The Jesus of the Gospels as interpreter of the Torah.

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According to the Gospels, Jesus has neither abolished nor surpassed the law. He interpreted the Torah. To show this, I will confine myself mainly to a section of the Gospel of Matthew, which, in the history of its Christian interpretation, was often used to prove the opposite and set under the heading "Antitheses" – Math. 5:21-48. However, Jesus offers no "antitheses to the law," but interpretations of the Torah.

I proceed by first tracing the strong manner in which Jesus – and not only in Matthew's Gospel – emphasizes the unquestionable validity of the Torah, and then by discussing a certain pattern that is used here six times, and finally, by using an example to focus in more detail on the content of Jesus' interpretation.

The Absolute Validity of the Torah

The Matthean Jesus gives solid expression to the fact that the Torah is unquestionably valid in the few verses of introduction to section 5:21- 48. In verse 17, he twice denies that the aim of his mission is to "abolish the Torah and the Prophets." On the contrary, the aim of his mission is, "to confirm," "to raise up," "to realize / implement" the Torah. The literal translation of the positive statement is "to fulfill." This stands in antithetic contrast to "abolish," "to anull." It is taken up again in verse 19. Instead of "fulfill," here the positive side of action and teaching is mentioned. Hereby Matthew gives an indication of how he understands the "fulfill." This also corresponds with the Hebrew language background and rabbinic usage. In it the commonly used opposites of "cancel," "destroy," on the one hand, and "raise up," "bring about," "implement," on the other, (batal and qum, each case in Piel) are applied. So it is said in Mishnah Avot 4:9, "Whoever implements the Torah in poverty, will eventually implement it in wealth, and he who destroys the Torah in wealth, will also destroy it in poverty."

Not an iota and not the smallest of strokes will pass away – even the smallest commandment remains valid.

Verse 18 underlines the continuing validity of the Torah; not one iota will pass away. This corresponds to what Rabbi ben Shim'on ben Jochaj taught, "The Book of Deuteronomy, climbed up, threw itself in front of the Holy One, blessed be He, and told him, 'Lord of the world, you have written in your Torah: any testament that is partially invalid, is totally invalid. And look, Solomon wants to tear one iota out of me.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, 'Solomon and thousands like him will perish, but no word will pass from you'" (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 2:6).

According to Matthew 5:18 "not one iota," but also "not one tittle stroke will pass from the Torah." The phrase, "little stroke," is an English translation of the Greek word keraía which may refer to the ornamental lines that are found on certain letters in the Torah scrolls from ancient times until today. They have no function for the reading of the texts. In the story of Moses in the Beit Midrash [house of teaching (transl.)] of Rabbi Akiva these decorative lines represent the oral tradition (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b): Moses meets God at Sinai while He is in the process of installing the ornamental lines in a Torah scroll. When he is surprised about this, he is told that Rabbi Akiva will develop "Halachot after Halachot" from every little stroke. During the subsequent stay in Rabbi Akiva's Beit Midrash Moses understands nothing, although there actually happens nothing else but

the interpretation of Moses. He calmes down when he hears, "This is Halacha of Moses from Sinai."

The oral Torah thus gains the same authority as the written one through God's own action at Sinai. When Jesus says that "not a tittle stroke of the Torah will pass away," he would therefore confirm not only the absolute validity of the written Torah but that of the oral Torah as well. For the Gospel of Matthew this is anything but absurd. In Matthew 23:2 Jesus notes, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat." For Matthew, these are the rabbinical sages of his own time, who interpret the Torah. Then he has Jesus challenge his audience, "Therefore. do whatever they teach you and follow it!" (Matthew 23:3a) Since those that are here addressed directly also represent the whole community of Matthew, this means: The oral Torah, too, is declared as binding on the Matthean community.

In Matthew 5:19 the abolishing of the smallest commandment is almost sanctioned, while the doing and the teaching of the commandments receive promise. Here again, a look at Matthew 23 can be helpful. In verse 23, the tithing of mint and anise and cumin, on the one hand, and justice, mercy and faithfulness/reliability, on the other, are weighted differently. But then it says in conclusion. "It is these (the latter) you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others." So also the tithing of mint, anise and cumin is binding, though it is not a commandment of the written, but certainly of the oral Torah.

Actually doing what is taught

There can be no argument about the intention of the verses 5:17 to 19 as a whole: The Torah is in force, unconditionally and without any curtailment. This is not taken back either in verse 20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Luther's translation speaks of a justice that should be "better." This suggests a qualitative difference. Yet, the Greek text contains clearly two quantitative terms (perisseúo and pleion) which I render with the Einheitsübersetzung [German ecumenical translation - transl.] as "far greater." What is at stake here is made clear again in chapter 23, when Jesus, after demanding to do everything and follow what "the scribes and Pharisees" teach, in distancing himself continues in v. 3b "but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Matthew clearly observes on the other side a discrepancy between teaching and action. Such a discrepancy is common in humans. But Matthew makes this discrepancy the perspective that determines everything these leaders are, so that they are repeatedly denigrated in chapter 23 as "hypocrites" for their lack of action, which is the all-important perspective. Their lack of action disqualifies them as leading representatives. Matthew's concern is the unity of teaching and acting. The righteousness that is "far greater" than that of the others then entails the demand to really do what is taught. This unity is naturally also the concern of rabbinical Judaism.

Jesus answers the question of eternal life according to his tradition by pointing to the commandments (Matthew 19:17 / Mark 10:18 / Luke 18:20). The commandments of the Decalogue are then enumerated as examples, in Matthew additionally the commandment to love one's neighbor. Only those who continue questioning what else is missing, are then asked to follow Jesus. Here, as well, the Torah is considered to be the self-evident and fundamental reality that is never in question. The summing-up of the Torah in one commandment does not void any single commandment.

That however, does not in any way exclude the summarizing of the Torah which the Jesus of the Gospels practices and also his giving a different weight to different parts of its content. But in doing so, he does not act differently than his Jewish tradition. According to Matthew 7:12 he says: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the Torah and the prophets." This statement is factually very closely to the "Story of a non-Jew," "who came to Shammaj. He said, 'Make me a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on

one leg.' He chased him away with a ruler he had in his hand. He came to Hillel. He made him a proselyte. He said to him, 'What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man! That is the whole Torah; everything else is commentary. Go and learn!" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a). The difference between Schammaj and Hillel is not that Schammaj holds the entire Torah as binding, whereas Hillel would mean to dispense with it in favor of the Golden Rule. Naturally, Hillel also holds the entire Torah as binding. This can be seen at the end, when he demands learning – of Torah, its individual commandments. But he can summarize the whole Torah in the Golden Rule, and in the summary give the individual commandments direction and orientation. Jesus also does not dispense with the Torah when he refers to individual commandments and interprets some of them.

To assume the superiority of the New Testament text over that of the Talmud from the fact that the Golden Rule is formulated negatively by Hillel and positively by Jesus, is not rooted in the issue itself, but in the Christian delusion of superiority. For once, there are also positive versions in other parts of the Jewish tradition, and for the other, the positive version is not protected from being used for purposes of calculated selfishness. The negative and positive version contain each a particular aspect that can be expressed only in that particular way. What is hateful to me, I tend to know much better than what I positively wish for. And that I could do to others, what I would not like being done to myself, is a frequent danger that is not captured in the positive version. However, it in turn emphasizes the activity in a positive action for the neighbor. Both aspects have their weight; they are complementary and should therefore not be pitted against each other.

In addition to the Golden Rule Jesus can summarize the Torah in the double commandment of love, in love of God and of fellow human being (Matthew 22:34-40 / Mark 12:28-34 / Luke 10:25-28). In Matthew 22:40 he states explicitly which can remind us of the end of Matthew 7:12, "On these two commandments hang all the Torah and the prophets." These summaries then have the same function that a "great summary" (k'lal gadól) has in the rabbinic tradition. Rabbi Akiva names as such the commandment to love the neighbor in Leviticus 19:18, while two of his colleagues consider Genesis 5:1 an even greater one because of its reference to humans as being created in the image of God, (B'reschit Rabbah 24:7). The "great summary" shows the perspective and gives the dimension in which the individual commandments are to be observed.

Finally, a close correlation between Jesus and the rabbinic tradition is evident in the way how a weighing of texts is done within the Torah. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus identifies three things that carry more weight in the Torah: "justice, mercy and faithfulness/reliability." Which is very close to what Rabban Shim'on ben Gamliel formulated: "On three things the world stands: on justice, faithfulness/reliability and peace" (Mishnah Avot 1:18).

Validity and Interpretation of the Torah

Jesus can thus summarize the Torah and weigh within it. He does not have a fundamentalist understanding of Scripture, as this is not the case with the rabbis either. This follows from the fact that he accepts the oral Torah, the interpretation of the Torah. The relationship between the validity and the interpretation of the Tora comes directly to the fore in Luke 10:26, where a Torah scholar asks Jesus how to attain eternal life, and Jesus puts the counter-question to him, "In the Torah – what is written there? How do you read it?" First, one notices that the first question is not formulated smoothly and that the phrase "In the Torah" emphatically precedes the following phrase. This is the basis – not only of the Torah scholar, but naturally also of Jesus, the basis on which the question of action and life may be answered reasonably and sufficiently. And so Jesus asks first what is written in it. He adds immediately another question: "How do you read it?"

A number of Bible translations obscure this by quite analogous phrasing it as, "What do you read there?" This is not about a triviality. Jesus asks how that, which is written, is read! How is it that one can still translate, "What are you reading?" These translators have surely also noticed that the

text presents two different interrogative pronouns. They have probably been misled to read the double-question as having the same meaning through the fact that the Torah scholar afterwards quotes, "You shall love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). He cites what is written and what he reads.

What these translators have not noticed is that here, by interweaving two quotes, Scripture is interpreted with Scripture, that this quoting of Scripture is at the same time an interpretation, an answer to the question of the nature and manner of reading. With the "How" after the "What" Jesus asks for the summarizing center of reading the Torah. He asks for the pathbreaking perspective through the large number of individual commandments. In the parallel passages of the other two Synoptic Gospels the questions asked are specifically about the "first" respectively "great" commandment of the Torah. In Luke this is done implicitly in the question of how the Torah is read. It makes clear that Scripture can only be received as interpreted Scripture. And so Jesus appears in the Gospels as interpreter of the Torah.

The pattern of Matthew 5:21-48 – Not: "But I say" rather, "I now say"

If one recalls the statements of Matthew 5:17-20 and its intention and understands that these verses form the introduction to 5:21- 48 and have the function of instruction as to how this section should be read, it is absolutely impossible to assume, Matthew could have understood it as "antitheses to the Torah." In view of this introduction, we must see this section as interpretations of the Torah. Six times the Torah is quoted, and six times there is immediately an interpretation of the quote.

The antithetical understanding of these verses sees its legitimation in the linguistic form of the introduction to what Jesus says after each quote. The usual translation says, "But I say" (egó de légo). The "de" is therefore understood adversative and the "I" is emphasized, because in the Greek text the person is already included in the predicate and could be left out unless the person is to be highlighted.

The translation, "but I say," is linguistically possible, but is by no means the only option.

For one thing, in New Testament Greek, we often see that the finite verb already includes the personal pronoun which would therefore not be necessary. However, the personal pronoun may still be present, although the context does not indicate that an emphasis is intended (cf. Matthew 16:18). For another, it is striking that kai (usually "and") is very often not used conjunctively but slightly adversatively and "de" very often not used adversatively, but conjunctively. The latter is found in the context of Matthew 5:21-48 at the beginning of verse 31: erréthe de. When the [German] Elberfeld translation renders it as "But it is said," it is simply absurd (cf. Matthew 19:9). Both of these phenomena can be explained from within the Hebrew language background: kai and de stand for the Hebrew ve, which includes both usages. The usage of the personal pronoun is also related to the Hebrew language background: because Hebrew constructs the present tense with the participle, the pronoun must be used to identify a specific individual. The Hebrew background phrase of egó de légo is vaaní omér. This is exegetical terminology, which introduces an interpretation, similar to scheneemár (erréthe: "it is [was] said"), which introduces a quotation from Scripture. The German translation in "Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache" [The Bible in Just Language] renders Jesus' words, "Today, I interpret it way," and thereby hits exactly on what Matthew meant. The insight that the pattern used in Matthew 5:21-48 listens back to the Hebrew language, falsifies the claim to an "original anti-theses" that originated with the [quest for the (transl.)] "historical" Jesus and was critical of the law/Torah. To understand the "historical" Jesus one would have to move into the realm of the Aramaic-Hebrew languages. However, since the expression vaaní omér ("I now say") is not antithetical, nor is the "I" in it meant to be highlighted, this claim itself looses even the appearance of validity.

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Interpretation in the context of Judaism

That Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel are not to be understood antithetically follows also from their content. In comparison with rabbinic tradition an extensive factual concurrence is evident in all six cases. This shall be shown briefly by using the first example. In Matthew 5:22 Jesus interprets the prohibition of murder in the Decalog this way, "Whoever is angry with his brother or sister is liable to judgment. And whoever says to his brother or his sister, 'You blockhead,' is liable to the Sanhedrin. Whoever says, 'You fool', is liable to hell fire." The closest parallel to this is offered by a contemporary of Matthew. Of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus it is said, "Whoever hates his fellow man, behold, he belongs to those who shed blood" (Derech erets rabba 11). He bases this statement on Deuteronomy 19:11, "For it is said, 'And if a person hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and rises against him.' " Both, the interpretation of Jesus as well as the one of Rabbi Eliezer are formed as a legal proposition. Neither here nor there it is seriously contemplated that the haters or angry ones are actually put on trial. With the transfer of judicial forms into the non-judicial realm, we are facing hyperbolic speech, which is meant to sensitize the listener to latent precursors of murder in him/herself.

Naturally, for the Gospel writers Jesus is not just one among other interpreters. Yet, his uniqueness arises not from the contents of his interpretations of the Torah, not from what he has said and done, but from an event in which he was deeply passive. It is based on the testimony that God raised the Crucified One from the dead in an act of apocalyptic new creation and made him Messiah. Thus, Matthew may present the teaching of Jesus on the Mount (Matthew 5 - 7) as the government program of the Messianic end-time king.

Summary

It was shown, and not only through Matthew 5:17-20, that for the Jesus of the Gospels, the Torah has absolute validity. Neither the emphasis on weightier passages in the Torah, nor their summaries in the Golden Rule or the commandment to love abolish the individual commandments. In the six sections of Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus does not oppose the citations of the Torah by saying, "But I say," rather, he introduces his interpretation with the words, "Now I say," and his interpretations are given in the context of the Judaism of his own time.

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