

LAW AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

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1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest Christians were Jews; within decades, however, the number of Christian Jews was rivalled, then surpassed, by that of non-Jewish believers. That references to "law" in the earliest Christian writings intend almost exclusively the Mosaic Torah is revealing of Christianity's roots. That Torah's applicability to the new communities of faith quickly became a subject of contention, reflects its rapid dissemination in the new-Jewish world. More than any other issue of internal debate, the controversy surrounding the Jewish "law" tested and shaped the self-understanding of the nascent church.

Only selected aspects of the debate can claim our attention here. We will consider, first, the nature and inevitability of the controversy, then the positions adopted by three New Testament writers: Paul, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews,² and Matthew³. Excluded from extended discussion here - as, indeed, they are from the canon of the Christian scriptures - are two extreme positions attested in the early centuries among devotees of Jesus: on the one hand, that of those who

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². The intended readership of the Epistle remains uncertain. See Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 1-13.

³. The first New Testament gospel is, strictly speaking, anonymous, although it has traditionally been attributed to Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. I use "Matthew" in this paper to designate the author of the gospel without pursuing further the question of his identity.

insisted that Christians were as bound by the Mosaic law as were Jews before the coming of Jesus the messiah, thus effectively denying the "newness" of the Christian covenant;⁴ and, on the other hand, that of those who denied that the deity who gave the Mosaic Law was the God of Jesus Christ, thus denying any continuity between the "old" covenant and the "new"⁵. For the spread of the early Christian movement, both these latter positions had strategic advantages as well as liabilities. The first would have lent the Christian movement, as a branch within Judaism, the protection and prestige of an ancient religion at a time when novelty in such matters was viewed with inherent suspicion; at the same time, the demand that non-Jewish males be circumcised and observe the other laws of the Mosaic Torah would no doubt have limited the attractiveness of the new faith. The strategic advantages and liabilities of the second position were, of course, exactly the reverse. Though neither of these positions will be developed here, enough will be said about the ethos of the early Christian faith to suggest both the inevitable occurrence and the ultimate unacceptability of these extreme alternatives.

2. TORAH AND CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS

Despite much diversity, Jews loyal to their ancestral faith at the turn of the era were united by belief in one God, in the divine election and redemption of Israel, and in God's gift of Torah to guide the lives of his covenant people.

Belief in the divine election of Israel permitted a wide diversity of views about God's dealings with, and intentions for, the non-Jewish peoples of the world. Israel - the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through Isaac and Jacob - was in any case the chosen people of God and the object of his special attention and favour, demonstrated most dramatically in the miraculous deliverance of their forebears from

⁴. See Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967) 18-23.

⁵. This was, of course, the position of Marcion. See Chadwick, *Early Church*, 38-40; Maurice F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967) 49-72.

slavery in Egypt⁶. The "redeemed" Israelites, led by Moses, had then journeyed to Mount Sinai for an encounter with God. At Sinai God had given them his laws through Moses their leader, and they had pledged their obedience. Israel was henceforth the "covenant" people of the Lord: as their God, he would protect and bless them as long as they, his people, gave him exclusive worship and whole-hearted obedience⁷.

The sum of the commandments and prohibitions believed to have been given to Moses on Mount Sinai is referred to as the Torah and designated Mosaic or divine, depending on whether the mediator or the Source is in view⁸. The latter term is also used for the first part of the Hebrew scriptures (the "books of Moses", or Pentateuch) and; indeed, for all God's revelation to his people. The wider usage as well as proposed etymologies of the word have frequently been cited as demonstrating that "Torah" means "instruction" or "guidance", but not "law". And certainly the content of the Mosaic Torah extends beyond the boundaries within which people of the modern west are wont to delimit law: matters of civil and criminal law are included, but so are broad moral principles as well as rules of festival observance; regulations for the cult, its sanctuary, officials, and sacrifices; dietary restrictions and prescriptions pertaining to ritual impurity. Still, all are spoken of as God's "commandments, ordinances and statutes" which Israel is "commanded" to "keep" and not "transgress"; indeed, individual prescriptions of Torah as well as the collection as a whole are accompanied by sanctions for transgressors. For such usage, the English term "law" remains the most adequate (or, perhaps, the least inadequate) rendering.

In fact, Jewish apologetic literature from around the turn of the era frequently compared the Mosaic Torah to the laws or "constitutions"

⁶. The story is told in Exodus 1-15.

⁷. Cf. Deuteronomy 11:8-32.

⁸. This paragraph represents a summary of my article "*Torah, nomos, and Law: A Question of Meaning*", in *Studies in Religion* 15 (1986) 327-336, where references and bibliography are given. The issues are also treated in my *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 136-140.

(Greek *politeiai*) of other peoples and states, arguing the superiority of the former on the grounds of its greater antiquity and comprehensibility, its immutability, its capacity to command obedience and devotion, its perfect embodiment of the "law of nature"⁹. Parallel to the latter claim is the identification, made within the developing "wisdom" tradition of Israel, of Torah with the divine wisdom by which all things are created, sustained, and ordered, and by which humans are guided on the path of life¹⁰. By this view, the demands of Torah, though expressing the will of the King of the Universe, are not arbitrary divine decrees, but prescriptions for life reflecting and woven into the very fabric of the cosmos.

The notion that Torah embodied the order of the cosmos was easily advanced in general terms. The perceived universality and reasonableness of Torah's moral commands were cited in support. More daunting was the task of showing how prescriptions known to distinguish Jews from other peoples of the world could somehow be rooted in the cosmic nature of things: the laws of circumcision, for example, or the forbidding of pork and certain foods. In such cases, apologists either resorted to allegorical interpretation¹¹ or declared that the prohibitions promoted self-discipline and other virtues¹². A third alternative was to concede the arbitrariness of particular demands, but to note that their fulfilment gave faithful Jews the opportunity to show submission in all areas of life to the will of their benevolent Lord, a submission that is itself inherently right, conducive of life - and divinely rewarded¹³.

Before we turn to the responses of early Christians to Torah, one other aspect of its Jewish understanding must be noted. Neither the chequered history of Israel nor the subjection of the Jewish people to

⁹. See, e.g., Josephus, *Against Apion*, especially Book II; Philo, *Moses*, Book II.

¹⁰. E.g., Sirach 24; Baruch 3:9-4:4.

¹¹. This is the tack taken by, e.g., the Letter of Aristeas.

¹². Cf. 4 Maccabees 2:23; 5:23-24.

¹³. Cf. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975) I, 365-399.

foreign powers at the turn of the era could support a claim that observance of Torah had brought the nation prosperity. The claims of faith found satisfaction, however, in the view that the disasters that had befallen God's covenant people were occasioned by Israel's resistance to God's will¹⁴. Nor, indeed, was the explanation first advanced *post eventum*: prior to the fall of the Israelite monarchies, prophets¹⁵ had announced their pending doom and attributed it to the people's disloyalty toward God.

Still, Israel was the covenant people of God, and divine undertakings can hardly come to nothing - human weakness and willfulness notwithstanding. In various depictions that we may broadly label "messianic"¹⁶, the same prophets who pronounced imminent doom spoke of a day beyond such judgment when God would overthrow forces of evil and oppression, forgive and transform the waywardness of his people, and establish the rule of righteousness, peace and prosperity¹⁷. The transformation that would make a willful people compliant with God's laws was, again, variously described¹⁸: God would infuse them with his divine spirit, replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, write his laws on their hearts. ... Whatever the mode, the resulting obedience of God's people was a crucial element in any portrayal of future felicity.

In proclaiming the dawning "kingdom of God"¹⁹, Jesus declared that the day of God's gracious intervention had come, that God was acting to free people from the power and effects of evil and to establish the rule of divine goodness. Jesus' own death and resurrection were, in the eyes of

¹⁴. E.g., Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9:1-19.

¹⁵. So Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel ...

¹⁶. Some portrayals, but not all, envisioned God intervening in the future to transform the fortunes of his people through a human "messianic" figure (i.e., one designated [literally "anointed"] by God for the purpose).

¹⁷. Isaiah 9:2-7 (in the Hebrew text 9:1-6); 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:11-31, etc.

¹⁸. Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 11-19-20; 36:26-27.

¹⁹. Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 12:28. In Matthew's gospel, the equivalent phrase "kingdom of heaven" is preferred.

the early Christians, decisive salvific events: the one atoned for human sins²⁰, the other signaled the divine triumph over sin and death²¹, inaugurating the long-promised "day of salvation"²². The charismatic signs (glossolalia, prophesying, healings, and the like) that accompanied the spread of the early Christian faith confirmed, in Christian minds, the realization of the old prophetic vision: God had infused his people with his spirit, enabling them to fulfill his will²³. To be sure, the powers of evil, though conquered, had not yet been banished: for a time, the dawning "new age" would coincide with the prolongation of the old, so that God could give Jews and non-Jews alike the opportunity to repent and believe²⁴. In the meantime, believers could rejoice in the assurance that nothing in the present age could separate them from the love of God revealed to them in Christ Jesus²⁵.

But what was the state of Torah as the "new creation" dawned? Was it an "old wineskin" incapable of containing "new wine"? Was it, as God's revealed will for his chosen nation, even now obligatory for all who wished to be numbered among the people of God? Was it, indeed, as the embodiment of the wisdom and order by which the cosmos is sustained, the path to be pursued by all who would not be "wise in their own eyes", but would "fear the LORD and depart from evil?"²⁶

Even without examining the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus in the Christian gospels, we may conclude with some confidence that he said nothing unambiguously affirming or denying the continuing validity of Torah's laws for the community of his disciples: had he done either, the controversy that arose among them would be inexplicable. The foregoing summary, however, should suffice to make apparent the inevitability of the dispute. Suggesting the necessity of Torah

²⁰. Matthew 26:28; Romans 3:24-25; 1 John 2:2.

²¹. Romans 6:5-10; 8:11.

²². 2 Corinthians 6:2.

²³. Acts 2:1-18; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13.

²⁴. Acts 3:18-26; 2 Peter 3:9.

²⁵. Romans 8:38-39.

²⁶. Cf. Proverbs 3:7.

observance were at least the following notions shared by the earliest Christians with non-Christian Jews: God had chosen as his people the descendants of Abraham, given them his Torah, and promised them that their obedience would be met with his favour. To be sure, Christian Jews were distinguished from their compatriots by their belief that Messiah had come; but nothing in that conviction need entail the abrogation of Torah. Suggesting the contrary position were the specifically Christian beliefs that a "new covenant" had been established²⁷, that God's intervention to provide redemption in Christ Jesus demonstrated the inadequacy of the Sinaitic covenant and its Torah to cope with human sinfulness²⁸, and that God had shown his acceptance of uncircumcised believers in Christ by giving them his spirit²⁹.

We may feel that, in the end, these latter, more distinctively Christian convictions were bound to carry the day in the Christian church. But they could not do so conclusively, nor could the issue be considered satisfactorily resolved, before a Christian understanding (or misunderstanding) of Torah had been articulated that accommodated the truth of all the beliefs listed above: both those Christian convictions shared with non-Christian Jews about God's dealings with Israel and the divine origin and purpose of Torah, and the characteristically Christian persuasion that God had acted in a new and decisive fashion in the person of Jesus Christ. In various ways, the New Testament writers we look at below attempted to provide just such a comprehensive understanding.

3. PAUL, THE APOSTLE OF THE GENTILES

The earliest Christian writings still extant were penned by the apostle Paul. Believing himself to be commissioned by his Lord to be the "apostle to the Gentiles", Paul could not but be confronted by the question of Torah's applicability to his Gentile converts. He responded

²⁷. Matthew 26:28; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:6-13.

²⁸. Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:21; 3:21.

²⁹. Acts 11:1-18; Galatians 3:2-5.

energetically, but thoughtfully³⁰: if Gentile believers were not to be circumcised in conformity with provisions of Torah (and that was emphatically Paul's position), then Paul felt constrained to show the more limited purpose of Torah (whose divine origin he did not question) and how extending its prescriptions to Gentile Christians would violate the divine intention. Constantly traveling, working his trade, debating, persuading, starting and nurturing communities of faith, occasioning and enduring embarrassment, Paul was anything but an armchair theologian. But theologian he was: no solution could serve for Paul on the practical level that did not commend itself on the theoretical.

We focus here on Paul's letter to the Romans, his most developed statement both of the Christian gospel and of the place of Israel and Torah in the divine plan. The letter is, on the one level, a celebration of God's "righteousness" as revealed in the Christian gospel³¹: that is, of God's benevolence and loyalty toward his creation, which impelled him to intervene in human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, to restore humanity and, ultimately, all creation to their intended goodness and glory. Such divine intervention can be said in a nutshell to have been necessitated by human sin; but the close links between Paul's understanding of Torah and his depiction of the human dilemma require us to pursue the latter portrait in more detail.

In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul argues that all human beings are guilty before God of concrete acts of wrongdoing for which they are inexcusable. Five aspects of his argument merit brief mention here.

i. When Paul writes that "all have sinned", he certainly includes every individual human being (apart from Jesus Christ himself³²); but his primary point in referring to "all" in this context is to include Jews together with non-Jews. The former, he grants, are the objects of significant divine favours. But in this (decisive) respect, they are no

³⁰. It would perhaps not be unfair to suggest that the letter to the Galatians shows Paul's response primarily in its energetic mode, but that to the Romans in its thoughtful.

³¹. Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26.

³². 2 Corinthians 5:21.

different than Gentiles: "the whole world is guilty before God" (Romans 3:19); "there is no difference [between Jew and Gentile]; for all have sinned and fall short of God's glory [i.e., of the glory divinely intended for humankind]" (3:22-23).

ii. Nonetheless, Jewish sin differs from Gentile sin in one (ultimately insignificant) respect: only Jewish sin involves the transgression of Torah, since it was to Jews alone that Torah was given. Gentile sin remains inexcusable: creation itself (Paul believes) displays enough of God's power and divinity to obligate all human beings to worship and thank their creator. The refusal of people to do so represents the fundamental human sin³³. But whereas Gentiles follow it up with acts that defy their own awareness of right and wrong³⁴, Jews, when they sin, transgress explicit commands given them in Torah³⁵.

iii. Paul treats the divine gift of Torah to the Jews as a favour inherently wonderful, but salvifically inconsequential. He believes (as suggested above) that even Gentiles possess a residual awareness of right and wrong (which they violate deliberately); but Jews, as recipients of the divine Torah, possess the very "embodiment of knowledge and truth" (Romans 2:20). In the end, however, knowledge of God's will is of benefit only to those who obey it³⁶. Jews have not done so, Paul claims (citing a text from prophetic litany of Israel's profanations of the divine name)³⁷: hence they cannot claim to have secured their standing before God by their observance of his commands³⁸.

³³. Romans 1:19-21.

³⁴. Romans 1: 32.

³⁵. Romans 2:12; 4:15.

³⁶. Romans 2:13.

³⁷. Romans 2:24, citing Ezekiel 36:20.

³⁸. So Romans 3:20. Paul here implies - what he elsewhere states - that Torah (and the Sinaitic covenant of which it is a part) requires such observance as its condition for life in God's favour. He quotes Leviticus 18:5 to this effect (Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12; Cf. Romans 2:13), though a footnote reference to "Deuteronomy, *passim*" would have served his purpose equally well. Why does he fail to note that Torah speaks of divine forgiveness for those who repent of their sins and observe prescribed rites of atonement? I suspect that he felt that Torah's rites of atonement were a mere

iv. In speaking of Torah as a gift to Jews, Paul indicates that the divine will - the "knowledge and truth" - contained in Torah is equally relevant to all humankind. Here he must be thinking primarily of Torah's moral commands, to examples of which he alludes in Romans 2:21-22³⁹. Jews and Gentiles alike, he insists, are obliged to "do what is good" (Romans 2:6-11) - and there is no suggestion that what constitutes the "good" is any different for Gentiles than it is for Jews. That Jews possess Torah allows them to provide instruction for Gentiles in moral requirements that are binding upon both⁴⁰ - though (as we have seen) left by both unfulfilled.

v. Paul concludes the argument of Romans 1:18-3:20 with the claim that "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified before God; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (3:20). To paraphrase his point: human sinfulness has prevented Torah from providing a framework within which human beings can enjoy good relations with God and secure eternal life in his favour. In the process, however, Torah has served to bring definition and recognition to the dilemma posed by human sinfulness.

In Romans 1:18-3:20, then, Paul insists that all human beings (i.e., Gentiles and Jews alike) are guilty of concrete acts of wrongdoing. In later chapters of Romans Paul goes further, seeing humanity as hopelessly entangled in sin. Three points are relevant for our purposes here.

i. In Romans 5:12-21 Paul follows the narrative in Genesis 2-3 that sees sin 'entering' human history through the disobedience of Adam, the

foreshadowing (ineffective in themselves) of the atonement God would provide in Christ Jesus (see Romans 3:24-26). In any case, he provides clear warrant for the conviction (not explicit, however, in his writings, where the issue is not raised) that unredeemed humanity (of which Israel is only the most favoured segment) is incapable of effective repentance. See the discussion below.

³⁹. Paul refers in the passage to circumcision (Romans 2:25-29), but *not* as a precept of Torah. Other requirements peculiar to Israel (food laws, festival observances, and the like) are not mentioned. Paul's focus here is on Torah

⁴⁰. Cf. Romans 2:17-21.

human being first created by God, to the command of his Creator. For Paul, however, Adam's "fall" from innocence to disobedience was more than a bad example followed (incredibly, but disastrously) by each of his descendants. Human beings after Adam never possess the innocence that, prior to his disobedience, was his: "through the disobedience of one man (Adam), many [Adam's descendants] were made sinners" (5:19). The rebelliousness against God reflected in Adam's misdeed, the desire to be God himself, to define his own good in defiance of his Creator's will: such sin, Paul believes, is ingrained in human nature since Adam and defines the boundaries within which Adam's descendants live.

ii. Though Paul can use "flesh" in a neutral way to denote the embodied existence of humankind⁴¹, in other contexts the term is strongly negative, reflecting humanity's adopted stance of resistance to God's will and its insistence - both foolish and perverse in any created being - on its own (supposed) autonomy. In this "flesh" Paul finds nothing good: only hostility toward God, insubmission to God's law, incapacity to please God⁴².

iii. In a sense the gift of Torah to the most favoured segment of Adamic humanity only exacerbates the problem⁴³. Not that Torah is to blame: its commands are "holy, righteous and good" (7:12). But there can be only one result when commands of God, righteous and good though they are, encounter a "flesh" that is resistant to God and insistent on its own autonomy: human rebelliousness, which lies dormant until it is confronted by divine commands, springs to life and expresses itself in fateful disobedience⁴⁴.

Torah's commands, then, are good, and God was right to provide humanity with a reminder of his claim on their obedience and of the path in which their well-being lay. But, addressed to a hostile "flesh", commands themselves cannot bring about human compliance or lead to

⁴¹. Romans 9:5; Galatians 2:20.

⁴². Romans 7:18; 8:7-8.

⁴³. Romans 5:20; 7:5, 7-13.

⁴⁴. Paul; describes the process graphically in Romans 7:7-13.

human good⁴⁵. At best Torah draws attention to the nature of the human dilemma⁴⁶.

Such is the dilemma from which, Paul believes, God has provided deliverance, and such the limited role Paul assigns Torah in the history of Israel. His portrayal of divine redemption must be summarized briefly before we look at the present relation (as Paul sees it) between God's "law" and his redeemed people.

The death of Jesus Christ atoned for human sins, enabling God to forgive sinner without "passing over" their sins as though they were inconsequential⁴⁷. Moreover, the submission to God's will that Christ showed throughout his life and that culminated in his death provided both a sharp contrast with the disobedience of Adam⁴⁸ and a lived model of what God intended human life to be. It behooves human beings - born in the likeness of Adam, both caught in and embracing the entanglement of sin and death - to somehow be freed from the conditions of life in the old, sin-scarred creation and to take their place in the new creation, initiated by God through Christ Jesus.

The transfer from old creation to new can only be effected by God himself. It takes place, and is symbolically enacted, when believers express their faith by being baptized "into Christ Jesus": they then die "with Christ" to the old life (a death symbolically represented by their immersion in water) in order that they may rise "with Christ" to a new life of righteousness in God's service⁴⁹. For a time, to be sure, believers continue to live in mortal bodies that remain subject to the temptations of sin⁵⁰. But they have been given the divine Spirit⁵¹ as a first

⁴⁵. Romans 8:3-4.

⁴⁶. Romans 7:7; Cf. 3:20.

⁴⁷. Romans 3:24-26.

⁴⁸. Romans 5:15-19.

⁴⁹. So Romans 6:1-11.

⁵⁰. Romans 8:10, 13.

⁵¹. The divine "personhood" attributed to the "Spirit" in texts such as Romans 8:27; 2 Corinthians 13:14 suggest the appropriateness of capitalization here.

instalment⁵² of their part in the blessings of the new age and as an indwelling presence that empowers a God-pleasing life⁵³.

What, then, is the relation of the believer to the Mosaic law? Paul cannot but think that believers are bound to serve God. And if, indeed, Torah is a statement of the divine will and of "what is good" for humankind, then Paul must surely believe that, when Christians live as they should, they "fulfill the righteous demand" of Torah. And so he does⁵⁴.

But believers do not, for Paul, encounter those demands as "laws", nor can the Mosaic embodiment of those commands as such be-binding upon them. Paul speaks repeatedly of believers as those who have "died to the law", have been "set free" from the law, are no longer "under" the law, have been "redeemed" from its sway⁵⁵. He means in part that believers are no longer subject to the curse that the law pronounces upon its transgressors - a curse borne vicariously on their behalf by Christ⁵⁶. But he means as well that they serve God in a way different from that of those who are subject to the law's demands⁵⁷.

"Law" in these contexts refers, not simply to a statement of the standards by which human beings are to live as God's creatures, but to their formulation as demands externally imposed upon wills prone to resist them. The "flesh" (as Paul defines the term) can only encounter a statement of God's standards as "law". Fittingly, then, human obligation to God, human resistance to God, and human need for redemption were all highlighted when God imposed his law on ("flesh") Israel. Included in that law were not only demands binding on all humankind, but also provisions peculiar to Israel, preserving their distinctiveness from the

⁵². Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5.

⁵³. Romans 7:6; Galatians 5:16-25.

⁵⁴. Romans 8:3-4; Cf. 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14.

⁵⁵. Romans 7:6; Galatians 2:19; Romans 6:14-15; Galatians 4:5.

⁵⁶. Galatians 3:10-13.

⁵⁷. See Romans 7:6; 2 Corinthians 3:6.

pagan nations, perhaps foreshadowing aspects of the coming redemption⁵⁸.

But God's ideal for humanity could hardly be the external imposition of his will on resistant subjects; "law" can only be the "guardian" of a humanity not yet "come of age" (Galatians 3:23-25). Already in the prophetic scriptures, the ideal future was seen as one in which God's will was enshrined in the hearts of his people⁵⁹. For Paul, that "future" had come. Provisions of Torah meant to distinguish Israel from other nations in the period leading up to Christ's coming must not be imposed upon the people of God in the new age. And even provisions which embodied what is good for all humanity cannot encounter the redeemed as unwelcome "laws": the redeemed, after all, are no longer "in the flesh"⁶⁰ (Romans 7:5), no longer God's "enemies" (Romans 5:10), but his willing "servants" (Romans 6:22).

Indeed, more than servants, they are God's adopted children - for whom trust in their loving Father and obedience to him should be natural⁶¹. Temptations must still be faced and resisted; believers can still stumble and need to be restored⁶². Nonetheless, Paul is sufficiently confident of the transformation wrought when they "died with Christ to the law" that he can speak of Christians as serving God "not in the old way of the written code, but in the new way of the Spirit" (Romans 7:4-6). The same righteousness which was (ineffectively) demanded by the law of its resistant subjects is taken to the natural outgrowth (or "fruit") of a life controlled by the divine Spirit⁶³.

⁵⁸. See Romans 3:25; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Colossians 2:16-17.

⁵⁹. See footnote 17 above.

⁶⁰. In the (negative) sense of the term "flesh", as "humanity resistant to God". They, of course, continue to live "in the flesh" in the sense that their existence is still an earthly, embodied one. Cf. 2 Corinthians 10:3; Galatians 2:20.

⁶¹. Romans 8:14-16.

⁶². Galatians 6:1.

⁶³. Romans 8:3-4; Galatians 5:22-23.

4. THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

The (unknown) author of the (so-called) "Epistle to the Hebrews" fears that his readers may, in the face of persecution, abandon their Christian faith. To dissuade them, he attempts to show that the salvation offered in the Christian gospel represents the culmination of all that God initiated - in terms of revelation, laws and institutions - in the past history of Israel. In the process (and this is our interest here), he claims that the Mosaic law and covenant, designed to foreshadow in their day the "good things" that were to come, have now been done away.

The "law" of which he speaks⁶⁴ embraces all the ordinances and institutions of the Mosaic dispensation: its priesthood, sanctuary, sacrifices and festivals. Details of the elaborate argument by which our author attempts to show, in each case, the inadequacies of the old order and the perfections of the new need not detain us here. The following summary observations must suffice.

i. The author finds that the ancient scriptures themselves reveal the planned obsolescence of the institutions of the Mosaic order. Had the priesthood of Levites operative under the Mosaic covenant been intended to be permanent, God would not have spoken much later in the Psalms of a priesthood of a different order⁶⁵. Had the sacrifices of the old order been adequate to cleanse the conscience of worshipers, then the Mosaic law would not have restricted access to the Most Holy Place to the high priest on a single occasion in the year⁶⁶. Indeed, those sacrifices would not have needed to be endlessly repeated, had they been able to perfect those who offered them⁶⁷. Nor would God have spoken in the (Old Testament) prophets of a coming "new covenant", if the old had been adequate⁶⁸. In short, according to our author, the scriptures

⁶⁴. Hebrews 7:5, 12, 16, 19, 28; 8:4; 9:19, 22; 10:1, 8, 28.

⁶⁵. I.e., that of Melchizedek. So Hebrews 7:11 referring to Psalm 110:4.

⁶⁶. Hebrews 9:7-10.

⁶⁷. Hebrews 10:1-4.

⁶⁸. Hebrews 8:7, 13.

themselves show that the Mosaic order was never intended to be permanent.

ii. Nor could the earthly paraphernalia of the Mosaic dispensation be anything but symbolic representations of heavenly realities. The earthly sanctuary of the Mosaic order was but a "copy and shadow" of God's heavenly tabernacle⁶⁹. The curtain which led into the Most Holy Place of the Mosaic tabernacle served as a picture and anticipation of the body of Christ, offered to open to believers the true and heavenly path to God⁷⁰. Indeed, the fiery mountain itself on which the commandments of the Mosaic dispensation were given pales in comparison with the heavenly Mount Zion⁷¹.

iii. The human frailty - moral as well as physical - of the officiants of the Mosaic order was inevitable, but another indication that the order in which they served must give way to that served by the endless life of the blameless Son of God⁷².

iv. The Mosaic order was all of one piece: if its priesthood proved inadequate, then its adequate replacement must belong to an entirely different order⁷³. Hence, the "law" which ordained the priesthood, rites and sacrifices of the Mosaic dispensation shares the temporary nature of all its institutions. Its day has passed, now that the "good things" (of which it was a mere foreshadowing) have come.

v. Our author never speaks of the moral commands of the Mosaic law. Still, his argument does not permit him to regard one part of the order as retaining validity when the rest of the order has proved obsolete. Accordingly, when (as Hebrews 13) our author makes moral demands on his readers, he does so without citing the Mosaic law.

⁶⁹. Hebrews 8:2, 5-6; 9:11, 24.

⁷⁰. Hebrews 10:19-20.

⁷¹. Hebrews 12:18-22.

⁷². Hebrews 5:1-3; 7:23-28.

⁷³. Hebrews 7:11-12.

vi. Paul saw the law's "weakness" in its inability to secure obedience from a hostile "flesh", the law's purpose in its highlighting of human sin⁷⁴. For the author of Hebrews, the "weakness" and impermanence of the law (he has the "ritual" law in mind) lay in the earthly frailty and mortality of its officiants and the merely representative and symbolic nature of its institutions. Its purpose was seen as educative: by "foreshadowing" the realities of the new age, it provided the interpretive framework within which they could be understood.

5. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew, too, believed that, with the appearance and work of Jesus, a new hour had struck in God's dealings with humankind. That to which the "law and prophets" looked forward, that which "many prophets and righteous people yearned to see", had now been realized (Matthew 5:17; 13:17). The "kingdom of heaven" had dawned: Jesus' miracles had displayed its power over evil; he had pronounced its nearness and admission to its joys for all who would forsake all else to receive them; he had modelled and taught its righteousness; he had died to atone for the sins of its people; he had been raised from the dead and given "all authority in heaven and in earth"⁷⁵. Now the gospel was to be proclaimed in all the world, and the church of Jesus built, before the Lord's return brought the kingdom to its consummation⁷⁶.

How did Matthew understand the status of the law in the new age? The question is more problematic than was the case with either Hebrews or Paul because of the genre in which Matthew wrote. The gospel is a narrative rather than an argument - and a tradition-bound narrative at that. That Matthew shaped and ordered the traditional material at his disposal is evident to all who compare his gospel with those of Mark and Luke; the same comparison, however, reveals the extent to which Matthew remained tied to the church's traditional material about Jesus. To take but one example important for our theme: though Matthew was

⁷⁴. Hebrews 8:3; 3:20; 5:20; 7:7.

⁷⁵. Matthew 12:28; 4:17; 13:44-46; 3:15; 5:20; 20:28; 26:28; 2:18.

⁷⁶. Matthew 28:19-20; 16:18; 24:14.

obviously supportive of the Christian mission to Gentiles⁷⁷, his gospel faithfully reflects the limitation of Jesus' own outreach to Jews⁷⁸ - and the absence of any directive for or against the circumcision of Gentile believers. We may, perhaps, suspect that, in the light of what is said (and not said) in Matthew 28:19-20 and of the tenor of his gospel as a whole, Matthew did not think Gentiles need be circumcised; but the text nowhere addresses the issue.

Ambiguity dogs other matters as well. Matthew 5:18 declares that not one "iota" will pass from the law "until all is accomplished". The text appears to insist on the continuing validity of every detail in the law - unless, of course, Matthew thought that, with the resurrection of Jesus, "all" had been "accomplished"; and that is quite possible. Elsewhere in the gospel Jesus criticizes the "scribes and Pharisees" for tithing herbs punctiliously while neglecting 'the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith". He continues: "these latter you must do, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23). The demand for "justice, mercy and faith" is straightforward; the end of the verse, however, can be construed either as an equally insistent requirement that herbs be tithed or as little more than a postscript ruling out the reading that Jesus was as opposed to careful tithing as he was to the neglect of mercy.

Matthew appears, however, to have thought that the Mosaic Torah remained in force as a statement of God's will, at least for Jewish believers⁷⁹. At the same time, the gospel is sharply critical of the law

⁷⁷. Matthew 24:14; 28:19:20.

⁷⁸. Matthew 15:24.

⁷⁹. In addition to Matthew 5:17-19; 23:23, we may point to Matthew 15:15-20. Unlike the parallel text in Mark (Mark 7:17-23), Matthew avoids the suggestion that Jesus "declared all foods clean". The probable explanation is that Matthew was not prepared to explicitly do away with the food laws of Torah. That said, one may well wonder whether the gospel's openness to Gentiles without any insistence on their observance of Torah, and its strong prioritizing of the "weightier matters of the law" over ritual observances did not (whatever Matthew's intentions) effectively point its readers in the same direction as the letters of Paul and that to the Hebrews: laws prescribing observances that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, while not explicitly abolished, were likely to fall into abeyance.

observance of contemporary Jews and insistent that the ethical requirements of God's kingdom (as spelled out by Jesus) *transcend* - without doing away with - the righteousness of Torah. In what follows, we will briefly develop these two points.

i. That those who scrupulously observe details of the law may well distort its priorities is a frequent insistence of the Matthean Jesus. In tithing herbs but neglecting mercy, they "strain out gnats and swallow camels" (Matthew 23:24). A prophetic text stating that God desires "mercy, not sacrifice" is twice quoted in the gospel to deflate the objections of those who would uphold ritual prescriptions of Torah when their setting aside allowed human needs to be met⁸⁰. Twice the "sum and substance of the law" is reduced to single principle: that of "doing to others as you would be done by" in Matthew 7:12, that of love for God and neighbour in 22:34-40. In the latter text at least, the criticism is implicit that Pharisaic observance of the law's concrete details was carried out in a spirit that transgressed the requirement of its heart.

Closely related is the gospel's frequent charge of hypocrisy: outward conformity with the law's prescriptions had been adopted as a path to public esteem by people whose hearts were far from God⁸¹. Furthermore, conformity with the law's more concretely defined prescriptions (the gospel suggests) had induced inflated notions of personal righteousness (handwashing and tithing are, after all, more easily measured than compassion) and led to premature attitudes of superiority over, and condemnation toward, those whose neglect of such concrete provisions in the law was evident to all⁸².

ii. But the law itself had its limitations: here Matthew shows a sensitivity akin to Paul's, though for Matthew the "righteousness of the

⁸⁰ Hosea 6:6, quoted in Matthew 9:13; 12:7.

⁸¹ Matthew 6:1-5, 16; 15:7-8; 23:1-7, 25-28.

⁸² See Matthew 12:7; 15:1-20; 21:28-32.

law" is transcended, not replaced, by that of the kingdom of heaven⁸³. The point is developed in the "antitheses" that follow the claim⁸⁴.

In each case, the Matthean Jesus distinguishes his own teaching ("But I say unto you ...") from what was "said to those of ancient times". The suggestion that Jesus is here portrayed as merely offering his own *interpretation* of provisions in Torah comes to grief in those cases⁸⁵ where he prohibits what Torah allowed. But it also fails to do justice to the contrast drawn in the antithetic formulation itself between ancient dictum and the authoritative declaration of Jesus: "You have heard ... but I say". Yet the contrast is not that between unrighteousness and righteousness, but that between limited statements of what God requires and its ultimate expression. Something of God's intention was captured in the prohibition of murder and adultery, in the laws related to divorce, oaths and revenge: for that reason, Jesus is not seen as simply "doing away" with Torah's stipulations. But the "kingdom of heaven", the antitheses suggest, requires a righteousness that transcends conformity with these laws of Torah.

Part of the point appears to be that the focus of certain laws is limited to what is legally enforceable. Murder may be prohibited by law - and the prohibition is indeed essential to the smooth functioning of earthly societies. But God's will for his creatures is violated by angry assertions of self-will and contempt for others as much as by the act of killing⁸⁶. The Mosaic law forbids adultery; but regarding another lustfully, as a mere occasion for one's own sexual gratification, is equally sinful⁸⁷. The law made provisions for divorce, for oaths, for equitable punishments: all measures designed to limit the effects of evil in society. But mere limiting of evil, though a worthy goal, does not

⁸³. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus claims to "fulfill", not "abolish" the law. In "fulfilling" the law, Jesus spells out and makes possible the righteousness which the law incompletely expressed and ineffectively required. See the discussion below.

⁸⁴. Matthew 5:21-48, following 5:17.

⁸⁵. Matthew 5:31-32, 33-37, 38-42.

⁸⁶. Matthew 5:21-22.

⁸⁷. Matthew 5:27-28.

(Matthew believes) measure up to the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven⁸⁸.

And there is more to be said. The goodness required in the Sermon on the Mount is not the same thing as careful compliance with even the most perfect and comprehensive code of law. Such observance, to be sure, contributes greatly to the order and stability of society; but, in itself, compliance with laws falls far short of the spontaneous selflessness, the uncalculated generosity, the unstinted love of God and all his creatures that, in Matthew's view, God desires in his children⁸⁹. The goodness of the kingdom is related to joy, to thankfulness, to appreciativeness - though none of these qualities need accompany the most fervent strivings to measure up to commands. It is the fruit of genuine, unselfconscious delight and whole-hearted trust in the goodness of God⁹⁰. It requires, in Matthew's gospel, the radical reorientation of the human heart toward God bought about by the experience of the power and goodness of his kingdom⁹¹: only "good trees" can bear "good fruit" (Matthew 7:17). Jesus' ethical teaching in Matthew is more concerned to evoke a vision than to prescribe precise limits of acceptable behaviour: in poetic, dramatic, often hyperbolic language, the Matthean Jesus illustrates the kind of attitude and action that should characterize those who know themselves to be God's children⁹².

6. CONCLUSIONS

Paul, Hebrews and Matthew all share with non-Christian Jews the conviction that God chose Israel as his people and gave them his law. They also believe, however, that God's decisive intervention for the well-being of his creatures took place in the life, death and resurrection

⁸⁸. Matthew 5:31-42.

⁸⁹. Cf. Matthew 5:39-48; 6:25-33; 18:21-22.

⁹⁰. Cf. Matthew 6:8, 25-33; 7:11.

⁹¹. Cf. Matthew 13:44-46.

⁹². Cf. C.H.Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) 46-63.

of Jesus Christ. In that light, they reinterpret the role of Torah in the divine drama of redemption.

For Paul, the statement of God's righteous demands in Torah brought human hostility to God to the fore - as well as the need for redemption. Hebrews focuses attention on the ritual Torah, claims that it could not (and was not intended to) provide a permanent basis for God's dealings with humankind, but sees it as anticipating the "priestly" work of Jesus Christ, and as providing the interpretive framework within which that work could be understood. Both limit the period of the law's binding force to the period leading up to the coming of Christ⁹³. Matthew does not see the Mosaic law as "done away", but he does see its righteousness fulfilled and transcended in that of the kingdom of heaven.

For all, the law was divinely given, but incapable of coping with human sin. At best, it could provide the divine diagnosis of the human problem, limit its ill effects and foreshadow the divine solution. The transformation of the human heart, however, required, not the statutory formulation of God's will in Torah, but the personal demonstration of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ.

⁹³. Galatians 3:19, 23-25; Hebrews 7:12.