

What does Matthew mean by his use of πληροω and what is its relevance for understanding how Jesus fulfils the law in Matthew 5:18?

Yannick Christos-Wahab
Beeson Divinity School

Introduction

In Matthean studies, few topics have warranted more attention or scholarship than Matthew's view on the law. In particular, the views on the law presented in the Sermon on the Mount are of such a contentious nature that M. Jack Suggs claims that it "makes jugglers of us all."¹ To understand the Matthean view of the law, it is common for scholars to look to the perceived Matthean community to understand Matthew's presentation of this material. However it is my view that in this particular case Matthew's view on the law here does not lie in an understanding of the historical context of the letter itself, but in an understanding of the literary context. It is my view that it is an understanding of Matthew 5:17-20, particularly an understanding of the word *πληροω*, which illuminates the antitheses that follow and brings out Matthew's view on the law. It is a denial of the prophetic purpose of the law, which for Matthew is its primary purpose, which causes us to distort the meaning of *πληροω* here and consequently misunderstand the point that Matthew is trying to present. By understanding the literary context and the verses themselves, we uncover Matthew's vital and shocking Christological claim that Jesus is not merely interpreting or even doing the law but that he is offering the true law, which the Torah could only point to, but is now possible because of the imminent kingdom of God.

Historical Context

A proposed understanding of the historical context of the composition of Matthew's gospel has undoubtedly played a vital role in the interpretation of Matthew 5:17-48, arguably more so than in any other part of the gospel. This can be shown for example in the works of Ulrich Luz and R. G. Hamerton-Kelly. Luz, in his reconstruction of the Matthean community, says

¹ M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1970), 112.

of Matthew that “his community upheld the Jewish purity laws without seeing anything decisive in them”² and this is then mirrored in his discussion of the antithesis where he states that Matthew “probably felt that the laws...remained operative, but should be made subordinate to the more significant commandment of love.”³ This link between the historical reconstruction and interpretation of 5:17-48 is far more explicit in Hamerton-Kelly’s “Attitudes to the Law in Matthew’s Gospel.” In providing his rationale for another look at the passage he states, “Ernst Kaesemann’s portrayal of the Matthean community...seems to make it possible for us to see facets of the question concerning the Law which have not yet been brought to the light.”⁴ This leads him to say that, “In light of the weight of scholarship, it does not seem likely that verse 18 is a word of Jesus. We must, therefore... try to interpret the verse as a product of the community behind the Gospel.”⁵

Over and against this tendency in much of scholarship, it is my firm belief that a reconstruction of the Matthean community is not only unhelpful for an understanding of 5:17-48, but in many cases is dangerous. In spite of one’s views Richard Bauckham’s assertion that the gospels are written for all Christians,⁶ it is clear that his criticisms of the consensus view that the gospels were written for specific and isolated communities are significant. Additionally, such reconstructions are not only in danger of circular reasoning,⁷ but also readily seem to overestimate the extent to which a text may be seen as transparent for a community.⁸ This is evidenced in the above two authors. Even if we accept their reconstruction of the Matthean community, this identification of the views of the implied

² Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15.

³ Luz, *Matthew*, 53.

⁴ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, “Attitudes to the Law in Matthew’s Gospel: A Discussion of Matthew 5:18.” *Biblical Research* 17 (1972): 20.

⁵ Hamerton-Kelly, *Attitudes*, 21.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written’, in *The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 11.

⁷ Bauckham, *Gospels*, 23.

⁸ Bauckham, *Gospels*, 24.

audience with those of the author fails to fully appreciate the myriad ways an author may seek to challenge, affirm or tweak the views of his implied audience.

Literary Context

This essay, in contrast, will look to a detailed analysis of 5:17-20 in its literary context to understand 5:17-48 at large. There are two important things from the literary context that will be important later in this essay to understanding this passage. Firstly, it is important to remember that this passage takes place in the context of the Sermon on the Mount in which there are clear parallels to Moses, especially when one considers the many Moses parallels that have come before it. This parallel is made even more apparent in Greek as the phrase “ἀνέβη εἰς τὸ ὄρος” occurs repeatedly in the LXX accounts of Moses at Sinai (Exod 19:3; 24:15, 18; 34:4).”⁹

Secondly, it is very important to remember that the entire Sermon on the Mount acts as a kingdom of heaven manifesto, laying out the details of the coming kingdom and therefore should be understood with reference to 4:17, Jesus’ programmatic ministry statement. This means that the context for Jesus’ teaching here is apocalyptic and the reason for his teaching is the kingdom of heaven which is being inaugurated by his coming. Such an understanding of the literary context resists the temptation to see the ethical demands in particular as simply eternal maxims and understands its existence in relation to the eschatological reality that Jesus represented.

⁹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157.

Detailed Analysis

As mentioned above, the understanding of the word πληροω is absolutely essential to understanding 5:17-48. BDAG lists 6 possible meanings for the word: “1. To make full, *fill* (full), 2. To complete a period of time, *fill (up)*, *complete*, 3. To bring to completion that which was already begun, *complete*, *finish* 4. To bring to a designed end, *fulfil a) prophecy*, *b) command*, *etc.*”¹⁰ There is an important discussion about Matthew 5:17 in this entry in which BDAG states that “depending on how one prefers to interpret the context, πληροω is understood here either as *fulfil=do*, carry out, or as *bring to full expression=show it forth* in its true mng., or as *fill up=complete.*”¹¹ Noticeably the possibility that πληροω here refers to a fulfilment of prophecy (4a) is not included here. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament also includes a discussion on πληροω and while it agrees with BDAG that the “meaning of πληροω...must be based on the context,”¹² it is far more definite in concluding that here it means to “fulfil a demand or claim.”¹³ Peter Mohrlang in “Matthew and Paul” also recognises this difficulty in this verse and agrees that it is to context that we must appeal where he states that, “In any case, with such lack of consensus, it is certain that our understanding of Matthew’s view of the law cannot be based on a clear and agreed exegesis of πληρωσαι in 5.17.”¹⁴ He then concludes from his understanding of the context that it means here “to explicate or live out the deeper meaning and intent of the law.”¹⁵

Although I agree with the above three sources that context is vital here, I will demonstrate that by looking again at the wider context we can see a prophetic fulfilment meaning for πληροω here. First of all, it should be noted that given the clear Moses typology being

¹⁰ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 828-829.

¹¹ Bauer, *BDAG*, 829.

¹² Gerhard Delling, “πληροω” *TDNT*, 6:286-298.

¹³ Delling, *TDNT*, 6:292.

¹⁴ Roger Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8.

¹⁵ Mohrlang, *Matthew*, 8.

employed, it is unlikely that Jesus here is to be understood as doing the law in any way. As Moses did, Jesus here is giving new law and not merely doing or even providing definitive exegesis of the law. This can be seen in the actual antitheses where Jesus' statements cannot be fully be understood as mere interpretation of the law but actual new instructions.

Furthermore, in light of the apocalyptic setting of these sayings, it is surprising to see the general lack of scholarship to identify the “ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται” to the very life of Christ. As mentioned above, the entirety of this passage and Jesus' ministry as a whole is based on the coming of the kingdom of heaven inaugurated in his coming. This new law does not abolish the old because that which the law itself was speaking about is happening in the life of the Messiah. The rationale for this new law is given in the eschatological fulfilment of the kingdom of heaven as seen in the ministry of Jesus. Such an understanding moves the focus away from the question of how Jesus' sayings here relate to Mosaic Law to its true focus the authority and identity of Jesus.

Further credence can be given to this view in light of how the key word πληρωω has been used in Matthew until this point. With the possible exception of 3:15¹⁶, every use of πληρωω prior to this clearly refers to fulfilment of prophecy.¹⁷ In each of these cases, as supported by BDAG,¹⁸ it refers to the events of Jesus' life as being the content to which the Hebrew Bible was pointing to. In addition, France helpfully points out that “Fulfil (rather than “obey,” “do,” or “keep) would not be the natural way...”¹⁹ if Matthew's intention here is to portray Jesus as somehow doing the law. Although πληρωω, like all words, must always be understood with reference to context, the dominant use of πληρωω in this way so far in

¹⁶ Both BDAG (829) and Mohrlang (8) refer to 3:15 as an example of πληρωω referring to doing and not fulfilment of prophecy. Although much could be said about this, it is important to note that even in this verse debate exists around its interpretation and R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 120-121 amongst others see a possible fulfilment of Isaiah 53 here.

¹⁷ Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23.

¹⁸ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 829.

¹⁹ France, *Matthew*, 182.

Matthew suggests that the context must be significantly different in order to support the need to reject this possibility here.

It is a misunderstanding of this context that has caused many scholars to reject this possibility for πληρωω. At the heart of this, is a rejection that the law can be functioning prophetically. Although the majority of scholars accept the way in which prophecy was seen to point forward to Jesus by Matthew, there seems to be an unwillingness to understand how Matthew might see the law as pointing forward. That at least some early Christian theology saw the law as pointing forward is evident in the New Testament.²⁰ However, the most compelling evidence for understanding the law as functioning prophetically here is actually in Matthew itself. Robert Banks notes importantly that in Matthew 11:13, one of the few other times that the law and the prophets are referred to collectively, Matthew “speaks not only of the Prophets but also of the Law as prophesying.”²¹ He then goes on to strengthen this claim by comparing it to its parallel in Luke where it is can be seen that it is only in Matthew’s version that the law and prophets are spoken of as prophesying.²² Although, it is unclear as to whether Matthew and Luke are using the same source, since there is no Mark parallel, it does serve to highlight its presence in Matthew. This verse serves to show that the law can be seen to be functioning prophetically, and therefore the context of the law in 5:17 should not be used to rule out the idea that πληρωω here functions in the same way as it does in the fulfilment quotations earlier in Matthew. Additionally, this verse lends credence to the idea that “ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται” in verse 17 refers to Jesus’ ministry. In 11:13 Jesus creates a division at John the Baptist, stating that up until John the Baptist everything was pointing forwards to his own ministry. This division here suggests that Jesus sees his own life and ministry as the event to which the law and the prophets spoke of and there is no reason to

²⁰ Hebrews 10:1-10 in its description of sacrificial law is one such example.

²¹ Robert Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5: 17-20.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 231.

²² Banks, *Matthew’s Understanding*, 236.

suggest that this does not apply to 5:18, in light of the general apocalyptic nature of his ministry.

If Jesus' life and ministry is in fact the event to which the law pointed, then one might quite naturally ask the question as to what it is about Jesus' ministry that necessitates a new law. It is here that I believe that Matthew 19: 1-12 is particularly instructive in understanding why this new law is needed. When Jesus is asked why Moses permitted divorce, he states that, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so."²³ There are two important things to note here in relation to my thesis statement. First of all, the provisional nature of the law is clearly shown, pointing to the need for something more. France states this when he states in reference to 5:17, "The Torah, then, is not God's last word to his people, but in a sense provisional, looking forward to a time of fulfilment through the Messiah."²⁴ Secondly, the fact that Jesus here is giving a new command in spite of this hard-heartedness suggests that something has been or is being done about the hard hearts of people that will allow for a new law. This is the new law that God always intended from the beginning but was not possible due to the hard-heartedness of his people Israel. Although the answer to this hard-heartedness is not clear, it seems that Jesus' abiding presence, seen in both the beginning and the end of the gospel²⁵ is the answer to this hard-heartedness. This opens the way to the new law, which is based upon the very character of God,²⁶ and is possible in light of the kingdom of heaven in which the hard hearts of His people are removed.

²³ Matthew 19:8. ESV as all other quotations.

²⁴ France, *Matthew*, 183.

²⁵ Matthew 1:23; 28:20.

²⁶ Matthew 5:48

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that a careful understanding of the literary context and the verses themselves point towards an understanding of πληρωω that works in much the same way as it does when it refers to prophecy. In particular, the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' statements in 5:17-48 and the acceptance of the law functioning prophetically in Matthew suggests that πληρωω here refers to the new law that the Mosaic Law pointed to and is possible in light of Jesus' life and ministry. If John's ministry begins the call to repent and highlights what people are to turn from in light of the kingdom of heaven, then Jesus' ministry begins to show what works they are to turn to in light of this coming kingdom of heaven. The effect is that it is the validity of the Mosaic Law that is being demonstrated, in the way in which it points to Christ, and not primarily Christ's validity in the way in which he somehow does the law. The result of this is that Matthew continues the high Christology which he has already begun and is clearly the point of the Sermon on the Mount. In light of this, when Jesus contrast his commandments with the Mosaic Law, he is not doing the law or stating the law but he is stating that this is the reality to which the law always intended to point to. So that, when Moses said "Do not murder," or "Do not commit adultery," the real significance of this claim is to point to the time when Jesus would say, "Do not be angry with your brother" and "Do not look at a woman with lust." It is therefore of little surprise that "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."²⁷

²⁷ Matthew 7:28b-29.

Reference Works

- Banks, Robert J. "Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5: 17-20." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 226-242.
- Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Ed. Frederick W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Carlston, Charles. "The Things That Defile (Mark 7:14) and the Law in Mathew and Mark." *New Testament Studies* 15 (1968): 75--96.
- Delling, G. 1968.. "πληρωω" Pages 286-98 in vol. 6 of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
- France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Gundry, Robert H. *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1982.
- Hammerton-Kelly, Robert G. "Attitudes to the Law in Matthew's Gospel: A Discussion of Matthew 5:18." *Biblical Research* 17 (1972): 19-32.
- Martin, Brice L. "Matthew on Christ and the Law." *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 53-70.
- Mohrlang, Roger. *Matthew and Paul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.