

# Jesus' Fulfilment of the Law in Matthew 5:17: A Panacea for Breaking the Law in Africa

by

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## Abstract

This paper examines Matthew 5:17 in the Bible with a view to establishing its contribution to eradicate breaking the law in Africa. Using Ralph's grammatico-historical approach, it also reveals that Jesus fulfilled the law in his own life through teaching and selfless service. Hence, it recommends that holistic obedience to the law in the life, teaching and selfless service of individuals could eradicate breaking the law in Africa as enshrined in Matthew 5:17.

## Introduction

Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας·  
Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets;  
οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι.  
I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.

The above passage reflects how Jesus' constant manner of speaking in regard to the Jewish religion and Scriptures shows the reverence in which he held them. The Old Testament represents the first steps in a great course of revelation and redemption which reaches its consummation in Christ himself. There were imperfections in the Jewish religion which were incidental to its character and purpose. It was in its very nature provisional and preparatory, and was adapted to an early and rude stage of human development (Matthew 5: 38, 39; 19:8; Mark 7:15; 12:33).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the image projected in Africa since the early seventies has been one of strife, mismanagement, cruel leadership and self-serving elites.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, philosophical issues have become burdened with political and emotional issues giving rise to inconsistencies which have made progress towards a greater respect for the rule of law difficult and embarrassing. The questions arising from the above submission are in what ways did Jesus fulfil the Law and the prophets? And how could Jesus fulfil the Law in Matthew serve as a catalyst to addressing breaking the Law in Africa? The most important passage, in its bearing on these problems, is Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17).

Driver<sup>3</sup> attests to Moses as the leader under whom Israel was delivered from the Egyptian bondage, led through the wilderness, and received a revelation. The formulation of many customs and institutions from which the later national system was developed came through him, so that Israel as a people owed its existence to Moses, a unique personality of supreme importance in the Old Testament. It is hardly contestable that the laws which came to guide the lives of Israel are attributed to Moses. For instance, the commandment, ordinances and statutes contained in the Law books (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers) were given directly to Moses by Yahweh. Many of the laws and institutions of the Pentateuch originated with Moses or at least received his sanction. On this Peterson<sup>4</sup> notes that we must look upon Moses as Israel looked upon him, that is, the original Law maker to whom all laws are ascribed. Through the Law Moses established a firm relationship in the wilderness of Kadesh between the Israelites and Yahweh, thereby becoming the originator of the Torah in Israel. Obedience to these laws was to be the distinguishing mark of the Israelites from other nations. These laws covered all aspects of life, regulating relationships and dealing with both personal and economic matters. They laid down guidelines for the way Israel would relate to other nations; they regulated the cult and its sacrifices through which their sins could be forgiven. Sometimes the Israelites obeyed these laws carefully and experienced God’s blessings in their national life. At other times they disregarded God’s laws and brought sanctions upon themselves; they were overrun by other nations and eventually suffered exile. It must not be misconstrued that Mosaic Law in all its detail is a human production, applicable to a particular people in a rude age, though it contains some moral precepts universally accepted. After the coming of Jesus Christ, obedience to the Mosaic Law was no longer the distinguishing mark of the people of God. They were now distinguished by their faith in Jesus Christ and participation in his spirit. The Law continued to have an educative role for them, but it was no longer the regulatory norm under which they lived.<sup>5</sup>

Kidder and Hodge affirm that the moral teaching of Christianity does not differ, in the main, from the moral teachings of philosophy. Unbelievers accept them, not as the result of revelation or the offspring of religion, but as the best deductions of human experience and thought. They are apart entirely from matters of doctrinal belief or religious worship, and just as good coming from Zoroaster as from Solomon, from Buddha as from Jesus, from Socrates as from Paul, from Shakespeare as from Augustine.<sup>6</sup>

Humans, therefore, are essentially moral beings since “the law written on humans’ hearts” and “the light of nature” renders humans moral agents, capable of doing right in many relations and responsible in all known relations, irrespective of any supernatural revelation whatsoever.

For Meyer<sup>7</sup> the ritual of the Torah seems to have left New Testament thought free to entertain the property and expediency of its entire omission. But it must be born in mind that the early Christian church was modelled after the Jewish synagogue rather than the Jewish temple. As far as the ritual of the synagogue is contained, in the Torah may not the latter be regarded as fundamental to Christian worship? The New Testament is not anti-nomistic in the sense of being opposed to any vital principle of the Law. Paul’s apparent anti-nomianism is only on the surface. Christ came not to abolish but intensify and supplement Old Testament ethics and religion.

Religion in Africa, as elsewhere, is a fact of life, a *fait accompli*. Neither persecution nor death can prevail against it. Religion has, indeed, long been recognised as one of those inalienable rights of man. Religious liberty is today accepted as “a normative principle for almost all nations and, conversely, the denial of religious liberty is viewed virtually everywhere as morally and legally invalid.”<sup>8</sup> Law in Africa is that left over from colonial days, plus ethnic or customary law, plus the new law (Constitutions and statutes) made since independence of those nations.<sup>9</sup> Law in Africa bears the imprint of the nationalism which expresses the continent’s universal feeling at the moment.

## **Prevalent approaches to Matthew 5:17**

The passage, *Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι* “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17), has long been considered of fundamental importance for an understanding of Jesus’ attitude to the Law through four main approaches in recent scholarship. These are (i) historic-critical, (ii) form-critical, (iii) redaction-critical and (iv) textual-critical approaches. (i) In the first stage of historic-critical enquiry it was almost unanimously accepted as an authentic utterance of Jesus; (ii) however, with the arrival of form-critical methodology, it was, for the most part, relegated to a conservative Jewish-Christian milieu; (iii) since the advent of redaction-critical analysis more emphasis has been placed on the role of Matthew in reworking the tradition; (iv) nevertheless, where investigation of Matthew’s genuineness has been undertaken, Matthew 5:17 generally continues to be viewed as a creation of the later Church rather than as an original utterance of Jesus though this has been less true of Matthew 5:17 than of succeeding verses. For the purpose of this study, Ralph Martin’s grammatico-historical approach to biblical exegesis was used to elicit information from the selected biblical text. In this approach, an inquiry is made into what the words (Greek *grammata*) meant to the original recipients of the passage under study.

Since the original autographs of biblical texts are no longer available, the scholar should make use of the ‘best’ translation. Ralph is of the opinion that the best translation is the one that is close to the original manuscript after it has been subjected to thorough textual criticism.<sup>10</sup> The fulfilment of the Law and the prophets by Jesus Christ is a great historic process, the adequate understanding of which requires a careful study of the text, Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

## Exegesis

Stevens<sup>11</sup> maintains that the passage, Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17), must be read in the light of the explanations and application which follow it. Jesus proceeds to say that ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου “not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law,” a statement which, if read by itself, would seem to indicate the perpetual validity of the whole Old Testament system, ritual, sacrifice, and all. But to the statement in question Jesus immediately adds: ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται “until all is accomplished”. He does not, therefore, say that no part of this system shall ever pass away (as it has done, and that, too, in consequence of his own teaching), but only that no part of it shall escape the process of fulfilment; that it shall not pass away till, having served its providential purpose, it is fulfilled in the gospel.

Matthew 5:17 has no parallel in other synoptic gospels. The opening words μὴ νομίσητε “do not think” are employed as a rhetorical device to strengthen the positive aspect of the following statement: οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.” When Jesus said that he came not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17), Votaw<sup>12</sup> affirms that Jesus meant a literal and complete performance of all their commands; and he continued, ὅς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλάχιστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). He considered that it was his duty to obey the Mosaic statutes in their current interpretation. Jesus, like the common people among whom he lived and worked, gave less heed to the minutia of the pharisaic restrictions concerning ceremonial cleanness, fasting, and Sabbath observance, but nonetheless he counted himself a true and faithful.

France<sup>13</sup> avers that Jesus came on earth owing to the prophecies about him to fulfil the spirit of the Law, in that way he places the Law alongside the prophets as finding fulfilment in him (Matthew 11:13; Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:24). The fulfilment of the Law does not mean its abolition; it remains wholly authoritative and demands the fullest respect of the disciple (Matthew 5:18-10) because to fulfil is to bring about that to which Scripture pointed, and that is what Jesus has now done. Ridderbos<sup>14</sup> understands the statement, οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.” When Jesus said that he came not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17b), to mean that Jesus ‘maintained and interpreted in its radical sense’ the Law and the prophets.

The presence of ἦλθον “I came” may be redactional and that a similar motive may lie behind its insertion. This is true of Foulkes, while commenting on the statement οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them”, states that people accused Jesus of trying to abolish the Law, especially because of the things that he did on the Sabbath.<sup>15</sup> But he came to ‘fulfil’, and that meant: (i) Giving the Law its fullest meaning, realising the purpose that God intended for it. (ii) Making everything in the Law to be important. It is easy for people to be very strict about keeping some parts of the Law but to neglect other parts. It is easy also to be very legalistic about details of the Law and at the same time to neglect what it really means. Conversely, Jesus did not honour those who taught others to break the Law, or to find ways of not having to keep it. Rather he honoured those who truly obeyed it and taught others to do so. (iii) Practising a standard of righteousness that was very different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. He was concerned with the spirit and purpose of the Law and not just the letter of it. To Jesus penitent sinners are the ones who find true righteousness, not those who think they have earned a place in the right with God by what they have done (Luke 18:9-14).<sup>16</sup>

Matthew employs καταλῦσαι, which is the infinitive aorist active of the verb καταλύω, denoting “dissolve, destroy, annul and rest.” καταλύω is a compound verb, that is, κατά meaning “down from, through, against, by, during and according to” and λύω having the basic meaning “loosen, dissolve.” The verb καταλύω has a range of meanings in the New Testament, namely (i) destroy (Mark 14:58; 15:29; Matthew 26:61; 27:40; Acts 6:14; Romans 14:20; Galatians 2:18), (ii) throw down (Mark 13:2; Matthew 24:2; Luke 21:6), (iii) annul (Matthew 5:17; 2 Maccabees 2:22), (iv) demolish (2 Corinthians 5:1), and (v) rest (Luke 9:12; 19:7). In the context of Matthew 5:17 the term καταλύω portrays Jesus as one who does not annul the Law through partial modification, but rather fulfils it.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, πληρῶσαι is the infinitive aorist active of the verb πληρόω which denotes “fill completely, fulfil, bring to completion and realise.” πληρόω is a causative verb from the stem of πλήρης and means basically “fill or make full in a purely spatial sense and then metaphorically.”

While the spatial meaning is relatively infrequent in the New Testament (Matthew 13:48; Acts 2:2), πληρώ acquires its real theological importance in metaphorical usage (Matthew 3:15; 5:17; Mark 1:15; John 7:8; 15:11; 16:24; Acts 2:2; 7:30; 13:52; Ephesians 4:10; 1 John 1:4; 2 John 12). In the context of Matthew 5:17, πληρώ is a redactional code word meaning “to establish the Law (and the Prophets who expound the Law) through teaching,” and it also later refers to modification of the Law through teaching. Far beyond this, Jesus realises righteousness not only by teaching but also through action (Jesus’ own life and selfless service). All of which discloses the Matthean conjunction of Christology and ethics.<sup>18</sup>

However, if it may be right to insist that Matthew’s concern is with Jesus’ general attitude to the Old Testament Law and in particular to ethical standards<sup>19</sup>, then this is not in conflict with the views of Mark or the author of Hebrews, neither of whom can properly be accused of destroying the Law and the prophets or the moral standards of the Old Testament.

The view that Jesus practised and preached a full literal obedience to the Jewish Law, as taught in his day by the scribes, cannot be derived from the gospels, and cannot be held except by a denial of their abundant and indisputable testimony. In Matthew 5: 21-48, Mark 1:1-23 and in many similar passages, Jesus assumes a position of superiority to the Law; he passes judgment upon its statutes; he points out its defects and shortcomings; he counts himself free and frees others from a full literal obedience to its commands. He lives and he teaches humans to live, in accordance with great religious and moral principles. These principles underlay, and in a good measure were embodied in, the codifications of the Jewish Law; but in his thought humans should not be enslaved to a legal system, however good—they should rather be free persons doing the will of God out of deliberate choice and with intelligent judgment, guided by mind and conscience instead of by a legal code. He did not re-enact the Ten Commandments, or give statutory injunctions of any kind. This freedom from the Jewish Law, of which Paul also made much, was one of the essential features of Jesus’ gospel.<sup>20</sup> Mark and the writer to the Hebrews are concerned with the ritual and the ceremonial law, which they believe is fulfilled in Christ and in the new covenant in such a way that Christ’s followers need no longer observe it. Banks seems to avoid the distinction by insisting that the whole of the Law and the prophets are fulfilled in and superseded by Christ. Banks also avows that Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament (the Law and the prophets), and he has certainly superseded the Law in the sense that our relationship to God is now through Christ, not through the Law. But Christ has not fulfilled and superseded the Law in the sense that all the Old Testament Law ceases to be binding on a Christian.<sup>21</sup> While the Old Testament represented the Law, it stood for authoritative institutions; the New Testament embodied the spirit of freedom of faith and love, and it put the inner life of the individual above the authority of tradition and law.<sup>22</sup> In this sense Delitzsch says, “Without the New Testament, the Old Testament would be a labyrinth without a clue, a syllogism without a conclusion, a riddle without a solution, a torso without a head, moon without a sun, since Christ is the proper interpretation of the Old Testament.”<sup>23</sup>

## Breaking the Law in Africa

Like the Jews having the Law but breaking it repeatedly owing to their outward principle in relation to the Law, the story is not different in the continent of Africa. Breaking the Law in Africa has become the order of the day among its citizenry. The legislatures make self-serving, greedy and democracy-killing law in their interest rather than in national interest.<sup>24</sup> It is probable that in any society that is worthy of being called sane and humane, the set of goals of Moses for the patriarchal communities should be a standard. The Law of Moses formed the basis for running a just society. But since African countries are often referred to as secular states, they are run by constitutions. While the Law of Moses was given by Yahweh, those of African countries are merely written up through human endeavour. It is probable, therefore, for humans to easily break the laws which they believe have been written by their peers. Given the resources available to legislators, not a few Nigerians believe that the federal legislators have frustrated the people who now find it difficult to repose confidence in them; their moves are viewed with suspicion. Pat Utomi, a political economist, summed up the rot in the Nigerian National Assembly as institutionalised corruption.<sup>25</sup> Corruption<sup>26</sup>, which is passively defined as a technical flaw in governance, is the most neglected human rights violation of our time. It fuels injustice, inequality and depravation, and is a major catalyst for migration and terrorism. In Africa, the social and political consequences of corruption rob nations of resources and potential, and drive inequality, resentment and radicalisation. This corruption discourages donors and destroys investor confidence, strangling development, progress and prosperity. It provides fertile ground for radicalisation and some extremist organisations such as *Boko Haram* in Nigeria; *Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiya* in Somalia; *Al-Shabab* in Somalia and Kenya; *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, *Ansar Dine* and *Movement for Oneness and Jihad* in Mali; *Lord's Resistance Army* in Uganda and Central African Republic; *Ansar-Al-Sharia* in Tunisia and Libya, etc.

Africa south of the Sahara is a fertile breeding ground for the recruitment of terrorists, a potential terrorist hideout, and a secured location for the acquisition of illegal arms as well as privileged territory for obscure financial transactions linked to terrorist activities. The most efficient ways to respond to this phenomenon are to be found within the respect of the rule of law and the legal framework set forth in international human rights treaties. The most worrying violations include arbitrary detentions, torture, violations of the right of life and of the right to a fair trial by an impartial and independent tribunal, violations of the right to freedom of expression and to private life and property, or refoulement of asylum seekers and expulsion of migrants suspected of taking part in terrorist activities to countries where they may face torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the poverty in Africa is a factor that exerts extreme pressure to achieve quick economic and social progress regardless of or in derogation of democratic processes.<sup>28</sup>

There are some government officials committing grave violations of human rights without any fear of being held accountable by their domestic justice systems in part because of the weakness of those systems or their willingness to prosecute and bring these criminals to justice. An example of this includes the cases of Mr Charles Ghankay Taylor, former President of Liberia; Mr Omar al-Bashir, former President of Sudan; and Mr Uhuru Kenyatta, former President of Kenya.<sup>29</sup> Lamenting over how a few highly placed people in government broke the Law in Nigeria through contract splitting, inflation of contract sums and other forms of financial irregularities uncovered in many federal ministries, departments and parastatals, Agbaegbu says, “it was not unexpected. The audit report showed that virtually all MDAs of the federal government bureaucracy, inclusive of the State House, Office of the Secretary to the Federal Government, Head of Service, Supreme Court, National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, the Armed Forces, Police and the Nigerian Customs were found to have contravened the civil service rules, financial regulations and due process procedures in spending government funds through contract awards.”<sup>30</sup> Farida Waziri, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, lost her job based on allegations of unethical conduct and procedural blunders in her prosecution of the anti-corruption war in Nigeria.<sup>31</sup> In addition, people in Africa break the law through their activities of human trafficking and smuggling, minimum wage violation, war crimes, crimes of aggression, genocide, and crimes against humanity; all these happened within the continent. Thus, African members of the legislature and judiciary, the elites and the masses, political and religious leaders, adults and youths break the Law repeatedly; yet, the quest for fulfilling the Law is a major concern of African society.

Alarmed and chastened by these trends, every African is yearning for sane and humane society wherein the content and the spirit of the Law are obeyed as well as the rule of law is wholly and impartially practised to the letter. In this sense, an exemplary leader, Jesus Christ, has fulfilled the Law and the prophets. Taking a cue from his life, teaching and selfless service to God and humanity would inspire others to obey the Law and enable African people to live meaningful and fulfilled lives.

## **The Law and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ**

### ***Jesus fulfilled the Law in His own Life:***

Stevens<sup>32</sup> asserts that the character of Jesus was the realisation of the ideal which the Law contemplated. He was a perfectly righteous person, and it was righteousness which the Law demanded and aimed to secure. But it is not merely or mainly the personal fulfilment of the Law’s ideal to which Jesus refers in saying that he came to fulfil the Law.



### *Jesus fulfilled the Law in His Teaching:*

Meyer<sup>33</sup> maintains that the New Testament doctrine of sin and Righteousness is based upon the ethical principles underlying and expressed in the Law. Here again the modifications made by Christ and His apostles become apparent. Whereas the Torah impresses ordinary readers with the thought that righteousness is obedience to the written law, the New Testament lays stress upon the righteous condition of heart and will and mind. It is true that the Mosaic system does not forget the demand of a right frame of mind, yet at its best it must be said to be productive of legal sincerity rather than vital spirituality. And indeed it can be clearly shown that both sin and righteousness are made a much more personal and subjective matter in the Sermon on the Mount than in the Law of Sinai. The apostolic method of emphasising precept was profoundly ethico-religious, while disregarding regulations strictly national and ritualistic made legal demands for righteousness applicable and commendable to Gentiles as well as Jews.

Meyer<sup>34</sup> says it is never to the Law as such that Jesus Christ takes exception. Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφήτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν· ἕως ἄν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται. ὃς ἐὰν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὃς δ' ἂν ποιῆσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν. “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19). Against the mechanical and external observance of the mere letter of the Law—which led to pride, self-satisfaction, formalism, casuistry, lack of spirituality and selfishness—Christ’s denunciations were vigorously hurled. Λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Externalism was our Lord’s point of attack upon the religious rigorist of his day. He established the principle of inwardness in opposition to pharisaic outwardness in the observance of the Law. But that principle was not alien to the Mosaic system, which developed a Rabbi Hillel as well as a Rabbi Shammai.

Christ's teaching elevated the standard of morality and religion. He supplemented the legal idea of justice and wrath on the part of the divine Lawgiver by revealing to sinful humanity the just and loving fatherhood of God. Over against the Old Testament injunction, ἅγιοι ἔσεσθε ὅτι ἐγὼ ἅγιος κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), Jesus places the words, ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι ὡς ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν. "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Inasmuch as legal precepts are indispensable to proper conduct, Christ allows them to remain. But he endeavours to secure obedience to them by a love of the deeper principles of the Law and a love of the Lawgiver himself. Hence, Paul and Peter, John and James were apostles of Christ, and differentiated as their modes of treatment regards the Law as its foundation, while towering above it as its culmination.

Stevens<sup>35</sup> affirms that Jesus fulfilled the Law in his teaching by setting forth therein the absolute truths of religion and the universal principles of goodness. While the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees consisted in the punctilious observance of the bare letter of the Law, quite to the neglect of its spirit; Jesus shows the difference between such external, superficial righteousness and that which corresponds to the Law's true ideal. This point may be best illustrated from the context of Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις· οὐ φονεύσεις· "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, You shall not kill" (Matthew 5:21a). It is commonly supposed that to refrain from the actual, overt act of murder is to keep that commandment, but Jesus means the person that only truly keeps it who refrains from anger and hate. In the sight of God, hate is the essence of murder. Jesus thus finds the seat of all goodness, and of all sin in the heart, that is, in the sphere of the motives and the desires. Likewise, Jesus declares that the essence of adultery is in the lustful desire and the impure look. Consequently, Jesus makes righteousness an inward and moral affair. Furthermore, oaths taken in God's name were regarded as more sacred and binding than those not so taken, and thus an easy way was opened for disregarding the real sacredness of vows and promises. Jesus strikes at the root of all these hollow and dishonest distinctions, and discountenances altogether the use of oaths in apparent confirmation of one's word. While the Jews made the commandment of truthfulness an instrument of untruthfulness, Jesus insists upon a truthful heart which makes one's "word as good as the person's bond." In addition, Jesus objects to the maxim of the Old Testament, which says, ὄφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὄφθαλμοῦ ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος χεῖρα ἀντὶ χειρός πόδα ἀντὶ ποδός κατάκαυμα ἀντὶ κατακάματος τραῦμα ἀντὶ τραύματος μώλωπα ἀντὶ μώλωπος "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (Exodus 21:24-25). This is because it was a law of retaliation which magistrates were to apply under certain restrictions in the punishment of crimes; it was popularly applied to justify personal and private revenge. The Jews had further perverted the true and natural sense of the statement, γαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου καὶ μισήσεις τὸν ἐχθρόν σου "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy."

Conversely, Jesus sets forth the ideal import of the commandment and illustrates and enforces the duty which it enjoins by showing that the love of God, which is the type of all true love, is not niggardly, but large and generous. This suggests that humans, especially African people are to be complete in love, which includes being generous, helpful and forgiving as the heavenly Father. All of these explain how Jesus penetrated in his teaching to the inner meaning of the Old Testament precepts and exhibited their true ideal requirements, as against the superficial application of them which regarded them as relating to outward action only. Thus, Jesus fulfilled the Law in his teaching, both by rescuing its true import from the perversions and exaggerations to which the scribes had subjected it, and also by recognising the ethical imperfections in the Law itself and by replacing them by absolute principles of truth and right which are universally applicable.

### ***Jesus fulfilled the Law in His selfless service:***

All that is of permanent value and validity for religion in the Old Testament is conserved in JFL through his selfless service. The nature of the Gospel and the history and teaching which the New Testament records ascertain the process of fulfilment. Jesus' own life, innocent sufferings and vicarious death on the cross explain the true and ideal meaning of sacrifice. Besides, he fulfils the prophets by realising their highest ideals of religion no less than by accomplishing their predictions, thereby fulfilling the Jewish history and having the development of revealed religion culminated in him. For instance, Isaiah 53:4 records οὗτος τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται "Our sickness he bore and our pains he carried them," which is rendered with sufficient exactness in Matthew 8:17b, αὐτὸς τὰς ἀσθενείας ἡμῶν ἔλαβεν καὶ τὰς νόσους ἐβάστασεν. "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." In this passage, the prophet means to represent the servant of Yahweh, of whom he is speaking, as suffering vicariously for the nation, enduring sorrows produced by the national sin, and through this suffering eventually conquering peace and purity for his people. The picture is clear enough; a righteous person involved in suffering through no fault of his own, but by virtue of his close relations to a sinful community, suffers from mind and other inflictions put on him by his enemies. Far beyond the Old Testament's perception of the suffering Messiah, Jesus is represented as taking into his own body and bearing the diseases which he expelled from the bodies of others, procuring pardon and peace for men, thereby fulfilling the prediction of prophet Isaiah.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, the perennial questions are in what ways did Jesus fulfil the Law and the prophets? On the one hand, by obeying the Law fully, that is, Jesus showed that the Law must be followed not only in outward action, but also in inward attitude. Paradoxically, the scribes and the Pharisees followed the Law outwardly, but not in their hearts and in so doing broke the Law. On the other hand, by fulfilling the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament, that is, the vicarious death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary, Christ offered himself as the final sacrifice for sin, and no other sacrifice is needed.

Through his death all who believe in him will escape punishment and receive salvation. Jesus fulfilled all these, as the prophets prophesied that Jesus would die for humans' sins. He would take the punishment for their sins (Isaiah 53:5-6). Christ would make his life a guilt offering<sup>37</sup> (Leviticus 5:14-16; Isaiah 53:10). In this way, all the prophecies about the Messiah, the Saviour, were fulfilled in his own life.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper reveals how Matthew 5:17 attempts to draw out some of the theological implications, and practical consequences, of the attitude Jesus adopts. This leads him to emphasise the prophetic, and so provisional, function of the Mosaic legislation and to underline its realisation and fulfilment in Christ's ministry; to highlight the authoritative character of Jesus' utterances and to indicate the polemical ramifications of his position for contemporary Jewish approaches to the Law; to stress the need for obedience to Jesus' teachings and to find an adequate ethical terminology to describe the character or the conduct which Jesus demands. It, therefore, becomes apparent that it is not so much Jesus' stance towards the Law that Matthew is concerned, but the concern to depict it; it is how the Law stands with and to him, as the one who brings it to fulfilment and to whom all attention must now be directed. For Matthew then, it is not the question of Jesus' relation to the Law that is in doubt, but rather its relation to him! This grammatico-historical analysis has sought to show that such a way of posing the issue stems from the authentic words of Jesus which Matthew's account enshrines.

Despite the recent giant step in the right direction in promulgating rule of law in Africa, there is a need for further efforts by African people and nations to take additional proactive and practical measures for an optimum effectiveness of the Law. Africa could well tip the balance of power in the world toward freedom and away from slavery, if the spirit and content of the Law is obeyed and people begin to live under the rule of law as Jesus fulfilled the Law in his own life, teaching and selfless service to God and humanity. Consequently, Jesus' principle of inwardness in relation to the Law is central to the message of this work, hence, a recommended posture.

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