were embellished and misapplied.

It seems clear that for Matthew the term καταλύω (*kataluō*) means “to tear down,” “demolish,” “do away with” and is used in the 1st century C.E. of the demolition of buildings as well as the nullifying or replacing of laws and constitutions.⁴ This Yeshua explicitly says is not the mission of His incarnation as regards the Law. Most modern scholars believe that such a strong statement of Yeshua on the issue of the Torah is proof that to one extent or another His teachings were being misinterpreted by His opponents, and He therefore takes strong measures to make Himself clear.⁵ The subsequent debates in the early church as to the role of the Law (as in the Jerusalem counsel of Acts 15) show clearly that the issues of how the Law was to be lived out among the disciples of Yeshua were not universally settled.⁶

² Heinz W. Cassirer, *God's New Covenant: A New Testament Translation* (Eerdmans, 1989).

³ All numbers preceded by the # sign refer to the Hebrew/Greek numbering system in the *Exhaustive Concordance of the NASB* (Lockman Foundation: Holman, 1981) which correspond to the numbering system of Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

⁴ See H.A.W. Meyer, *Matthew* (Hendrickson Pub., 1983 Reprint of 1884 edition), p. 120, ns. 4 & 5.

⁵ See the comments of Klyne Snodgrass, “Matthew and the Law” in *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers* (Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 545-46.

⁶ The redactional issues of Matthew's gospels are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that they are complex and that we have no recourse but to accept the texts as we now have them (and as the Church accepted them for nearly 2000 years) and work to understand how they fit together in the overall scope of theology. To suggest that these verses (Matt 5:17-20) comprise 2 or 3 redactional layers, and that they are in some measure the work of the later Christian community in the face of the Law/Grace debate is to venture into speculation beyond supportive data.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets...”

The normal phrase is “the Law and the Prophets.”⁷ The use of “or” instead of “and” is unique to Matthew, as is this entire paragraph.⁸ The Greek particle ἢ (“or,” #2228) is not strictly equivalent to καί (“and,” #2532), though at times it does come close in meaning.⁹ If there is a distinction at this point, it is to emphasize that Yeshua does not in any way put the Torah at odds with the Prophets, or visa versa. Carson even suggests a possible hinting of the prophetic nature of the Torah by linking it to the Prophets with the word “or”.¹⁰

This phrase, “the Law and/or the Prophets” forms an inclusio¹¹ with 7:12 and thus shows the textual extent of “The Sermon.”

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.”

Twice the word “abolish” is used (it is both times the same Greek word καταλύω [kataluō #2647]) in this first line, in order to assure a fitting contrast to the word “fulfill.” The word “fulfill” is πληρῶσαι (plerōsai) from πληρόω (pleroō #4137), an aorist infinitive.¹² This word has a wide range of meanings, and has given rise to varied interpretations in this passage.

Common Interpretations of “fulfill” in Matthew 5:17

1. “fulfill” in this context answers to the Aramaic or Hebrew קִיַּם (qûm #6966) which means “to stand,” “establish,” or “confirm.” With this understanding the words of Yeshua are interpreted to mean that He did not come to abolish the law but to confirm it and establish it. While at the outset this seems a very probable interpretation, it is flawed by the fact that the Lxx¹³ never uses πληρόω (pleroō) to translate קִיַּם (qûm).¹⁴ Instead, this Greek verb generally translates the Hebrew מָלֵא (male’ #4390) which means “to fill up,” “to fulfill.” Had Yeshua intended this meaning, it is more likely that a different Greek term would be found here, namely ἵστημι (histemi, #2476) or some derivation of this verb.

2. “fulfill” in this context means “to fill up” in the sense that Yeshua brings to the Law and the Prophets their completion by providing its full, intended meaning. To put it simply, this view considers that Yeshua replaces the

⁷ Interestingly enough, the best manuscript of the Hebrew text of Matthew attributed to Baal Shem-Tov leaves off the “or the prophets,” though other less accurate copies add it. See George Howard, *The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Mercer, 1995), p.17. “Law and Prophets” is found at Matt 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Rom 3:21. “the Law..., the Prophets, and the Psalms” is found at Lk. 24:44. Just “Law” indicates the whole Tanach at Matt 5:18; John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 1 Co 14:21.

⁸ The fact that this pericope is not found in the other synoptics has given rise to speculation that it is strictly a Matthean addition in the face of the Jewish-Gentile debates.

⁹ See Meyer, *Ibid.*, p. 120; Blass-DeBrunner (§446), however, show instances of ἢ functioning in much the same way as a copulative conjunction (e.g., Acts 1:7).

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Zondervan, 1984), 8:142. Carson (ad loc) also gives way to the possibility that ἢ τοὺς προφήτας is from a later hand.

¹¹ An “inclusio” is a literary term meaning a text which is framed at the beginning and the end with a common term, terms or motif.

¹² The aorist infinitive may emphasize the decisive nature of this fulfillment. That is, it may suggest that Yeshua is emphasizing the goal of His coming as centered in the realization or keeping of the Law.

¹³ Lxx is the common abbreviation for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Tanach, which was popular at the time of Yeshua, and into the Apostolic era.

¹⁴ See the excellent comments of Delling, “πληρόω” in *TDNT*, 6:293 in this regard. He shows that קִיַּם (hifil of קָם) is regularly translated by other Greek terms, primarily by στησία, and that ἵστημι is consistently used throughout the NT when the concepts of “to confirm,” “to execute” or “declare to be valid” are intended (cp. Rom 3:31; Heb 10:9).

host of commandments with the two commandments to love God and one's neighbor.¹⁵ While certain aspects of this sense ring true with other teachings of the Apostles, such a meaning here is dubious on account of the "jot and tittle" phrase in verse 18 which focuses attention on the written Torah as a unified whole which, according to Yeshua, must abide. It is highly unlikely that He is teaching that the "jot and tittle" abides in His "deeper" teaching which does away with the Torah. Such an interpretation of "fulfill" contradicts the heart of this pericope.

3. "fulfill" in this context means "to fill up" in the sense that Yeshua fulfills the Law and the Prophets in that they point to Him, and He is their fulfillment. From this point of view the issue is not the relationship of Yeshua to the Law, but the Law to Yeshua. Thus, "fulfill" in this verse would have the same meaning as it does in the quotation formulae so often employed by Matthew, and already encountered in the earlier chapters (1:22; 2:17; 4:14). This explanation is, in one respect or another, accepted by all believers in Yeshua, who believe that He is the goal to which the Law and the Prophets always pointed.¹⁶ On the other hand, this view does not adequately answer what seems to be an emphasis in the text, namely, that the fulfilling of the Law and the Prophets is not so much taken up in a theoretical theology (that Yeshua is in some forensic way the "goal" of the Law) but in the actual activity of obedience to the Law and the Prophets. In verse 19 the contrast is not between a person who accepts the Law as over against one who does not, but rather between one who annuls the Law in contrast to the person who *does* the Law.¹⁷ Furthermore, if Yeshua is answering the accusations that He was teaching the abolishment of the Law, this explanation rather confirms His accusers' case. But the text taken as a whole certainly stresses His insistence that any one accusing Him of being against the Law was simply wrong.

4. "fulfill" in this context means "to deepen" or "extend" in the sense that Yeshua takes the Law and carries it a step further. For example, adultery is taken from a merely physical act to one of the heart, as is murder. This deepening or extending is generally considered as moving the Law from being external to the deeper reality of the internal. The internalization of the Law as promised in the New Covenant¹⁸ gives this explanation a certain level of acceptability. The difficulties with this explanation, however, are obvious. First, πληρώω, *plēroō* ("fulfill") does not have the meaning "extend" or "deepen" precisely, and certainly such a meaning cannot be demonstrated as particularly Matthean. Secondly, there is every indication in the Tanach that the faithful did indeed internalize the Law, and that it was written on their hearts. The contrast between the Tanach and the ministry of Yeshua (made popular by certain segments of the Christian church) as being one of external verses internal is artificial and biblically unsubstantiated.¹⁹

The four suggestions given above for the meaning "fulfill" in Matthew 5:17 each contribute something, but no single one adequately satisfies the context of this passage. It remains to explore further definitions of the word within the context of Yeshua's statement about the Law and the Prophets.

¹⁵ Lenski takes this view in his commentary as noted by Carson, *Ibid.*, p. 143. See also the comments of Douglas Moo, "The Law of Moses or the Law of Messiah" in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, John S. Feinberg, ed. (Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 204-5.

¹⁶ Rom. 10:4; Lk 24:27.

¹⁷ Note the margin in the NASB study bible at this point. The Greek contrasts the idea of "annulling" (λύω) and "teaching" (διδάσκω) with "doing" (ποιέω) and "teaching" (διδάσκω). This must certainly help us understand what Yeshua meant by "annulling." To annul the commandment and to teach that the commandment is annulled is to not do the commandment and to teach others that they likewise do not need to do it. Thus, any explanation of "fulfill" which does not take this "doing" into consideration is, in this regard, inadequate.

¹⁸ Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Co 3.

¹⁹ The very fact that David is referred to as "a man after God's own heart" shows clearly that obedience was viewed as an inner, heart issue. The prophets teach this explicitly (Mic 6:8; Is. 1:17-18) as do the psalmists (Ps 51:16, 17; 119:9-11) as well as the Torah (Deut. 6:4; 10:6). To charge the Tanach as having concern only for the temporal obedience of the Law without the necessary heart obedience is, in the final analysis, not only to totally misunderstand the Tanach, but to misunderstand obedience as well, for in God's eyes obedience begins with the heart.

“Fulfill” (πληρώω) in Matthew

The verb πληρώω (“fulfill”) is used 16 times in Matthew.²⁰ 13 times the word is found in the passive and 3 times in the active voice. The active voice occurrences are 3:15; 5:17; 23:32. Of the 13 times where the passive is used, 12 are used in the quotation formula expressing the “fulfillment” of prophecy, and 1 relates to a boat being filled with fish (13:48). Whenever the word is used in the quotation formula, it is found in the passive. Prophecy is viewed as being fulfilled (passive) by the active hand of God in the events of history.

In contrast is the active voice in 5:17. The active voice stresses the activity of Yeshua in keeping or observing the commandments. If the meaning in 5:17 were to be understood on the analogy of fulfillment of prophecy, then it seems reasonable that the passive would have been used and would have read something like this: “...I did not come to abolish, but that the Law and Prophets might be fulfilled.” If Yeshua had intended His words to be understood as parallel to the fulfillment formulae prevalent in His day, and especially employed by Matthew, then we would expect a passive here as well.

Perhaps the best clue to the meaning of “fulfill” in this saying of Messiah is the parallelism that goes on in verse 19.²¹ In the first clause the verbs λύω (*luō*, “loose, destroy”) and διδάσκω (*didaskō*, “teach, instruct”) are paralleled in the second clause by the verbs ποιέω (*poieō*, “do”) and διδάσκω (*didaskō*, “teach, instruct”).

“Whoever then annuls one of the least of the commandments	and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.
but whoever does (them)	and teaches (others to do them), he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven

What seems apparent in this parallel structure is the simple definition (in terms of opposites) of “annul” as “not doing”. Conversely, to “do” the commandments (and thus to teach others to do them too) would be the opposite of “annulling” them and would thus be to “fulfill” them. It would seem probable from this analogy that what Yeshua is indicating in His words of verse 17 is simply that He did not come to destroy the commandments but rather to do them. This fits with the active aspect of the verb as over against the more prevalent passive usage. Theologically, this would answer to the “first Adam / last Adam” motif found in Paul.²²

To put it simply, the structure of the paragraph, especially verse 19, suggests that what Yeshua meant by “fulfilling” in verse 17 was “doing.” “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets (that is, to act and teach as though the Scriptures were no longer an authority). I came not to abolish, but to fulfill (that is, not to neglect the Scriptures but to obey them). Thus, Yeshua was asking His disciples to understand that one of His purposes in coming as the Messiah was to expound the Law and the Prophets both by His words and (especially) by His deeds. He came to explain how one could actually do the Law, and what the purpose of doing the Law was. He came to exegete the Law and the Prophets in their fulness, not in a different way, but in a full and complete way—perfectly, one might say.

One other factor helps strengthen this interpretation. It was noted above that the Hebrew hifil verb הִקִּימָה, *heiqim*, “fulfill, establish, cause to happen what has been promised,” is most often translated in Lxx by a verb other than πληρώω (*plēroō*, the verb in our Matthew text). The Hebrew word most often translated by *plēroō* is מָלֵא, *māle’*, “to fill up, complete, finish.” But there are a several instances in which *māle’* and its Lxx translation by *plēroō* clearly have the meaning “to confirm, establish, make certain.”

²⁰ 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35, 48; 21:4; 23:32; 26:54, 56; 27:9.

²¹ The structure of the paragraph (5:17-20) is a major point of debate. I take it that verses 18-20 structurally define and expand on the meanings of kataluw and plhrow in verse 17. Verses 18 and 20 both begin with gar and must be considered as explanatory of the information given in the preceding clause(s). I would consider v. 18 to be expanding and defining the meaning of plhrwsai in v. 17, while v. 19 defines and expands the meaning of katalusai in v. 17. The chiasmic structure is apparent.

²² 1 Cor 15:22, 45.

The phrase מלא את־הדברים, “to fulfill the words,”²³ is interesting in connection with our Matthew text, particularly since the Lxx uses πληρώω to translate this idiom. “To fulfill the words” means “to strengthen and actualize them by an event”. In this regard, מלא can be replaced by הקים (hif. of קום) in the idiomatic phrase, as in Isaiah 44:26 (cp. Num 23:19; 1 Sa 3:12). Snijders comments about this phrase:

Nothing new occurs in such fulfillment; rather, a word is made full, or is empowered. It then acquires unavoidable validity and will certainly come to pass. Thus, Martin Noth does not understand the expression in the sense of ‘substantively amplify’ or ‘complete,’ but rather as ‘implement fully.’

Dnl. 4:30(33) shows clearly how closely related are prediction and occurrence: ‘In the same moment [that the voice sounded from heaven] the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar.’ The word was implemented. It is not ‘empty,’ but rather brings about that which Yahweh has willed, and effects that for which he sent it (Isa 55:11)

Finally, in 1 K 1:14 Nathan says that he will come in to the king after Bathsheba, and while she yet speaks with the king he (Nathan) ‘will fulfill your words.’ His message is the same as that of Bathsheba, his story the same. For just this reason he lends her words power and validity, since through two or three witnesses a word or matter is ‘sustained’ (*yaqum dabar*, Dt 19:15). Thus it is hardly correct when C.F.D. Moule denies the meaning ‘confirmation’ and translates ‘I will tell the whole story,’ as if that story contained gaps to be filled.¹⁵

Of particular interest is the use of this phrase in Jeremiah 44:25.

בְּהֵאמֹר יְהוָה־צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם וּנְשֵׁיכֶם וַתִּדְבַרְנָה בְּפִיכֶם וּבִידְבַרְכֶם מִלֵּאֲתָם לֵאמֹר עָשָׂה נַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־נְדָרֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר נָדַרְנוּ לְקַטֹּר לְמַלְכַת הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְהַסֵּד לָהּ נְסֻכִים הַקֹּדִים תְּקִימָנָה אֶת־נְדָרֵיכֶם וְעָשָׂה תַעֲשִׂינָה אֶת־נְדָרֵיכֶם

thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, as follows: ‘As for you and your wives, you have spoken with your mouths and fulfilled it 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 libations to her.” Go ahead and confirm your vows, and certainly perform your vows!’

What is striking in this text is the combined use of מלא and עשה, which exactly parallel *plēroō* and *poieō* in Matthew 5:17. 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” (הקים) it.

Plēroō, then, in Matthew 5:17, could very well carry the meaning of “implement” or “bring to action” on the basis of its Lxx translation of מלא. When prophecy is “fulfilled” (מלא) it implies it is implemented or brought into action. This perfectly corresponds with what Yeshua was expressing. He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to implement them—to cause them to be performed, both by Himself and those who were His disciples. What is more, this interpretation fits well with the structure of the pericope.²⁴

Verse 18

(The following is a more literal translation from the Greek)

“For truly I say to you, until the heaven and earth pass away, one jot (iota) or hook will not pass away from the Law, until all (of it) happens.”

The use of ἀμῆν (*amēn*, #281), translated as “truly,” is common in the gospels and especially in Matthew. It is

²³ 1Ki 1:14; 2Ki 2:27; 2Chron 36:21.

²⁴ For a more complete exposition of this aspect of “fulfill” in Matt 5:17, see my paper, “What does πληρῶσαι (“to fulfill”) Mean in Matthew 5:17?”, available on the English Articles page at www.torahresource.com.

used 30 times in Matthew on the lips of Yeshua²⁵ and often introduces (with emphasis) the conclusion of an argument or teaching. In the present text the use of *amen* serves to notify the listener/reader that Yeshua has come to His conclusion regarding the issue of the Law and the Prophets and their enduring importance.

In line with the first century debates over halakic matters, including the relationship of Oral²⁶ and Written Torah, it may be concluded that Yeshua's common "truly I say..." is a manner of introducing His own teachings as an established authority in the community.²⁷

The *terminus ad quem* (end point) of Yeshua's affirmation of the validity of the Law and the Prophets is the passing away of the heaven and earth. The only other use of this phrase in Matthew is 24:35 which seems to be parallel to our text: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words shall not pass away."²⁸ Thus, the expression "heaven and earth" is not quite equivalent to "forever" but stands for "never, as long as the current world order exists."²⁹ In contrast, the words of Yeshua will endure beyond the demise of the present world order.

It may be argued that the strong statement of Yeshua in Matthew 24:35 (that His words would never pass away) puts His teaching above the Law, or at least gives to His own words an eternity which He does not ascribe to the Law. While it is clear that Yeshua counted His teaching ever as much an authority as the Law, He did not consider His words as a replacement for Law. Rather, His words and teaching were necessary for a correct understanding of the Law, and only through His revelation could the Law and the Prophets realize their purpose.

Our text speaks of "not the smallest letter or stroke" passing away. Doubtlessly the smallest letter (Greek *ιώτα*, *iota*) refers to the Hebrew *Yod* (י), while the term "stroke" (Greek *κεραία*, *keraiia*, #2762) could have a number of translations. Some consider it the Hebrew *vav* (ו), others the serif that distinguishes several Hebrew letters (פ, כ, ט) while still others the crowns (embellishments) on certain letters in the synagogue Torah scrolls.³⁰ Whatever the case, it is clear the Yeshua makes special reference here to the written Tanach, and shows a very high view of Scripture.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*) agrees with Yeshua's insistence upon the integrity of the written text. Furthermore, the *Yod* is the center of much Rabbinic discussion, being the smallest letter in the Hebrew aleph-bet.

²⁵ 5:26; 6:2, 5, 16; 8:10; 10:15, 23, 42; 11:11; 13:17; 16:28; 17:20; 18:3, 13, 18, 19; 19:23, 28; 21:21, 31; 23:36; 24:2, 34, 47; 25:12, 40, 45; 26:13, 21, 34. Only in the Gospel of John is the double *ἀμὴν ἀμὴν*, "truly, truly" used (John 1:51; 3:3,5,11; 5:19, 24, 25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20, 21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18).

²⁶ In the later rabbinic literature the Oral Torah is described as having been dictated to Moses on Sinai and passed down orally (*m.Avot* 1.1). Rabbinic tradition teaches that the Mishnah was written down or codified in the late 2nd Century C.E. and ultimately in the Talmuds of the 4th–5th Centuries C.E. The Oral Torah consisted primarily of the halakic decisions by the Jewish leaders regarding the specific applications and interpretations of the Written Torah. While the Oral Torah was considered binding and authoritative, before it was codified in written form, it did not have the same position of prestige as did the Written Torah. See Jacob Neusner, *The Oral Torah* (Harper & Row, 1985).

²⁷ Recently it has been suggested that the term "Rabbi" did not come into common use until after 70 C.E., and that its use in the book of Matthew is anachronistic and colored by the struggles of the Jewish-Christian community immediately following the Apostolic era. See the comments of Michael Hilton and Gordian Marshall, *The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism* (SCM Press, 1988), pp. 3-5. For a fuller study of the use of the title Rabbi in the history of first century Judaism, see Solomon Zeitlin, "The Title Rabbi in the Gospels is Anachronistic," *JQR*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Oct, 1968), 158-160 which is a full response to Hershel Shanks, "Is the Title 'Rabbi' Anachronistic in the Gospels?," *JQR* Vol. 53 (1962-3), pp. 337-345 [this initial article by Shanks is followed by a short reply by Zeitlin as well]. For a more complete study on the use of the title "rabbi," see my essay, "The Term 'Rabbi' in the Gospels," available on the English Articles page at www.torahresource.com.

²⁸ Both Mark (13:31) and Luke (21:33) have this saying of Yeshua as well.

²⁹ In the Tanach ("Old Testament"), the permanency of the heavens and earth is regularly used as a metaphor describing that which lasts forever. Cf. Jer 31:35–36; 33:20–21; Ps 89:36–37; 148:3–6.

³⁰ These are called *תגין* in Aramaic (Hebrew: *תגינים*). In *b.Menachot* 29b, they are called *תגינים* are said to be attached to ט, ע, ש, צ, ג, ז, ג. Rabbinic tradition has God Himself attaching the *tagin* to letters when Moses ascends Sinai and enters the cloud, but this is clearly one of the many rabbinic myths created in order to give greater authority to their developed *halachah*. While it is common to read that the "stroke" referred to by Yeshua in Matt 5:18 is referring to the *tagin*, such an interpretation relies upon an anachronism, for the extant copies of the pre-masoretic text (i.e., Qumran) show no such markings.

R. Honna said in the name of R. Acha, The letter *Yod* which God took out of the name of Sarai our mother was given half to Sara and half to Abraham. A tradition of R. Hoshai: The letter *Yod* came and prostrated itself before God, and said, 'O eternal Lord, thou has rooted me out of the name of that holy woman.' The blessed God answered, 'Hitherto thou has been in the name of a woman, and that in the end [viz. in Sarai]; but henceforward thou shalt be in the name of a man, and that in the beginning.' Hence is that which is written, 'And Moses called the name of Hoshea, Yehoshua.'³¹

The Rabbis also speak directly to the absolute importance of every stroke in the text.

It is written [Lev. 22:32] וְלֹא תִחַלְלֵנִי אֶת־שֵׁם קֹדֶשׁי "Ye shall not profane my holy name": whosoever shall change ה into ה, destroys the world [for then תִּחַלְלֵנִי written with ה, makes this sense, Ye shall not 'praise' my holy name.] It is written [Ps 150:6] כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְיָ "Let every spirit praise the Lord": whosoever changeth ה into ה destroys the world. [It would read "Let every spirit profane the Lord."] It is written [Jer. 5:12], כָּתְשׁוּ בַיהוָה "They lied against the Lord": whosoever changeth כ into כ destroys the world. [It would read "Like the Lord they lied."] It is written [Deut. 6:4], יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד, "The Lord our God is one Lord": he that changeth ד into ד, destroys the world. [It would read "The Lord our God is another Lord."]³²

It is not surprising then to hear similar words from the lips of Yeshua. Once again, however, the prophetic aspects of the Law are emphasized, for whereas the Rabbis talk in terms of man possessing the ability to destroy the world through a tampering of the written text (though they certainly were using this as a hyperbole), Yeshua affirms the invincibility of the Tanach as ordained by the omnipotent hands of God.

The fact that "Prophets" is not added in this verse, however, as it was in the previous one shows that the real issue revolves around the Law. Certainly, for Yeshua the Law has a prophetic mission, and thus cannot be separated from the Prophets. But the accusation must have been that Yeshua was teaching the abolition of the Law of Moses, and to that accusation He directs these words particularly.

"until all is accomplished "

The normal English translations give a passive sense to this phrase which is misleading. The Greek is active, and perhaps "until everything happens" is the more literal sense. The Greek word translated "accomplished" is γίνομαι (*ginomai*, #1096), a very frequent verb with a base meaning of "come to be, become, originate" and the sense of "happen, take place" in our text and related constructions.³³

The term "everything" (Greek πάντα > πᾶς, #3956) must refer to the prophetic aspects of the Law.³⁴ Thus, whether considered small or great, every aspect of the Law will stand and find its completion. Nothing will be lost or aborted.

The emphasis, then, from this phrase is that God is working His immutable plan, a plan centered in redemption (the central issue of the Tanach) and that nothing will stand in the way of each aspect coming to happen in the course of time. But more specific to this context is the emphasis that the Law has, at least for Yeshua, a continuing part to play in the plan of God, and that therefore it is wrong to attempt to "abolish" the Law in an effort to further the redemptive work of God.

³¹ b.*Sanhedrin* 20.3.

³² *Tanchuma* 1.1. [*Tanchuma* is a compilation of midrashic comments which, according to tradition, feature the frequent comments of Rabbi Tanchuma Bar Abba, a Palestinian amora. His principal teacher in *halachah* and *aggadah* was R. Huna.] See the comments in John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, 4 vols. (Baker, 1979), 2.102.

³³ Cp. Matt. 1:22; 26:56; 18:31; 21:21; 24:6, 20, 34; 26:54; 27:54; 28:11; 1 Esdr. 1:10; Jdth 15.1; 1Macc 4.20; 2Macc 10.21; 3Macc 1.17.

³⁴ Compare, for instance, the words of Yeshua at Lk. 24:27, "And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures."

Verse 19

The structure of the paragraph now becomes significant. Does verse 19 continue the thought of verse 18, or is verse 18 a parenthesis so that verse 19 takes up the line of reasoning from verse 17? It is my opinion that 18 is the first member of a chiasmic³⁵ structure, and that 19 is the second. That is to say, verse 18 enlarges Yeshua's comments regarding πληρῶσαι ("fulfill") of verse 17, and then 19 expands His comments on the concept of καταλύσαι ("abolish"). In this way, 18 and 19 act in a *chiasmus* to the "abolish"/"fulfill" pair in 17.

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments...

If the structure of the pericope is as I have noted above, the use of λύω (*luō*, "loose, destroy" #3089) for the sense of "annul" must define more of what Yeshua means by "abolish" in 17. Thus, combining these two words and the sense they bring to Yeshua's statement, abolishing the Law is attempting to see it as annulled, of no consequence, without binding power, and in this sense destroyed.³⁶

Furthermore, as noted above (see chart, p. 6), the parallel structure of this verse puts "annuls" over against "keeps" (literally, "does," ποιέω, *poieō*, #4160, note NIV "practices"), strongly indicating that the manner in which one might attempt to destroy the commandment was to cease to "do" it, i.e., cease to keep it. Explaining "abolish" by defining its opposite, i.e., "doing," creates the bridge to verse 20, which emphasizes actually doing the commandments. Exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees must certainly go beyond merely doing the commandments, but it cannot exclude doing them.

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments...

The Greek word translated "least" is ἐλάχιστος (*elaxistos*, #1646) which is the superlative form of μικρός (*mikros*, #3398) meaning "least, smallest; very little, insignificant." The word is found 13 times in the Apostolic writings.³⁷ The meaning of the word itself is obvious, whether used of the smallest tribe of Israel (Matt. 2:6, quoting Micah 5:1) or of Paul, as the least of the apostles (1 Co. 15:9). It is more difficult to define what Yeshua means, however, by the phrase "the least of my brethren" in the parable of Matt. 25:40. Apparently, this refers to someone in the lowest ranking job in the King's court.

In our present text, however, does the word indicate that in Yeshua's view some commandments rank higher than others? It would appear so. Note the words of Yeshua at Matthew 23:23, where the tithing of one's own herbs while neglecting justice, mercy and faithfulness, is described as "neglecting the weightier provisions of the Law." Certainly, the Rabbis themselves agreed that there was a hierarchical structure in the Law, the preservation of life being at the highest, or, to use Yeshua's terms, being the heaviest of all the commandments.

The Rabbis were clear that even the least commandment was not to be neglected. Montefiore writes about our text:

Verse 19 remains a very odd and curious saying to have been put in the mouth of Jesus. It almost goes beyond what we can find among the utterances of the Rabbis. For the 'least' commands would, to the Rabbis, include some (by no means all) of the ceremonial commands. They would have regarded 'Thou shalt do no murder' as more important than 'A garment of mixed stuff of divers sorts shall not come upon thee.' . . . It was indeed a 'moral' command which the Rabbis quote (y.*Kiddushin* i.61 b) as the 'least' of the positive

³⁵ A "chiasmus" is a literary pattern which follows an A / B / B' / A' arrangement. That is, in a list of 4 elements, the first and fourth are connected, and the second and third are connected. If they are written in a two line pattern, and actual lines are drawn to connect the pairs, and "X" is formed, or, in the Greek, a "Chi" (χ) is formed, from which the word "chiasmus" is derived.

³⁶ BDAG notes that the word λύω was commonly used of laws or decrees which were rendered void and were therefore of no lasting consequence, pp. 606–07.

³⁷ Besides the 2 times in the present text, cf. Matt 2:6; 25:40, 45; Lk. 12:26; 16:10; 19:17; 1 Co 4:3; 6:2; 15:9; Eph. 3:8; Jms 3:4.

commandments, but, perhaps, they rather meant the easiest to fulfil, not the smallest in worth or importance. It is the commandment in Deut. 22:6, 7, and they point out that to this ‘least’ command the Law appends the same reward as to the greatest command (Ex. 20:12). So Ben Azzai (m.*Abot* 4.2) said, ‘Run to do even a slight precept, and flee from transgression: for precept draws precept in its train, and transgression, transgression; for the recompense of a precept is a precept, and the recompense of a transgression is a transgression.’ And Rabbi (m.*Abot* 2.1) said, ‘Be heedful of a light precept as a grave one, for thou knowest not the grant of reward for each precept.’ But even Strack and Billerback quote no parallel for the thought that he who fulfils and teaches the smallest precepts shall be called great (or greatest: cp. ‘least’) in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is Rabbinism with a vengeance!³⁸

It seems probable, however, that Yeshua here employs hyperbole in order to reinforce His main point, that He does not support any notion of the abolishment of the Law. The argument is *kal vechomer*³⁹—if the least commandment is neglected, the lowest position is attained. Thus the need to adhere to all the commandments is established—none are to be neglected. In this way, the entirety of the Law is maintained by Yeshua, so that at no point is He willing to admit even the abolishment of one commandment, not even one of the least.

The parallelism is obvious at this point. In the same way that the Law is fulfilled even to the smallest stroke or letter, so must the Law be followed, even to the least commandment. It becomes clear that “abolish” and “fulfill” have very much to do with whether or not the Law is maintained in practice. “Fulfill” cannot mean, therefore, a nullification of the “doing”, since in the parallel “destroying” (literally “loosing”) is opposite of “doing” (NIV “practicing”). Yeshua is not talking about a “fulfilling” that envisions a cessation of the “doing.”

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments...

One might rightly ask to which commandments Yeshua is here referring. He identifies them by the demonstrative “these,” as though they are immediately before the eyes of those He addresses. Were the commandments numbered to the current 613 during the time of Yeshua?⁴⁰ Whatever the case, it is clear in this context that Yeshua assumes His readers fully cognizant of what He would mean by “these commandments.” Ultimately, the demonstrative (“these”) must refer back to the previous “Law and Prophets.” Admittedly, it has no direct, grammatical antecedent in the text as it now stands.

and so teaches others

The primary emphasis is directed to the teachers of the communities—those who would influence the community in regard to the mitzvot. Apparently Yeshua was being accused by His opponents of teaching the abrogation of the Law, or at least of some of the commandments. He not only exposes such a rumor, but announces His own position regarding any who would teach such a thing.

The English “other” in “and so teaches others” is actually the Greek τῶν ἀνθρώπων, “the men/people.” The sense might be either of a particular group of men, such as rabbinic disciples, or (most likely) a use of the article (“the”) to denote a general group, i.e., “the community” where the plural of ἀνθρώπος (*anthropos*, #444) is analo-

³⁸ C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (KTAV, 1970), pp. 37-8.

³⁹ *Kal v'chomer* was a standard Rabbinic argument, whereby the greater was proven on the basis of the lesser, or visa versa. In the present text, the argument would be understood in this way: if the neglect of the least commandment carries with it a penalty, how much more would the neglect of a great commandment.

⁴⁰ According to A. H. Rabinowitz in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 16 vols. (Keter: 1972), 5, cols. 760-61, the tradition of numbering the commandments (mitzvot) to 613 is very ancient. It is found in the writing of the Tannaim (Simeon b. Eleazar [*Mekh. Yitro*, Ba-Hodesh, 5]; Simeon b. Azzai [*Sifre Deut* 76 where 365 prohibitions are mentioned) and mentioned in the *Midrash Rabbah* as based upon ancient tradition (Ex. R. 33:7; Num. R. 13:15-16; 18:21) as well as in the Talmud (b.*Yevamot* 47b). Rabinowitz believes this particular enumeration crystallized in the school of R. Akiva (who was a near contemporary of the Apostle Paul). While there is debate over when the listing of positive and negative commands actually became standard in the Jewish community, there seems to be general consensus that it was an ancient tradition. We may at least affirm with confidence that during the time of Yeshua the Jewish community was involved in the discussion of the enumeration of the commandments.

gous to Hebrew אנשים (*anashim*, plural of #376) in the sense “people.”

shall be called least in the kingdom⁴¹ of heaven...shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The penalty for a disregard of the Law and the Prophets is to be called “least in the kingdom of heaven.” “Kingdom of heaven” as a set term is found only in Matthew and must certainly be understood as a metonym for the Divine name, so that in this case “kingdom of heaven” is equal to “kingdom of God.”

What does it mean to be called “least in the kingdom of heaven”? A similar phrase is used at Matthew 11:11—

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least [less] in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

The obvious difference is that in 11:11 μικρότερος (*mikroteros*, comparative of #3398) is used while in 5:19 ἐλάχιστος (superlative of *elaxistos*, #1646) is employed. But the two phrases have obvious parallels, namely, some kind of comparison of rank or position within the kingdom of heaven/God. The surprise turnabout in 11:11 is simply that the one who seeks not the highest, but the lowest position, i.e., the position of servant, in the kingdom of heaven, will, in fact, be accredited with a reputation exceeding that of John the Baptist. The hyperbolic statement, “among those born of women there has not arise anyone greater than John the Baptist,” casts the comparison as also hyperbolic. In other words, servants are the greatest in the kingdom.

But in 5:19 the term is not used in this way. Far from being a commendation from a “lowest-is-best” (=humility is the greatest virtue) point of view, to be least in the kingdom in this statement of Yeshua is certainly a position to be shunned. It is clear that Yeshua is admonishing His listeners to be the greatest in the kingdom.

Some have taken consolation in the fact that the comparison between least and great in the kingdom is not a penalty of exclusion. That is to say, even those who destroy the commandments and teach others also to neglect them, are not excluded from the kingdom, but only are accorded the lowest ranking. But one wonders if this is actually the case. It appears that verse 20 clarifies this question: unless one exceeds the righteousness expressed by scribe and Pharisee in relation to the Law, one will not enter the kingdom of heaven. “Not entering the kingdom” is the penalty for rejecting God and failing to obey Him.⁴² In a similar way, riches may be a major stumbling block to those attempting to enter the kingdom (Matt 19:23-24), since one cannot serve both God and riches (Matt 6:24).

It would seem, therefore, that we are at an impasse. Apparently, one who annuls the commandments and teaches others to follow in his path is punished only by having an inferior rank in the kingdom. Yet in the very next statement of Yeshua, exclusion from the kingdom is promised to any who do not themselves exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees! To exceed such a righteousness cannot include an annulment of the commandments. For if at this point Yeshua is turning the notion of Law-keeping on its head, He has in every way failed to support His initial premise, namely, the enduring validity of the Law and the Prophets as contained in commandments.

In order to quiet this seeming contradiction, some may conclude that the “called⁴³ least in the kingdom / great in the kingdom” comparison is rather a hyperbolic expression denoting exclusion on the one hand, and inclusion on the other. To put it plainly, to disregard the Law and the Prophets, and to teach others likewise to disregard

⁴¹ A discussion of the “kingdom of heaven / God” is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that most generally the kingdom of heaven is the realm of God’s reign over His people, and, in this case, God’s reign is specifically located in the Messiah, the King He has appointed.

⁴² Matt. 7:21 “Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.”

Matt. 19:23-24 “And Yeshua said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

⁴³ The use of the term “called” (καλέω, *kaleō*, #2564) is Semitic idiom for statement of fact. As an example, the use of Isaiah 56:7 in Matt. 21:13, “My house shall be called a house a prayer” has the simple meaning, “My house shall be a house of prayer.” This is rooted in the essence of the name, i.e., one’s name is a declaration of one’s character, an irrefutable acknowledgement of one’s true essence.

them, is to assure one's exclusion from the kingdom of God. For apart from keeping the commandments and teaching others to keep them, it would be impossible to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

This explanation is difficult in the face of Yeshua's regularly using "least in the kingdom" to denote an attitude of servanthood and humility. For instance, 18:1ff compares this attitude of humility to becoming like a child. Further, 23:11-12 makes it clear that the greatest (μεῖζων, *meizōn*, #3187) among the disciples would be the one who was a servant. To put it pointedly, the greatest is the one who considers himself the least.

It is, however, one thing to consider oneself the least, that is, to have a genuinely humble view of oneself. But it is an entirely different matter to have God declare a person to be the least. This distinction is all important. And in our present text, it is God making the judgement—to neglect the commands is to run the risk of being declared least in the kingdom. Such a declaration would be sought by no true disciple, for if there were genuine love for the King, then such love would motivate to full service and loyalty and would not settle for a position of "least in the kingdom."

There is no doubt, therefore, that whatever else these "least/greatest" contrasts may convey, they are not both acceptable positions in the kingdom. One is to be sought after, and the other shunned. It is a later theological extrapolation to emphasize that the "least in the kingdom" is still in the kingdom! This cannot be the point. The least position in the kingdom is a place no genuine child of God would be content to fill.

20 *For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees...*

This concluding statement of fact is introduced with a similar phrase to that of verse 18, "I say to you" being a kind of set introduction to an authoritative declaration on the part of Yeshua. The central issue of Yeshua's conclusion, what constitutes a true "keeping" or "doing" of the Law, focuses upon the scribes and Pharisees. Since the Pharisaic sect was taken up with maintaining the written Torah as well as the oral traditions, it was only natural that they would be linked with the scribes. But what they both had in common for certain was their scrupulous maintenance to the letter of the Law *in the outward performance of it*. What they lacked was the true, spiritual sense of the heart of the Law, that is, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.⁴⁴ As such, their righteousness was primarily that of performance and at times lacked a true heart motivation of love for God.

But one might rightly ask why Yeshua felt the necessity at this point to use the scribes and Pharisees as any standard at all. The obvious answer, it seems to me, is that while Yeshua emphasized the utter necessity of heart obedience if one intended to keep the commandments, He did not in any way negate the requirement of outward performance. That is to say, one surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees not by neglecting the outward performance of the *mitzvot* (commandments), but by performing them as the fruit of a heart given over to the true worship of God. Another way of saying it is this: if the commandments are received as purely obligation, it would be impossible, from God's perspective, to keep them. But if they are received rather as divine blessing and privilege, then the keeping of them is pure delight. However, only the heart borne out of faith in God is able to so receive the commandments as blessing, and it is this kind of "keeping" which Yeshua teaches His disciples.⁴⁵

The Greek is quite emphatic. The simple 3rd class condition⁴⁶ makes entrance into the kingdom impossible apart from fulfilling the initial condition, i.e., surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Further-

⁴⁴ Yeshua censures the Pharisees and teachers of the Law not for taking the Law too seriously, but for not taking it seriously enough! They preach but do not practice (23:3); they concentrate on the Law's minutiae to the neglect of its weightier matters (23:23); and they supplant divine laws with human traditions (15:3-9).

⁴⁵ It is for this very reason, it seems to me, that Yeshua so passionately decries the Rabbis of His time. The Rabbis had so encumbered the Law with their traditions that one could only receive them as obligation. The burden of performance had all but eclipsed the aspect of blessing. Furthermore, it was this heaping up of traditions, i.e., the Rabbinic halakic decisions, which caused the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, and it is precisely, as I see it, this wall of Rabbinic ordinances which Yeshua abolished through His death, Eph. 2:14-15. The Law of Moses never encouraged a dividing wall between Israel and nations which could not be bridged. In point of fact, even though Israel was to remain distinct from the nations, she was to do so that she might be a light to them! It was the Rabbinic ordinances which threatened this ministry of being a light to the nations, and was therefore necessary for it to be broken down through the work of Yeshua.

⁴⁶ ἔάν μὴ followed by οὐ μὴ is clear: the apodosis will never be true unless the protosis is established.

more, the emphasis upon “surpassing” is clearly in the Greek, with *περισεύω*, “excel, exceed” (*perisseuō*, #4052) followed by *πλεῖον*, “more than” (*pleion*, #4119).

The Greek *περισεύω* (*perisseuō*) means to “excel abundantly” or “to be present in abundance.” BDAG translate the phrase “unless your righteousness greatly surpasses that of the scribes...”, emphasizing the emphatic character of the word.⁴⁷ I think the REB catches the sense in its translation: “I tell you, unless you show yourselves far better than the scribes and Pharisees, you can never enter the kingdom of Heaven.” The point is simply this: “far surpassing the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” cannot exclude the performance of the commandments.

It is interesting that Yeshua puts this Law-oriented righteousness on equal footing with the humble heart of faith (18:3), for without this He likewise states that one will not enter the kingdom of heaven. In similar fashion, what is impossible for man (in the sense of entering into the kingdom of heaven) is possible with God (19:23,24). This must be talking about the heart change that comes as a result of faith. The same phraseology is used by Yeshua as recorded by John (3:5), that apart from being born of “water and the Spirit,” one cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. Certainly the traditional Christian church has put far more emphasis upon John 3:5 than upon Matthew 5:20!

Summary

It only now remains to summarize the thoughts thus far expounded. I fully recognize that this study is brief and not exhaustive. I have sought to be straight forward with the text, and to at least begin to uncover its meaning. Here then are summary statements which I hope will urge us all on toward a better understanding of the Law’s present ministry under the reign of Yeshua.

1. One’s interpretation of this statement of Yeshua will hinge on one’s understanding of the key terms “abolish,” “fulfill,” “accomplish,” “annuls,” “least / great(est),” and “surpasses.”
2. “Abolish” means to tear down, or, in the case of laws or covenants, “to render void, of no further consequence.” Yeshua clearly states that He did not come with a purpose to abolish the Law and the Prophets.
3. In this text, “Law and Prophets” is the broader heading under which “commandments” is Yeshua’s specific topic. In linking the two together, He demonstrates the prophetic nature of the Law, and its need to be fulfilled.
4. The term fulfill is generally interpreted in one of the following ways:
 - a. “to establish or confirm” — the Greek term used, however, does not normally have this meaning, and another word would have most likely been used had this meaning been intended.
 - b. “to fill up” in the sense of summing the Law and Prophets in His own teaching and thus replacing the Law and Prophets with His more excellent and full teaching. This explanation errors in that it does not take seriously the “jot and tittle” emphasis of Yeshua. He is not fulfilling the Law and Prophets by replacing it— His words here establish the longevity of the Law and Prophets as contained in the written Torah.
 - c. “to fill up” in the same sense that prophecy generally is “fulfilled.” All would agree to this explanation in measure, but it does not adequately answer the obvious emphasis of Yeshua in verse 19, where the contrast is between “loosing” or “destroying” commandments and “doing” or “keeping” the commandments.
 - d. “to deepen” or “extend”. This view states that Yeshua took the Law and Prophets to a deeper meaning, i.e., adultery can happen in the heart; murder and hatred are equated, etc. But this view tends to characterize the Law as external, and Yeshua’s deepening of it as internal, a contrast not at all founded on the Scriptures. The true believers in Israel recognized full well the intrinsic spiritual nature of the Law.
5. If the parallels in verse 19 are given their due, and if the structure of the whole paragraph would indicate that verses 18 and 19 are expositions of the terms “abolish” and “fulfill” in verse 17, then “fulfill” means “doing” or “keeping” the Law. Thus, we might paraphrase the final line of verse 17 in this way: “I did not come to

⁴⁷ BDAG, p. 805.

abolish but to keep” (the Law / the commandments).

6. The validity of the commandments in terms of time is predicated upon the passing away of the heaven and earth. Or, to put it another way, the commandments remain valid until the physical universe as we now know it undergoes a radical change.
7. There was a hierarchical arrangement of the commandments in the time of Yeshua, those dealing with life and death being put above those commandments which were merely ceremonial. Yeshua insists that even the least of the commandments was not to be disregarded or abandoned.
8. The position of anyone who abandoned the Law, or taught others to do so, was one of “least in the kingdom”. This is a position no true disciple of Yeshua would be content with.
9. On the other hand, the reward for “doing” or “keeping” the commandments, and teaching others to do them as well, was a position of “great in the kingdom.” This ought to be the goal of a true disciple of Yeshua.
10. In order to dispel the notion that He was teaching that one could keep the Law without actually performing the commandments, Yeshua used as a standard the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, the two groups most zealous in His day for the outward performance of the mitzvot.
11. In order to emphasize the essential, spiritual reality of the commandments, He taught His disciples, and us, that true righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. By this He means that the commandments can only rightly be kept when they are understood as blessing rather than mere obligation, as the fruit of faith rather than the means of it.
12. To approach the commandments from the vantage point of blessing rather than as obligations, one must first be reconciled to God, so that he considers himself a friend and not an enemy of God. As friend of God, the commandments may be viewed as blessing rather than obligation, and may thus be kept in heart, and thus, indeed. Apart from such a “heart-keeping of the commandments” there is no ability to keep them. It is this heart issue which defines Yeshua’s teaching of “surpassing” the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, as the following section (5:21-48) shows.
13. This passage would teach us, therefore, that as God’s children we are blessed by the commandments, and ought to apply ourselves to their keeping—not as a means to become something, but because our hearts are so overtaken with gratitude toward the One who has redeemed us.
14. The Ten Words (Commandments) are God’s summation of the Law, and ought to be our focus in applying ourselves to keep the Law. Aspects of the Law which, because of God’s providence, are impossible for us to keep, may be suspended (such as the Temple ministry which will be reinstated in the millennial reign of Yeshua). This is not an annulling of the commandment but a suspending of it for God’s purposes. In some cases, laws pertain to specific issues which are temporary, such as the laws regarding the dismantling and transporting of the Tabernacle. Once the Temple was built, these laws no longer had a meaningful function. Theoretically, at what point God might reinstate the moveable Tabernacle, these laws would once again become pertinent.
[As to sacrifices in the millennial Temple, this in no way detracts from the finished work of Yeshua as our eternal sacrifice. Sacrifices in the millennium would fulfill the exact function they did in ancient times, namely, a visual pointing to the ultimate sacrifice in Yeshua. While the ancient rituals point forward toward the coming of Messiah and His work, the millennial Temple will point back to what He accomplished as a teach-

ing aid for the nation of Israel.]⁴⁸

15. We ought to guard ourselves from any satisfaction which derives from equalling the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. For according to Yeshua's words, those with such righteousness will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. Only those who surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees are viewed as truly righteous. To whatever extent, then, we consider our mere meeting the obligation of the Law as sufficient righteousness, we misunderstand both the Law and Yeshua's teaching here. Only as our love for God enables us to understand the commandments as a blessing from Him, will we be enabled to keep them as He intended.

⁴⁸ For further study on the reinstatement of the Temple sacrifices in the millennium, see my "Why We Keep Torah: Ten Persistent Questions," Chapter 3 (available at www.torahresource.com).