

## **JESUS, TORA AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNTAIN**

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*The New Testament scholars are used to question the authenticity of the texts they find problematic. A case in point is the text of Mt.5, 17-18 :” Do not think I am come to abolish (destroy)the Tora or the Prophets. I didn’t come to abolish , but to fulfill . For I really say you, before the heaven and the earth will pass away, no yod or a prick of the yod from the Tora will pass away, until all will happen” (Own translation). This text is attributed to the Early Jewish Church of Jerusalem.*

However the rest of the Sermon on the Mountain hinges on this text. The text is crucial to the understanding of the Sermon. It is the preamble of what follows. Therefore I don’t think we can discard this text without missing the sense of the Sermon.

In his paper on the same subject David Flusser (1987: 25-26) shows that “abolish” and “fulfill” are technical terms of rabbinical exegesis. Flusser traces them back to the Hebrew בטל =batel=to annulate , abolish and דייק=qaiem= to fulfill, to confirm, to maintain. In the vocabulary of the rabbis (S.W. Bacher 1965 mentioned by Flusser 1987) these words are not about practicing, but about interpreting the Tora. A wrong exposition of the Scriptures was thought to be tantamount to their annulations, while their right interpretation was tantamount to their fulfillment.

That is to say Jesus according to Mt. 5,17 was countering the suspicion of a wrong interpretation of the Scriptures. I think the rest of the Sermon could arise this suspicion. He could be suspected of bringing a new Tora. Jesus counters this suspicion with the statement about the validity of every letter of the Scriptures even of the smallest one , which in the Hebrew alphabet is yod (Mt. 5, 18). On this point Flusser sees an analogy between Jesus’ and the Rabbinical view of Tora (Flusser 1987:25). According to Rabbinical tradition there is a mysterious link between the text of the written Tora and the Universe. In this respect Rabbi Eleazar said: “Without Tora the heaven and the earth will not last” (Pes. 68 b.).

The literal validity of the Tora entails the validity of every of its commandments. That implies the validity of the smallest/less important commandments. In Hebrew they are called מצוות קלות =mitsvot kalot= light commandments as opposed to the מצוות חמורות = mitsvot hamurot= weighty ,grave, important, serious commandments. A weighty commandment is one whose breach leads to a serious , grave offence, which entails a severe penalty. A light commandment is one whose breach leads to a light offence with easier consequences.

If we take a look at some rabbinical texts we find similarities to the views of Jesus on this matter (Mt. 5, 19).

For instance in Mishna Pirkei Abboth it is written: והוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה

W’hewi zahir b’mitzwah kalah k’b’hamurah=“Be heedful/careful of a light commandment, as of a weighty one” (Abboth 2, 1). And according to Abboth 7,2 “Ben Azzai said:” Make haste/run to fulfill a slight commandment as if it were a weighty one, and flee from transgression, for the fulfillment of a light commandment leads to the fulfillment of another commandment and a transgression entails another transgression; for the reward of performing a commandment is the fulfillment of another commandment and the reward of a transgression is another transgression.”

As we have seen above, Jesus warns against making light of the light commandments. But he does something more. He upgrades the light commandments, so that their transgressors are liable to hard penalties. An example is Mt. 5,21-22 which sounds” You have heard that it was told to the ancestors:”you shall not murder” and one who murders will face the judgement. But I tell you that whoever gets angry at his brother will face

the local court<sup>i</sup> ; whoever says to this brother “you empty-headed stupid” will be brought before the Sanhedrin<sup>ii</sup> ; and whoever says to his brother “you madman” will be liable to the fire of Gey-Hinnom.” (Own translation).

Another example is Mt. 5, 27-28 which sounds:” You have heard that it was told “You shall not commit adultery” ; but I tell you whoever looks to a woman so as to covet her has already committed adultery in his heart.”

These texts make me think of Abboth 1,1 and 3,13 where it is told about סיג ורהלת=siag  
la Tora= a fence for Tora. The rabbis used to devise commandments, restrictive ordinances so as to prevent a person from violating a law of Tora. A classical example is the prohibition of eating dairy products together with meat. This prohibition prevents the boiling of a young goat in its mother milk, which was forbidden according to Ex.23,19; 32,26 and Dt.19,21. It was meant to prevent the people of Israel from performing a Canaanite rite. I think also Jesus in Mt.5, 21-22.27-28 put fences for Tora. However they are quite natural. For anger can lead to murder and an abusive language can be lethal. And a lustful look can be a gateway to adultery.

Now let us take a look at Jesus’ teaching about oaths (Mt.5, 33-37). It is about Lv. 19, 12:” You shall not swear falsely in My Name, and profane your God’s name. I am the Lord with the Holy Name “ (own translation). According to Mt.5,34 Jesus tells his audience not to swear at all, and not to swear about anything. Their answer should be a plain “yes” or “no”. “Anything more comes from the evil one” Mt. (5,37).

As a matter of fact the religious Jews today are avoiding oaths. As in all the armies the world around, the recruits of IDF (Israel Defence Forces) have to swear allegiance to their state. However the religious soldiers are allowed to declare their allegiance instead of swearing. The same applies to the civil life. A religious Jew can give a declaration of הן קצד i.e. hen tsedeq=“a honest yes” instead of swearing. However I did not find any Jewish text which forbids swearing.

As to the Essenes, Josephus Flavius gave an interesting description of their attitude to swearing:”They are eminent for fidelity and are the ministers of peace; whatever they say also is firmer than an oath; but swearing is avoided by them and they esteem it worse than perjury; for they say that who cannot be believed without swearing is already condemned...”( Wars of the Jews II, VIII, 6) However swearing was not totally banned from their community. Those who wanted to join them had after having undergone severe tests, to take tremendous oaths to live according to the rules of the community. And they have to swear to not communicate their doctrines, otherwise than as they received themselves.(Wars. II, VIII, 7).

Therefore I think Jesus was alone in strictly prohibiting any form for swearing. No less radical is Jesus’ teaching about retaliation (Mt. 5, 38-42). He doesn’t only reject the principle of “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (Ex. 21, 24), but tell his audience not to resist the wrongdoers, to turn the another cheek, to go the second mile etc. I think, this is the most difficult point of Jesus’ ethic if not the impossible.

However we have to clear up a misunderstanding on this point. A misunderstanding made manifest by the usual representation of the Jewish moral as one of revenge and retaliation. As a matter of fact the Sadducees were alone in giving a literal interpretation of Ex.21,24.. The Pharisees interpreted the same text in terms of compensations one had to pay for the injuries he had inflicted on his victim. According to Mishna Baba Kama 8,1 one had to pay not only for physical and economical damages but also for the moral ones. A complete list of such compensations can be found in Baba Kama 8,6.

As the Pharisees after the catastrophe of AD 70 emerged as the only spiritual leaders of the Jewish people, Jewish religion became identical to Pharisaism. That is why the representation of the moral of Judaism as one of retaliation is untenable.

Another text which can be misunderstood is Mt.5, 43: "You have heard it was told "You shall love your fellow-man, and hate your enemy". The first part of this verse refers to Lv.19, 18. As to the second part , for what I know, it is not traceable to any particular text. To be sure, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible or in the Rabbinical writings we can find a text calling to hatred. On the contrary: in Proverbs 24, 17-18 it is written: " Don't be glad when you enemy falls and don't let your heart rejoice when he stumbles lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and then turn his wrath away from him". (Own translation) This text is quoted by Rabbi Shmuel ha-Katan (the Small) in Abboth 4, 19.

More on this subject we can find in Ex. 23,4-5: " If you meet your enemy's ox or donkey going astray , bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of somebody who hates you lying under its burden, would you desist from helping him; no, you will give him a helping hand." (Own translation)

And in Prv. 25,21 it is written: " If somebody who hates you is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink..." (Own translation)

In these texts the love for enemies is made concrete, even if it is not mentioned explicitly. It shows that Jesus in this respect stood on a common Jewish ground. However there was a group in contemporary Judaism which had hatred as one of its tenets. According to Josephus Flavius the Essenes were bound by an oath to always hate the wicked and help the righteous. (Wars, II, VIII, 7.) And according to their Manual of Discipline , the members of the Community of Qumran, which supposedly were Essenes, had "To love all the Sons of Light and hate all the Sons of Darkness" (DSD 1,10). That makes plausible the assumption that Mt. 5,43 was a polemic against the Essenes.

The excerpts I went through (Mt.5, 17-18; 21-22; 27-28; 33-37; 38-39; 43-44) don't cover all the Sermon on the Mountain. However they are essential to our subject-matter. These texts have a common pattern: they start with the words : "You have heard it was told..." followed by "but I tell you..." Many scholars understand the sentence "...but I tell you" as a claim to an authority over that of the Scriptures. Therefore they read the above mentioned pattern as a criticism of the Hebrew Bible. However this understanding is at variance with what it is told in the Gospels about Jesus' use of the Scriptures.

For instance, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness (Mt.4, 1-11 and Lk. 4, 1-13) he resisted the attacks of the tempter by just quoting the Scriptures. Another story is about Jesus joining his depressed disciples on the walk to Emmaus (Lk. 24, 13-31). He could just have opened their eyes so as to recognize him. Instead of doing so he proved to them from Moses, the Prophets and the Scriptures that Messiah was bound to suffer and so enter his glory (Lk.24, 25-27). Eventually he let them recognize him (Lk.24,31).

True, Jesus had an authority which amazed his audience.(Mt. 7,29). However his authority was not over that of the Scriptures, but it was based on the Scriptures. It was the authority of Messiah. And one of the tasks of Messiah was to reveal new aspects, new facets of the Tora, unknown before. Delivering the Sermon on the Mountain Jesus exercised his messianic authority.

However the Sermon on the Mountain is about something more than some aspects of the Tora. It is about the very will of God. Jesus states the literal validity of the Scriptures but he takes his audience beyond the letter of Tora. He reveal them the intention behind the letter. I think when Jesus said "...you were told so and so, but I tell you so and so..." he meant to say:..."The letter tells so and so. , but God wants more than that..."

There is a suspense between the letter and what is beyond the letter and Jesus makes it manifest in the Sermon on the Mountain.

Bringing us beyond the letter Jesus brings us to the intention of the letter. The intention is a righteousness which surpasses that of the teachers of Tora and the Pharisees (Mt. 5, 20). Reaching this righteousness is tantamount to reaching the state of the Children of the Heavenly Father (Mt. 5, 45) i. e. reaching His Perfection (Mt. 5, 48).

Fulfilling Tora in Jesus means fulfilling it the way He did. And through the Sermon on the Mountain Jesus revealed himself as the fulfiller of Tora. He has fulfilled Tora in double sense: He gave its right and final interpretation and practiced it. He practiced what he preached especially on the cross as he prayed for his enemies (Lk. 23, 34).

However the message of the Sermon on the Mountain is universal; its addressees are the Jews and the Gentiles alike. Its universality has been illustrated by Gandhi who neither was Jew or Christian, but Hindu. Nevertheless he has been inspired by the Sermon on the Mountain in his non-violent struggle against the British rule in India. Can then the Sermon on the Mountain help us with the quest for keeping Tora in its specific Jewish dimensions? I think Mt.5,17-18 can provide a clue to this question. According to these verses Jesus states the permanent validity of the Scriptures. A consequence is that Israel's election still is valid. That is to say the continuous existence of the Jewish people is willed by God. Therefore God wants the Jews in the Body of Christ to preserve their identity as Jews.

Another clue is provided by Acts 21,20 where the Apostle Paul is told about the many ten thousands of the new Jewish members of the Christian community of Jerusalem who are zealous for Tora. For their sake the Apostle is asked to go to the Temple and to perform a ritual in order to show that he doesn't teach the Diaspora Jews to give up observing Tora. That is to say our quest is legitimate. Nobody should look askance at it.

Yet we have to bear in mind that this quest must be viewed in the light of the New Covenant (Jer. 31, 31.) According to Jer. 31,33 the main aspect of the New Covenant is the internalization of Tora and its commandments i.e. it is about תורה שב לב = Tora she ba lev = Tora in the heart. I think that also the Sermon on the Mountain is much about Tora in the New Covenant.

Nevertheless there are many questions left to be answered. They are mainly about how to practice Tora in the Body of Christ without damaging the fellowship with our Gentile sisters and brethren. In this connection we have to remember the words of St. Augustine: "In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas et in omnibus caritas", which I would like to render as: "Unity in the most important matters, liberty in the uncertain ones and charity (Christian love) in everything"

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<sup>i</sup> *The local court was constituted by 7 persons (Ex.20, 13,)*

*ii. The Sanhedrin was in the time of Jesus the Jewish Supreme Court . It was presided by the High Priest, and among its 71 members were the representatives of the noblest Jewish families and the teachers of the Scriptures.*