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# THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 5:17: A DIALECTICAL APPROACH

## ABSTRACT

In this contribution, the five main views in understanding the fulfilment of the law in Matthew 5:17 are critiqued in terms of their inconsistency with the co-text of the Gospel. The whole of 5:17-48 is assessed in terms of the challenging relationship between the statements about fulfilment or completion of the law and the Prophets in 5:17-18 and the way in which Jesus seems to intensify obedience to law *per se* in 5:19-48. The interpretation of 5:19-48 is sought by considering all of Jesus' words in the entire Gospel in terms of entry into the kingdom (5:19-20), doing the perfect will of the Father (5:48), and the way in which the law and the Prophets are fulfilled and accomplished in Christ (5:17-18). A dialectical approach is followed wherein statements concerning the retention of strict obedience to law are considered to be part of the thesis; statements that are opposed to strict obedience to law are considered to form the antithesis, and the way in which these opposites are related is considered as the new synthesis. This thesis, antithesis and synthesis form the solution to understanding fulfilment in Matthew 5:17.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, the relationship between the law and the gospel has always been a contentious issue. Traditionally, the interpretation of the fulfilment of the law in Matthew 5:17 is central in this regard (Trout 2015:1; Viljoen 2006). As usefully pointed out by

Trout (2015), the five main views in interpreting πληρόω (“fulfil”) in Matthew 15:17 can be summarised as follows:

- To *uphold* or *confirm* the law (see, for example, Wenham 1979; Charles 2002). In this view, the terms πληρόω (“fulfil”) and καταλύω (“abolish”) are starkly contrasted. Jesus’ teaching, as set out in 5:17-48, is understood as a reaction against the charge of breaking the law.
- To be fulfilled in Jesus’ *obedience* to the law (see, for example, Luz 1989:268-269; Cantry 2008; Evans 2012:115). Unlike καταλύω, πληρόω focusses on Jesus’ deeds rather than on his teaching. His keeping of the law would thus be his way of fulfilling the law.
- To realise or have deeper insight into the law’s *intended meaning* (see, for example, Hagner 1993; Nolland 2005; Viljoen 2006). In this view, Jesus brings out the law’s intended meaning in his teaching. In this sense, Jesus’ teaching would establish or complete the law. In the interpretation of 5:18, an element of newness in light of fulfilment confirm continuity with the law.
- Fulfilment as *transcending* (see, for example, Westerholm 1992; Davies & Allison 1988:486). This view is based on the so-called antithesis of 5:21-48, in which, as is argued, the law is not abolished, but transcended by Jesus’ teaching being a more perfect picture of the nature of God’s will.
- Fulfilment as *realisation* of what the law anticipated (see, for example, Lenski 1961:207; Banks 1975; Carson 1984; Moo 1996b; Morris 1992; Thielman 1999; France 2007; Turner 2008). In this interpretation, Matthew’s regular use of the verb πληρόω is followed: that which has been anticipated has now been realised. The term πληρόω is thus interpreted as carrying a prophetic or eschatological connotation. In other words, that which both the law and the Prophets predicted has been realised or has come into effect in Christ. This view also falls under the rubric of a salvation-historical perspective, where the realisation of the new covenant in Christ completes, fulfils and replaces the old covenant, constituting both continuity and discontinuity. Yet, this view represents the strongest opposition between the law and the gospel.

## 2. THE CHALLENGING NATURE OF MATTHEW 5:17-48 AND A PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

One of the most challenging aspects of interpreting Matthew 5:17-48 is the relationship between verses 17-18, which are about the fulfilment of the law, and verses 19-48, which are about performing the commandments of

the law. Since verse 19 is linked to verses 17-18 by *οὖν* (“therefore/then”), one could hardly claim that verses 19-48 are not related to verses 17-18. By taking the *οὖν* in verse 19 at face value, it is also problematic to view verses 19-48 as set in contrast to verses 17-18, as if it would mean something different from what is intended by the idea of fulfilment (*πληρώω*) in verse 17, or accomplishment (*γίνομαι*) in verse 18. Verses 21-48 rather explain or unpack what is meant by verses 17-20. In this sense, verses 17-20 could be interpreted as a kind of thesis statement to what follows in verses 21-48 (Blomberg 1992:105; Keener 1997).

A challenging aspect of verses 21-48 is that the level of conduct portrayed in them seems to be an *intensification* of obedience to the law as such (Luz 1989:268; Morris 1992:111; Nolland 2005:271),<sup>1</sup> as if the bar is lifted and the requirement for entering God’s kingdom (v. 20) is even more stringent than that put forth in the Mosaic Law (Davies & Allison 1988:498, 501). Such an observation is supported by the following:

- Those who fail to do the least of “these commandments” will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (v. 19).
- Entry into the kingdom is dependent on a horizontal righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20).<sup>2</sup>
- The individual commandments are intensified so that it is easier to break a commandment (for example, mere anger toward a brother is equated with murder, vv. 21-22; merely looking at someone with lustful intent is equated with adultery, v. 28; the conditions for divorce are intensified, v. 32).
- The passage ends and climaxes with the highest possible standard: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48, ESV). The call to be as perfect (*τέλειος*) as the heavenly Father can also be considered a summary statement or conclusion that spans all of the moral or ethical demands listed in verses 21-47 (Carson 1984:160). Essentially, in this instance, perfection entails the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law, in terms of Jesus’ exposition thereof (Hagner 1993:135). Can Jesus’ disciples achieve this level of conduct? Carson (1984:161) writes:

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1 See France (2007:179) who writes that these verses have created the impression that “Matthew took a very conservative line on legal observance, believing that the Christian disciple was bound to continue to obey all the commandments of the Torah”.

2 The term *δικαιοσύνη* denotes conduct, in this instance, which is on a horizontal level (Luz 1989:269; BDAG, *δικαιοσύνη* §3; see Hagner 1993:109).

This must not encourage us to conclude that Jesus teaches that unqualified perfection is already possible for his disciples. He teaches them to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy (v. 3) and to pray 'Forgive us our debts' (Mt. 6:12)

According to 5:10, one's level of conduct is a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom (5:20), but, the standard of perfection set forth in 5:48 to achieve such a goal gives the impression that it is *impossible* to enter the kingdom (Klausner 1926:392-397).<sup>3</sup> France (2007:179) mentions the other problem in understanding what is explained above:

If Matthew took a very conservative line on legal observance ... the interpreter must face the fact that this teaching is out of step with the overall thrust of NT Christianity and with the almost universal consensus of Christians ever since.

The question is whether 5:19-48 must be interpreted differently, in order to avoid contradiction with Christian consensus.

In addition, the close relationship between verses 17-18 and verses 19-48 also creates problems for the five main views listed earlier. On the one hand, the fact that the standard of conduct relative to the Mosaic Law is *raised* in verses 19-48 means that Jesus did not merely uphold or confirm the law (view 1). In this regard, verses 19-48 arguably stand in discontinuity with the Mosaic Law itself. On the other hand, the raising of the standard of the law can hardly be interpreted as an eschatologically new code of conduct that supersedes the Mosaic Law (view 5), for it is still in the realm of law. Although one could argue that there is inward movement toward the realm of the mind and the heart in verses 19-48 (see Meier 1976:100), this movement is still within the realm of strict obedience to the law (see Luz 1989). The notion that verses 19-48 (merely) convey the deeper or intended meaning of the Mosaic Law, notwithstanding the fact that there is room for fulfilment and newness in this approach (view 3), also seems to contrast with the raising of the moral/ethical bar in verses 19-48. In fact, the latter aspect seems to transcend the intended meaning of the Mosaic Law.

Although view 2 seems to pose the least problems in terms of the relationship between verses 17-18 and verses 19-48, the question is:

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3 While some authors (for example, Carson 1984:160; Osborne 2010:214) would note, in verse 48, a reference to Deuteronomy 18:13, where God calls Israel to be *תָּמִים* (complete/whole/upright), the context of Deuteronomy 18 is that of God's reprimand against the abominable practices of the pagans such as divination, consulting mediums, or necromancers. Deuteronomy 18:13 is thus not a general moral/ethical call to be perfect such as is put forth in Matthew 5:48.

How can the intended meaning of πληρώω (v. 17) point to transcendence, especially considering the meaning of πληρώω in the rest of Matthew. The word πληρώω occurs 16 times in Matthew, more than in any of the other Gospels,<sup>4</sup> of which 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56 and 27:9 (12 times) point to the *realisation* or fulfilment of prophecies in the Old Testament. In 3:15, πληρώω is used in reference to Jesus who would “fulfil” all righteousness through baptism. In 13:48, the term is used in connection with Jesus’ kingdom parable about the net that is “full” of fish. In 23:32, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees who “fill up” the measure of their fathers in murdering the prophets. On the basis of the prevalent notion of the realisation of prophecy (12 times), it is most likely that πληρώω, in 5:17, carries similar connotations, especially if one considers that the law and the Prophets probably point to (parts of) Scripture.

Lastly, that fulfilment in this passage would point to Jesus’ obedience (view 2) seems to be at odds with the context of this passage. Verses 19-48 are about the conduct of people; hardly anything or nothing in this passage hints at Jesus’ obedience or conduct in this respect. In other words, although the notion of Jesus’ obedience seems to solve much of the problems of this passage theologically, it seems to be more of an arbitrary solution than a solution that is derived from the text itself.

On the basis of the challenging nature of Matthew 5:17-48, the question is: How can verses 17-18 and verses 19-48 be reconciled in a way that does justice to this entire passage? I propose that the answer to this conundrum lies in a dialectical rhetorical outlay of the whole Gospel regarding the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets, which involves a *thesis*, an *antithesis* and a *synthesis*. To be more specific, I propose that the key to understanding the relationship between 5:17-18 and 19-48 lies in considering all of Jesus’ words in *the whole of Matthew* in respect of entry into the kingdom (5:19-20); doing the perfect will of the Father (5:48), and the way in which the law and the Prophets are fulfilled and accomplished in Christ (5:17-18). This approach is not a rhetorical analysis as such,<sup>5</sup> but an attempt to balance all of these aspects into the total rhetorical effect they create in the whole Gospel.

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4 Twice in Mark, 9 times in Luke and 15 times in John.

5 A full rhetorical analysis would include the application of ancient rhetorical categories (for example, Grams 1991). The aim here is to focus on the overall rhetorical effect that emerges by weighing the statements that relate to the fulfilment of the law in the whole of Matthew.

### 3. ENTRY INTO THE KINGDOM BY DOING THE WILL OF THE FATHER

The concept of ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (“the kingdom of heaven”), which occurs 32 times in the Gospel (3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 7:21, and so on), or ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (“the kingdom of God”), which occurs 5 times (6:33;<sup>6</sup> 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43), is traditionally viewed as a major theme in the Gospel of Matthew (Pennington 2008). This is besides references to the kingdom or kingdoms without these modifiers (4:23; 6:10; 8:12; 9:35; 12:25, 26; 13:19, 38, 41, 43; 16:28; 20:21; 24:7, 14; 25:34; 26:29). Since the expression ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶ occurs in Matthew 5:19 and 20, directly following Jesus’ statements about the fulfilment (πληρῶ, v. 17) and the accomplishment (γίνομαι, v. 18) of the law and the Prophets, it appears to be an integral part of their fulfilment. In fact, being great or least in the kingdom (v. 19) and especially *entry* into the kingdom (v. 20) lie at the heart of the kind of horizontal righteousness (v. 20) that Jesus is proclaiming.

A significant note is struck in 7:21 when the theme of *entry* into the kingdom of heaven occurs for the first time after 5:19-20. In 7:21, Jesus states that the one who *does the will of the Father* in heaven enters the kingdom of heaven.<sup>7</sup> In addition, this statement reminds one of 5:48, where Jesus commanded his disciples to be perfect (τέλειος) as their heavenly Father is perfect. At this stage in the Gospel (7:21), the reader’s natural question is: How is this ideal attained? *How* can one be perfect as one’s heavenly Father (5:48)? *How* can one do the will of the Father (7:21)? For, in most of the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), Jesus focusses on the conduct of his disciples without elaborating much on *how* a sinful, fallible human being can attain such a level of conduct. Neither does Jesus explicitly state *how* the will of the Father is done. In fact, in the build-up of the Gospel, from 7:24 onwards, Jesus consistently *points to himself* as the ultimate climax or destination of all conduct, as if the Father’s will is done by obeying and embracing Jesus himself. Yet, Matthew 7:24 implicitly answers the question as to how the Father’s will is done: one must listen to Jesus’ words and do what he says (see France 2007:296). Later, in 12:50, Jesus indeed connects the doing of the will of the Father with being his brothers and sisters. In other words, it appears that following Jesus and doing the will of the Father correspond.

6 The occurrence of τοῦ θεοῦ in Matthew 6:33 is uncertain and enclosed in square brackets in the NA28 text.

7 See the asking for God’s kingdom to come and his will be done in the Lord’s Prayer (6:10).

There are other instances where Jesus points to himself as the ultimate goal of being a disciple. According to 8:22; 9:9; 10:38, and 16:24, Jesus calls upon people to follow him. This involves more than simply following Jesus' teachings or even following his example. It involves losing one's own life or soul (*ψυχή*, 10:37-40; 16:24-26). Apart from indicating self-denial or dying to "self", losing one's *ψυχή* seems to involve losing one's natural identity and taking on a new life and a new identity in Christ). According to 11:28-30, Jesus urges his disciples to take on the rest that he provides, to learn from him, and to take on his yoke (*ζυγός*, vv. 29, 30), which is easy and light. In this way, people will find rest for their souls (*ψυχαίς*). Ironically, the heavy loads and yokes that people carry seem to relate to the demands of the Mosaic Law (Schweizer 1975:272; Davies & Allison 1991:289; Blomberg 1992:194; Morris 1992:296; Hagner 1993:324; France 2007:448; Mitch & Sri 2011:161; Osborne 2010:441),<sup>8</sup> and especially the burdens (*φορτία*) laid upon people's shoulders by the Pharisees (23:4). Davies and Allison (1991:291) argue that, in 11:25-30, "Jesus is the functional equivalent of Torah" and "its immediate antecedent". The rest that Jesus proposes in himself is thus the opposite of the yoke imposed by the Mosaic Law.

The following question naturally flows from the above: *Why* does Jesus point to himself as the way in which the will of the Father is done? This implicit question is answered on several levels. According to 10:37-40, Jesus explicitly states that those who receive him receive the one who sent Jesus (*τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με*), namely the Father. In other words, those who receive Jesus receive the Father (see 10:33). According to 11:27, all things have been handed over to Jesus by his Father. Jesus further states that no one knows the Son except the Father and that no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal himself, thus establishing the close connection between Jesus' revelation and the will of the Father (see 3:17). This connection between Jesus' teaching and the will of the Father becomes even clearer in Jesus' transfiguration, when the Father speaks aloud and says that Jesus is His beloved Son with whom He is well pleased, commanding that people should listen to Jesus (17:5). In other words, the Father condones Jesus' ministry and puts his stamp on Jesus' teaching so to speak, indicating that the Father's will and Jesus' teaching are in perfect unity. The same principle is conveyed by 28:18-20 in the authority (*ἐξουσία*, v. 18) that has been given to Jesus and the importance of adhering to Jesus' own teaching (v. 20). Another reason why Jesus points to himself in doing the Father's will is the fact that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins (9:6). In fact, 20:28 states that Jesus came

8 See Peter's reference to the yoke (*ζυγός*) of the Mosaic Law that neither the disciples nor the patriarchs could bear (Acts 15:10; see Gal. 5:1). See also *m. Abot* 3:5; *m. Ber.* 2:2; 1QH 6:19.

to give his life as “a ransom for many” (λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν). This involves freeing people from the consequences of judgement (Evans 2012:355). Jesus is thus the medium through which one’s life can be changed toward the Father’s will. This reality converges with Jesus being the baptiser with the Holy Spirit (3:11), which ultimately leads one in God’s will (see 10:20; 12:18). In Jesus’ statement that he casts out demons in the Spirit, there is also a definite link between Jesus’ ministry “in the Spirit of God” (ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ) and the kingdom (12:28), thus further establishing the link between Jesus’ ministry and the Father’s will.

In addition to doing the will of the Father, Jesus also lays down two more principles for entering the kingdom of heaven. First, one has to become like a child to enter the kingdom (18:3). The same principle holds when Jesus states that the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children (19:14). Childlike entry into the kingdom implies humility and *dependence* (Morris 1992:459-460; Hagner 1995:518, 553; Osborne 2010:670, 712; France 2007:727; Turner 2008:435-436), which amounts to *childlike faith* (Carson 1984:397, 420; Schweizer 1975:636, 384). Secondly, Jesus declares that it is difficult for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of heaven. The inverse side of this reality overlaps with the above, namely that entrance into the kingdom is marked by *dependence* on God. Even though salvation is difficult when it depends on people, all things are possible with God (19:23-26). It is worth noting that even the wealthy man’s strict obedience to the law did not suffice to ensure his entry into the kingdom (19:20), a notion that, in itself, seems to contrast with 5:19-48. In sum, Jesus’ utterances about entering the kingdom of heaven, which involves pointing to himself in doing the Father’s will, seem to state a kind of *antithesis* to the *thesis* portrayed by the requirement of entering the kingdom that Jesus set out in 5:19-20 and the way in which he gave content to such required conduct in 5:21-48.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. THE WAY IN WHICH THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS ARE FULFILLED IN CHRIST

In terms of Jesus’ utterance about the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets in 5:17, several elements in the rest of the Gospel seem to clarify its meaning. First, the reference to both the law (νόμος) and the Prophets (προφῆται) occurs elsewhere in the Gospel (7:12; 11:13; 22:40), where the law and the Prophets indicate two main sections of the Old Testament and probably refer to the entire Old Testament Scripture (see Mitch & Sri

9 This approach presupposes that 5:21-48 is not to be viewed as the so-called antithesis (see Davies & Allison 1988:501).



2011:94; Evans 2012:114). *Νόμος*, in 5:18, almost certainly does not point to any specific set of laws, but implies the whole of the Old Testament (Carson 1984:145). According to 7:12, Jesus considers the principle of doing to others as you wish others to do to you as the essence of “the law and the Prophets”. In establishing this so-called “golden rule”, Jesus alludes to the principle of love, which fulfils the law and the Prophets (22:37-40; see Schweizer 1975:175; Hagner 1993:176; France 2007:282; Osborne 2010:262-263; Mitch & Sri 2011:118). The sense is that of *fulfilling the demands of the law* and arguably points to the *completion of an era*.

Secondly, the notion of the dawn of a new era also lies behind 11:13, where Jesus indicates that the law and the Prophets prophesied until John the Baptist. In other words, John, whom Jesus views as Elijah that would come (11:14; see Mal. 4:5), is the last prophet or a transitional prophet of the old era, whereas Jesus himself represents the *beginning of a new era* (see Carson 1984:268; Blomberg 1992:188; Morris 1992:283; Hagner 1993:308). According to Osborne (2010:422), “the age of the prophets has ended” (similarly Mitch & Sri 2011:155). Hagner (1993:308) writes: “The point is that a key turning point has been reached, marking off the old from the new”.

Thirdly, Jesus’ answer to the question about the greatest commandment in the law is the command to love the Lord, which Jesus explains as “the great and first commandment”, followed by the command to love your neighbour as yourself (22:36-39). While Jesus’ reference to these two commandments could be interpreted as pointing to their importance, his closing statement that the law and the Prophets “hang” (*κρεμάννυμι*) on these two commandments (22:40) seems to point in the direction that the double love command includes all the commandments of the law and the Prophets without the necessity to adhere to all its specific stipulations (see Schweizer 1975:108, 426). If understood in this way, the double love command works to *complete* the law and the Prophets and to indicate the *dawn of a new era*, in which one principle governs all ethics or morality. How such an understanding would correlate to 5:19-48 will be discussed below.

Another theme in connection with the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets put forth in 5:18, that recurs in the Gospel, is that of *all things* that need to *take place* or *be accomplished* (*πάντα γένηται*).<sup>10</sup> Although slightly different terms are used, the reference in 1:22 to “all this” that

10 The reference to no iota or dot (the smallest Hebrew characters) that will not fall until heaven and earth would pass away could be hyperbolic, indicating that nothing in the law is unimportant (Evans 2012:117). But France (2007:187) is probably right in stating that the smallest details of the law will be permanent,

“took place” (τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν) to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet is about the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, which has salvation-historical significance. In 21:4, the reference to “this” that “took place” (τοῦτο δὲ γέγονεν) to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet points to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In 26:54-56, Jesus again points to the Scriptures that need to be fulfilled by Judas’ betrayal (v. 54), followed by the notion that “all this has taken place” (τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν, v. 56) to fulfil the Scriptures of the Prophets. Davies and Allison (1997:516) show that “the passion narrative in its entirety” stands under all these things that have taken place according to verse 56 (see Meier 1980:329). This in itself constitutes the climax of salvation history.

Lastly, in 28:11, some of the guards who reported to the chief priests refer to “all that had taken place” (ἅπαντα τὰ γενόμενα), involving all the things that took place in terms of Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. This can be viewed as the ultimate fulfilment of the law and the Prophets. These last references to all the things that took place (26:54, 56; 28:11) might point to Jesus’ reference to all things that need to be accomplished in 5:18 (Hammerton-Kelly 1972:30).<sup>11</sup> The question remains: How is the fulfilment or completion of the law and the Prophets related to the intensification of specific commands in 5:19-48?

## 5. TWO OPPOSING MESSAGES ABOUT THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW?

If all of Jesus’ statements concerning the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets in the Gospel of Matthew are considered, there seems to be a stark contrast between the statements in 5:19-48 and the rest of the Gospel. As pointed out earlier, according to these verses, Jesus raises the standard of conduct relative to the Mosaic Law to such an extent that it climaxes in the onus to be perfect, just as the Father is perfect (v. 48). There are other instances in the Gospel where Jesus focusses on one’s level of conduct as an indication of one’s favour with God. According to 12:33-37, Jesus points to the condemnation that awaits those who do not bear good fruit, that is, their conduct disqualifies them as being part of the kingdom of heaven by implication. According to 16:27, Jesus declares that the Father will repay each person according to what that person has

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but that all it points forward to will become a reality. In light of its fulfilment, the law will be understood in a new light.

11 While there is a reference in 24:34-35 to all the things that need to take place in the eschaton, they do not stand in such a close relationship with the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets as the other reference discussed in this instance.

done. In his address to the Pharisees, Jesus also sternly condemns their conduct, as they do not practise what they preach (23:3). The fact that, according to 5:19-20, entry into the kingdom seems to depend on this high level of conduct, however, starkly contrasts with the conditions for entry into the kingdom put forth elsewhere, namely childlike faith and dependence on God.

The contrast between 5:19-48 and the rest of the Gospel is deepened when compared to the relative simplicity behind the idea of receiving Jesus (10:40), but especially when compared to the call to take on Jesus' light and easy yoke (11:28-30), which seems to be in direct contrast with the yoke and heavy burden imposed by the Mosaic Law itself.<sup>12</sup> Further, Jesus' emphasis on the double love command within the direct context of the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets (22:37-40; see 7:12) is seemingly to simplify the demands of the Mosaic Law, which constitutes a contrast between the double love command and the strict tone of 5:19-48. Although 5:43-47 also addresses the principle of love, the context is that of loving one's enemies, which would place a higher demand on its hearers than they would expect (Osborne 2010:212). Yet the way in which the double love command is presented in 22:37-40 comes across as an ultimate controlling principle (see Hagner 1995:648; France 2007:847; Turner 2008:536; Osborne 2010:823) that not only contains the whole law (Blomberg 1992:335), but also seems to work in the direction of replacing the strict codes of the law and even to head towards reducing the law to a single principle (see Schweizer 1975:426). That the double love command at this stage in Jesus' ministry and at this point in salvation history would imply a downright abrogation of any specific law(s) there and then, would be an over-interpretation (see Carson 1984:465; France 2007:847). It might be the intention, in this instance, that the onus to adhere to all of the specifics of the Mosaic Law is due for fulfilment and replacement by the principle of love in the new covenant later on, for the new covenant would only be properly inaugurated at Jesus' death and resurrection.

The following main question arises from these seemingly conflicting statements about the level of conduct that is required in reference to the law (see especially 5:19-48; 12:33-37; 16:27; 23:3 vs. 10:40; 11:28-30; 18:3; 19:14, 23-26; 22:37-40): *How are these two portrayals of what is required from a disciple reconciled with each other?* I contend that these opposites should not be uncritically harmonised. In fact, given their full force, these

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12 Some use 5:21-48 to argue against a contrast between 10:28-30 and 5:21-48, as if Jesus did not have the demands of the Mosaic Law in mind, in this instance (for example, Carson 1984:278), but in order to understand the rhetorical build-up, the full force of such a contrast has to be acknowledged in this instance.

opposites are essential elements in understanding the overall rhetoric concerning the law in the Gospel.

## 6. BRINGING TWO OPPOSITES TOGETHER: A TRANSITION TO A NEW ERA

An important factor in assessing the significance of 5:19-48 is the fact that Jesus redefines or provides new content to the law. Although the stipulations set out in verses 21-47 are very much within the realm of strict obedience to the law, they all seem to transcend or even radicalise the original stipulations of the law. This reality in itself already signifies a sense of newness. In other words, Jesus does not merely confirm the law as is. The same tendency lies beneath other sayings of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus intensifies the commandment concerning divorce between a husband and a wife in such a way that it is more difficult to have a divorce (19:3-10). On the other hand, Jesus relaxes the conditions in respect of fasting (9:14-17) and the Sabbath, pointing to himself as the Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-8). In other words, even in providing new content to certain laws, there seems to be a contrast between the various redefinitions that requires clarification.

The element of newness in Jesus' interpretation of the law is especially evident in 9:17 where Jesus, in relaxing the conditions for fasting, states that new wine is not put into old wineskins, but requires new wineskins to preserve the new content. Jesus anticipates the new covenant that fulfils and supersedes the covenant under the law (see Carson 1984:228; Morris 1992:226; Osborne 2010:343-344), or at least contrasts the old age represented by John the Baptist and the new age represented by Jesus (Hagner 1993:245; Evans 2012:205). An implicit element of newness also lies beneath Jesus' reprimand of the Pharisees who shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces (23:13). In a sense, the Pharisees were the guardians of the law, which they confirmed and upheld in the eyes of the people. But ironically, this led to a situation where the people were actually deprived of the kingdom. The latter points to a kind of predicament under the law in anticipation of a new era of relating to God (see Osborne 2010:344).

In Matthew, the dawn of a new era of relating to God already emerges when John the Baptist, in answer to the Pharisees and Sadducees' claim on Abraham, declares that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from stones, that God accepts only those who bear good fruit, and that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:9-11). John thus reacts to the assumption that one can escape judgement by being a physical descendant of Abraham (Mitch & Sri 2011:67; Evans 2012:71;

Morris 1992:59) and implies “that participation in the kingdom results from grace and extends the borders of God’s people beyond racial frontiers” (Carson 1984:104; similarly Davies & Allison 1988:309). Yet the actual inauguration of a new covenant becomes clearer when the events surrounding Jesus’ death, resurrection and utterances at this time come into play. In the account of the Last Supper (26:26-29), Jesus identifies the bread and wine with his body that will suffer and die for his people for the forgiveness of sin. This in itself can be considered a pardoning of the transgressions committed against the law (see Rom. 5:13; 7:7-8; 1 Cor. 15:56). But, significantly, Jesus refers to his blood as “the blood of the covenant” (τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης, v. 28). Some notable manuscripts add *καινῆς* (“new”) in this instance (A C D K W Γ Δ f<sup>1</sup>.<sup>13</sup> 565. 579. 700. 892. 1241. 1424. / 844. / 2211 ℳ latt sy sa bo; I<sup>lat</sup>). While the added *καινῆς* may be an analogy of Luke 22:20 (Metzger 1994:54), given the manuscript evidence, its authenticity is probably not to be ruled out completely. Nevertheless, a new covenant is probably implied in Matthew 26:28 (Blomberg 1992:391; Morris 1992:660; Hagner 1995:773; Mitch & Sri 2011:337; Evans 2012:431; Osborne 2010:968)<sup>13</sup> by the fact that Jesus’ death signifies the *inauguration* of the covenant he is speaking about (see Carson 1984:537-538; Davies & Allison 1997:473). Yet the idea of newness is established in the next verse (v. 29), with Jesus’ statement about drinking the cup “new” (*καινός*) with his disciples in his Father’s kingdom. This is the last statement about the kingdom in Matthew. Although this statement probably refers to the banquet table in heaven (Blomberg 1992:391; Hagner 1995:774; Osborne 2010:968), in principle, the newness of the covenant is inaugurated in Jesus’ death and resurrection (see Blomberg 1992:391; Evans 2012:431).

An element of newness is also observed in Matthew’s account of Jesus who never explicitly identifies with an earthly kingdom or territorial kingship, even though it is relatively certain that such an expectation prevailed at the time (Wright 1992:308; Fitzmyer 2007). Apart from the fact that the kingdom is consistently referred to as the kingdom “of heaven” or “of God”, the fact that the kingdom is entered by dependence on God (18:3; 19:14; 19:23-26) also signifies its different nature from that of the prevalent expectation. It is worth noting that, according to Matthew, Jesus does not explicitly confirm the idea that he would be the king of the Ἰουδαῖοι (“Jews” or “Judaean”, 27:11-12). Jesus answers σὺ λέγεις, meaning “you say [so]” (v. 11), which probably signifies his acknowledgement of some kind of kingship. But Pilate did not understand what kind of king

13 Jesus probably alludes to Jeremiah 31:31, which contains the idea of a new covenant (Carson 1984:537; Blomberg 1992:391; Morris 1992:660; Hagner 1995:773; France 2007:994; Turner 2008:625).

he was dealing with (Mitch & Sri 2011:352; Blomberg 1992:410; Morris 1992:700; Hagner 1993:818; France 2007:1051; Evans 2012:451; John 18:36-37). The actual claim that Jesus would be the king of the *Ἰουδαῖοι* is rather mockingly attributed to him by outsiders (see 27:37; TDNT 3:376). In addition, the fact that the reward of the kingdom is neither a material inheritance nor earthly dominion, but involves “eternal life” (*ζωὴν αἰώνιον*, 19:16, 29; 25:46) attests to the same reality. An element of newness is also portrayed by the parable of the tenants, who killed the son of the landlord. This resulted in the kingdom being taken away from the tenants and given to a people who produce its fruits (21:33-36). In this parable, there is a change in the identity of God’s people: God’s people are, in fact, replaced by a new people (see 3:9; 12:21).

This *other kind of kingdom* that Jesus and his ministry represent also comes into focus in Matthew’s references to Jesus’ relationship with the temple. Jesus refers to “something greater than the temple” that is embodied by him being the Lord of the Sabbath (12:6-8). This is apart from two references from outsiders to Jesus destroying the temple and building it in three days (26:61; 27:40). While these references might not be an accurate representation of what Jesus actually said (see Osborne 2010:996), they probably point to Jesus’ words concerning the physical centre of worship being destroyed and being replaced by Jesus Himself as the new centre of worship, as recorded in John 2:19-21 (France 2007:1023; Osborne 2010:996; Mitch & Sri 2011:345; John 4:21-24). Lastly, the fact that Matthew gives an account of the veil that was torn from top to bottom (27:51) probably means that access to God’s intimate presence, signified by the holiest of holies in the temple, has become accessible and open in the new era in Christ (Carson 1984:580; Blomberg 1992:421; Gurtner 2007:201; France 2007:1081; Osborne 2010:1043), whereas an allusion to the temple’s immanent destruction is also likely (Carson 1984:580-581; Blomberg 1992:421; Hagner 1995:853; Davies & Allison 1997:631). According to Carson (1984:580-581), in this new era, the Levitical priesthood became obsolete, the Mosaic covenant changed, and the temple ritual and the law governing it became obsolete, whereas Jesus became the new temple (26:61; Hagner 1995:853).

## 7. CONCLUSION: COMBINING OPPOSING ELEMENTS TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING 5:17-18

When everything regarding entry into the kingdom (5:19-20), doing the perfect will of the father (5:48), and the way in which the law and the Prophets are fulfilled (5:17-18) in the Gospel of Matthew is considered, the

following picture in terms of the overall rhetorical build-up concerning the theme of fulfilling the law and the Prophets emerges.

Matthew 5:17 already sets up a tension in that, on the one hand, Jesus states that he did not come to abolish, annul or invalidate the law or the Prophets, and that, on the other hand, he came to fulfil, fill up, complete, finish and/or bring them to realisation (BDAG, πληρόω). While, on a semantic level, it would be unusual that the term πληρόω would convey all of these meanings, its significance in respect of the rhetorical build-up seems uncertain, thus creating the possibility of ambiguity. As discussed earlier, in light of Matthew's use of the word πληρόω elsewhere, it probably carries strong connotations of the realisation of Scripture, but the way in which fulfilment is explained in 5:19-48 seems to be towards retaining rather than realising or completing the law. There is thus a tension between non-abolishment and fulfilment in 5:17-18. In other words, the concept of πληρόω in 5:17 has more than one side to it. In 5:18, Jesus confirms that nothing in the law (pointing to [a part of] Scripture) will fall away until all is accomplished. This seems to convey two aspects of πληρόω (v. 17). The law must remain in place until all is accomplished, but this also implies a kind of fulfilment of the law that does not point to the eternal force of the specific stipulations of the law, but to the fulfilment of its prophetic content (Carson 1984:145-146; France 2007:187). This statement thus portrays a measure of progression. Rhetorically, one could ask at this point: *When* would all these things be accomplished?

Jesus immediately proceeds by emphasising the importance of adhering to specific prescriptions of the law, to such an extent that horizontal righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and even that entry into the kingdom depends on this high level of conduct (5:18-19). Jesus then continues with the same intensity by attaching stricter conditions to individual laws. The intensity reaches a climax in 5:48 when Jesus expects people to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. On a rhetorical level, this intensity of obedience to the law creates a plight, for no-one is perfect. The level of conduct required would seem to be impossible. In other words, Jesus seems to *radicalise obedience to the law* to such an extent that it requires a solution. How can this level of conduct be achieved? Part of the meaning of the fulfilment of the law (5:17) would then be to "fill up"<sup>14</sup> the law or to "make it full" to such an extent that it becomes unbearable. In other words, the intensity of obedience to the law is *not an end in itself*, but a necessary step in requiring a solution. In terms of the overall rhetorical build-up, 5:21-48 can thus be viewed as the *thesis*.

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14 Such a usage would conform to the way in which πληρόω is used in the LXX, which renders the Hebrew מָלֵא (Carson 1984:142).

In answer to this plight, the solution starts to follow: The (perfect) will of the Father is done (5:48, followed by 7:21) by listening to Jesus' words (7:24; 17:5; 28:20), by following him (8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24), by receiving him in person (10:40), by taking on the rest in him that relieves one from the yoke of the law (11:28-30), by living on the basis of the double command of love (22:37-40), by having simple, child-like faith (18:3; 19:14), and by being dependent on God (19:23-26). These statements are a kind of *antithesis* to the thesis above. The thesis and antithesis inevitably lead to the next question: How are these two opposites reconciled? This question can be answered on several levels, and viewed as the new *synthesis*.

1. By embracing and receiving Jesus and his teachings, the perfect will of the Father is fulfilled (10:40; 17:5), thereby establishing the mutual revelation of the Father and the Son (11:27).
2. In Christ, the impossibility to enter the kingdom on one's own or even by doing the law, is overcome (19:20, 25-26).
3. By entering into Christ's rest (11:28-30), by his forgiveness of sins (9:6) and by Christ's ransom for many (20:28), there is shielding against, or even escape from both the strict demands of the law and the judgement for not adhering to the law.
4. By losing one's life or soul and by identifying with Christ in his suffering in taking up one's cross (10:37-40; 16:24-26; 26:26-29), one takes on a new identity and a new life in Christ, although this will only be fully realised in the eschaton.
5. The Christ event signifies a new covenant (26:26-29) that fulfils yet supersedes the prevalent expectations concerning the kingdom at the time and the old symbols of religion (12:6-8; 26:61; 27:40, 51). Although not specifically developed in Matthew, the baptism with the Spirit (3:11) performed by Jesus probably points to "a time of spiritual refreshment and renewal leading to a closer and more obedient relationship with God" (France 2007:114),<sup>15</sup> and arguably signifies the enablement by God to do the will of the Father (Hagner 1993:53).<sup>16</sup>

In understanding the synthesis in terms of the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets, a *salvation-historical* perspective is crucial (see view 5 above and especially Carson 1984:143-145). There is *salvation-historical progression* from Jesus' statements concerning the law in 5:19-48 to

15 As background, see especially the Old Testament promises in this regard (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; 39:29; Joel 3:1-2).

16 Hagner points to the Spirit that brings forth the "proper response of 'fruit in agreement with repentance' (v 8)".



28:18-20. Strictly speaking, when Jesus was elaborating on the practical significance of the law in 5:21-48, he and his listeners were still under the law and *the old covenant*. Then there was a time of *transition* when Jesus already preached the content of the new covenant, but still referred back to the old covenant, for example, pointing out to the rich young man that he would enter life if he keeps the commandments of the law (19:17). At the same time, however, the inability to enter the kingdom on the basis of fulfilling the law is highlighted in the same encounter with the rich young man (19:20-26). Yet the actual point when the new covenant is inaugurated and the new conditions for entry into the kingdom apply is with Jesus' death and resurrection, forming the climax of salvation history (Davies 1962:44-63; Meier 1976:61-65; Moo 1996b:353).<sup>17</sup> If the double love command (22:37-40) is situated salvation-historically at the time when Jesus referred to it, it could hardly be understood as being intended to replace the specific commandments of the law (22:37-40). But, viewed in retrospect from the position of the inauguration of the new covenant through Jesus' death and resurrection, the love command points to a reality where love becomes the overarching and all-inclusive principle for doing the Father's perfect will, without the necessity to adhere to all the specific stipulations of the old covenant. Paul attached this kind of annotations to this saying of Jesus (Rom. 13:8-10; Moo 1996a:814-816). Finally, when Jesus' command to teach his disciples to observe all that he has commanded (28:20) is considered from a salvation-historical perspective, his teachings must be understood through the lens of the "blood of the [new] covenant" (26:28) that was inaugurated in Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' specific commandments in 5:21-48 cannot be viewed as the strict rules of the new covenant, but rather be understood in terms of their salvation-historical function to make people realise their inherent *inability* to do the Father's perfect will and to bring them to complete *dependence on Jesus himself* in achieving that goal. In the latter sense, the iota and the dot of the law and the Prophets *keep* their ultimate function, namely to testify about the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets in Christ and to urge people to receive Christ.

In view of the salvation-historical progression of the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets, *πληρώω* in 5:17 can thus be understood as follows. It points to a filling up of the law to the point of impossibility (thesis), which results in a salvation-historical completion of the law and the Prophets by, and in Christ (antithesis). This completion is rooted in Christ's teaching

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17 See especially the correspondence between the anticipation of all things that need to be accomplished (*γίνονται*) in 5:18 and the reporting of all the things that took place (*γίνονται*) in terms of Jesus' death and resurrection in 26:54, 56 and 28:11.

as well as in his death and resurrection, wherein he serves as ransom for all sin and forgives all transgressions (against the law). The salvation-historical completion, in turn, involves the inauguration of a new covenant, in which the double love command fulfils and incorporates the essential values of the law, but relieves people from the burden of adhering to its strict stipulations. There is respite from the yoke of the law in embracing Christ and in being shielded from God's judgement by the work(s) of Christ as being in perfect harmony with the will of the Father (synthesis). This salvation-historical dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis thus constitutes the meaning of the fulfilment of the law and the Prophets (5:17). The law and the Prophets is thus upheld in that it makes people realise their sense of inadequacy, which, in turn, drives them to embrace Christ and his teachings. Christ imparts new life into people, although only fully realised in the eschaton. Loosing one's identity and identifying with Christ enables one to fulfil the Father's perfect will.

Finally, in the proposed dialectic approach to fulfilling the law in Matthew 5:17, an element of upholding the law (view 1) is retained (the thesis formed by 5:19-48), an element of transcendence (view 4) is incorporated (the antithesis formed by Jesus' teachings after 5:48, but especially after 7:12), and the element of realisation (view 5) is confirmed (the synthesis created by the significance of Christ's death and resurrection).

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