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Replacement Through Fulfillment

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; … Then he began to speak, and taught them” (New Revised Standard Version, Matt. 5:1). During his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides many of the moral teachings that underline his ministry (Harris 359). He uniquely singles out the poor, the meek, the mournful, and the persecuted, offering them blessings and giving them favor in his eyes (Matt. 5:3-11). He continues by interpreting many prominent moral laws of the Hebrew Bible, such as those governing murder, adultery, divorce, and prayer, offering his unorthodox insight (Matt. 5:21-32; 6:5-15). Throughout the sermon, Jesus speaks about original ideas, often without appealing to words spoken by those before him. This significantly moves listeners, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29).

Although Jesus says in the same sermon, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill,” his teachings appear to challenge the existing interpretations of the Hebrew Bible (Matt. 5:17). In Deuteronomy and Proverbs, it states that those who experience good fortune on Earth are considered favored in the eyes of God, yet Jesus seemingly presents an opposing ideology in his message (Harris 360). Furthermore, his Antitheses interpret the Hebrew Bible laws to unwarranted depths by proposing, for instance, that even so much as a hateful thought is enough to ensure condemnation (Matt. 5:22). With Jesus’ unique stance of appealing to his own authority, it brings to question whether he is truly fulfilling or completely replacing the Mosaic law. However, with close analysis of Jesus’ ministry and connections to select passages in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, it is clear Jesus both fulfills and replaces the law as foretold by the prophets.

First consider the moral law which Jesus must uphold to fulfill the Mosaic law. To fulfill this part of the law, Jesus must uphold the Ten Commandments. Throughout the Gospels, there is no instance of Jesus breaking the literal interpretation of the moral law. The Gospels depict a man who has no idols, never murders, never commits adultery, and never steals. To his accusers, the supposed masters of the law, he challenges, “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” yet none are able to provide such evidence (John 8:46-50). Throughout the New Testament it is often repeated in different ways, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22). With no evidence to the contrary, it must be known that Jesus fulfilled the literal moral law completely.

Jesus does not, however, stop with the literal interpretation of the law. As foretold by the prophet Isaiah, he must exalt the law, as it is written, “for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious” (Isa. 42:21). Thus, Jesus seeks the spiritual truth beneath the law (Harris 360). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ interpretations of the ten commandments bring this prophecy to fruition. By extending the commandment, “You shall not murder,” to include feelings of anger and by extending the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” to include looks of lust, Jesus raises these commandments to previously unrealized levels of holiness (Exod. 20:13-14; Matt. 5:21-30). Continuing in the same manner, Jesus reveals the spiritual truth of the remaining commandments. Therefore, Jesus not only fulfills the literal interpretation but also fulfills and preaches of the underlying spiritual essence of the moral law.

Consider now the ceremonial and ritualistic laws of the Hebrew Bible. The ceremonial laws most notably consist of ritual sacrifice, circumcision, and ceremonial feasts (Exod. 20:24; Gen. 17:10; Deut. 16:10). As an infant, Jesus adheres to the practice of circumcision as it is written, “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child” (Luke 2:21). Later, as a boy, Jesus partakes in ritual sacrifices, having “offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord” (Luke 2:24). Furthermore, Jesus and his disciples routinely observe ceremonial feasts as whenever the Passover is near, he asks, “Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” (Mark 14:14). Therefore, all passages depict Jesus as a devout Jewish man, fulfilling not only all moral laws, but all ceremonial laws.

Like Jesus’ interpretation of the moral laws, he extends the ceremonial law to its deeper spiritual truth. During God’s test of Abraham’s faith asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham foreshadows Jesus’ sacrifice, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:8). Jesus understands these ritual sacrifices are, “only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never … make perfect those who approach” (Heb. 10:1). Instead, he knows he must, “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). By performing this superior sacrifice, Jesus goes beyond the literal ceremonial laws and, once again, fulfills the essence of the law.

By elevating the moral and ceremonial law to the humanly unattainable level of pure thought and perfect self-sacrifice, Jesus reveals just how thoroughly he fulfills what he argues is the true purpose of law and the prophets. Furthermore, he makes it clear just how fruitless human efforts are when trying to fully obey this law. Therefore, under Jesus’ interpretation of the law, if anyone is to be good in the eyes of his father, something must change, otherwise all humans have fallen short. By Jesus’ fulfilling of the law, he prepares the way for a new promise.

Through this new promise, Jesus fulfills the prophecy provided in multiple passages in the Hebrew Bible. The existence of this new promise is first conceived after Moses first institutes the law and predicts the Israelites will be unable to uphold it (Deut. 29:22-28). He then prophecies that after their failure, “God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 30:6). The prophet Jeremiah further clarifies the circumcision of the heart corresponds to the requirements of the law, writing from Lord’s perspective, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). Thus, for Jesus to fulfill the prophets as he set out to do, he must institute this new promise apart from the existing covenant.

This obscure new promise prophesied in the Hebrew Bible is repeatedly characterized in the Pauline Epistles and known today as justification by faith (Harris 450). Central to Paul’s argument is the ritual self-sacrifice of Jesus which pays the price for all sinners by becoming a curse (Gal. 3:13-14). Once Jesus has died, Paul argues that sinners no longer live but Jesus lives in them (Gal. 2:20). He further appeals to the story of the Hebrew Bible in which God counts Abrahams faith to him as righteousness, well before the Mosaic law and institution of circumcision were established (Gal. 3:6-9 cf. Gen. 15:6). Therefore, from this, Paul establishes that the law is no longer necessary for salvation (Harris 451). Instead, Paul argues one is to simply have faith in Jesus and receive salvation as a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9). Thus, through Jesus, the fulfillment of the Mosaic covenant leads to its replacement.

Although this promise of justification by faith serves to replace the old covenant through Mosaic law, it is not without its connections to the original law and comes with its own responsibilities. Paul makes it clear that the Hebrew Bible is not useless. It serves the great purpose of preparing the people for the coming of Jesus, acting as a “disciplinarian” (Gal. 3:24). Even though those who have faith in Jesus are no longer subject to this disciplinarian, they are not free from responsibility (Gal. 3:25-26). They must still refrain from the “desires of the flesh” and live according to the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-21). Central to these conditions is the concept of practicing neighborly love without external restrictions (Harris 451). This concept returns to Jesus’ golden rule, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” which Jesus argues is the entirety of the law and the prophets (Matt. 7:12). Therefore, Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets while replacing the old covenant.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount initially poses a difficult situation when examined in isolation. It appears as if Jesus appeals to his own authority to rewrite the meaning of the law, perhaps even replacing it completely. Yet, close analysis with corresponding passages throughout the Bible reveals that Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets not only to the letter but further to the underlying Spirit of it. He sheds light on the idea that the law has never been upheld and should be used to show the necessity for a new promise. This new promise, foretold by the prophets which Jesus upholds, is the concept of justification by faith. People are no longer bound by law they cannot keep; they are only required to have faith and to follow the golden rule: love your neighbor as yourself.

Works Cited

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