

# Is the Law of Moses Still Binding?

---

Never has there been a period in my lifetime when there is as much doctrinal confusion in the body of Christ as there is at this time. Some of the most fundamental issues of biblical truth are being challenged.

One of the curious oddities that has made its appearance is the notion that the law of Moses was not abolished by Jesus' death upon the cross. Rather, it continues on, its commands (at least some of them) being bound upon the believer, and its obligatory force continuing until the return of Christ. A young professor in a Christian university has expressed the following thoughts.

If Jesus' death on the cross really did do away with the Law altogether, why does he affirm it so strongly in Matthew 5, and even enjoin those in his kingdom to fulfill its commands? Don't forget how Jesus closes his teaching on the Law. He says: *"Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same shall be called least **in the kingdom of heaven!** But whoever keeps them and teaches others to do the same will be great in the kingdom of heaven."* Is the Kingdom of Heaven now? Are Jesus' words for us? I strive to keep and teach the Law because I want to be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven. But I want you to know something. Unlike Israel of the Old Testament, I study, keep, and teach a fulfilled Law; a Law redefined by Christ and his death. Many of the types and shadows of the Law have been replaced by the realities to which they point in Christ. This fact, however, does not nullify the Law; rather it makes the Law even more beautiful and meaningful (emphasis original).

The error in this affirmation is egregious, not to mention contradictory. It concedes the Law has been *"fulfilled"*, and yet contends it must be *"kept"* today even the least of its obligations. This stands in sharp contrast to the teaching of Christ, as well as the writers of the New Testament. It really is most amazing that any mature Christian would advocate it much less one who is in a position of responsibility, and exercises considerable influence over impressionable youth.

Now before we move on I want to make this very clear that the Hebrew word 'TURAH' does not refer to the Law or the first five books of the Bible.

**For a more in-depth understanding please see our article: [What do we mean by the term Turah?](#)**

## **A Transitional Period**

One must understand that the commencement of the New Testament record begins with what might be designated as a “**transitional**” period. In this era, instruction was given first by John the Baptizer; then by Jesus himself, which would accommodate a seamless passage from the old Mosaic regime to the glorious kingdom of Christ.

This is the very point the Lord had in mind when he declared: “*The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached*” (Luke 16:16). In a manner of speaking, John’s ministry was a “**bridge**” between the old covenant era and the beginning of the reign of Christ.

Though the Law of Moses was still operative until the death of Christ (and its civil aspects until the fall of the nation in A.D. 70), Jesus nonetheless taught many “kingdom” principles during his personal ministry. He did this, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7; see also Matthew 18:15-17**), frequently highlighting some of the differences between the two covenants, especially in terms of the contrasting motivations that were internal to the respective systems.

## **What about Matthew 5:17-20?**

One of the problems the Lord would encounter was a reaction from the Pharisees, who would charge that this Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary who had designs on “destroying” the Mosaic economy that had held sway over the Hebrew nation for fifteen centuries. It was imperative that this distortion be addressed and corrected. Hence, the Lord announced:

*Think not that I came to **destroy** the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to **fulfill**. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5:17-20**).*

The term “**destroy**” is a word that can connote the idea of some violence. It derives from the compound Greek term **kataluo** (17 times in the New Testament), literally to “loose down.” Christ employed the word prophetically concerning the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 (**Matthew 24:2; Luke 21:6; cf. also Matthew 26:61;**

27:40, etc.). It also is applied to the commencing corruption of the human body at the point of death (2 Corinthians 5:1).

*kat-al-oo'-o*  
From G2596 and G3089; to **loosen down** (**disintegrate**), that is, (by implication) to **demolish** (literally or figuratively); specifically (compare G2646) to **halt** for the night: - destroy, dissolve, be guest, lodge, come to nought, overthrow, throw down.

- **Loosen down (disintegrate)**
- **Demolish**
- **Halt**

In the context cited above, therefore, the Lord was contending that he did not come to violently “tear down” the law, as though he were its enemy. Never! Rather, he came to **“fulfill”** it. These terms stand in perfect contrasting balance.

The Saviour fulfilled the messianic **prophecies** (more than 300) of the law that heralded his coming (**Luke 24:44**). He fulfilled the **demand** of the law for perfect obedience—by his sinless life (**Galatians 3:10; John 8:29, 46; 1 Peter 2:22**). He fulfilled the **purpose** of the law, being the very object of its glorious, preparatory design (**Galatians 3:24-25**).

The Mosaic regime was never intended to be a permanent institution. The notion that the Torah would continue in effect until the Second Coming of Christ as some have alleged is utterly without biblical support. The beneficial **effects** of the law, as designed by the Creator, will abide through the age; but not the law itself.

But one might wonder: “Does not the passage affirm that the law would continue ‘until heaven and earth pass away’?” It absolutely does not. The text simply announces that the law would remain intact **until such a time as it is fulfilled**.

This fulfillment is the very thing Jesus declared he came to accomplish! If he did **not** fulfill the law, then the Saviour **did not do what he came to do**, hence, failed in his mission. If he **did do** what he came to do, the law was fulfilled, hence, does not remain an obligatory system today.

Compare Luke's parallel: "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one tittle of the law to fall" (**Luke 16:17**). When the Son of God "**fulfilled**" the law, it had not failed, fallen, or been destroyed; it had been completed.

Thus it no longer was a law to which the Jews, or anyone else, were obligated to obey as a legal system. To fail to recognize this truth is to overlook one of the most fundamental propositions of biblical literature.

But what should be said about the connection of **verses 19 and 20**, to **verses 27 and 18**? Does this suggest that the commandments of the law would be binding upon those in the kingdom of Christ? This was the position argued by the young gentleman cited earlier. It absolutely does not. Such an interpretation would stand in radical contradiction to scores of passages in the New Testament letters. J.W. McGarvey explained the connection nicely:

*The man who would break what he considered the small commandments of God, under one dispensation, would be proportionately disobedient under a better dispensation; for habits of disobedience once formed are not easily laid aside. For this reason obedience or disobedience while under the law was an index to what a man would be under Christ. The text shows that the relative greatness of persons in the kingdom of heaven is measured by their conscientiousness in reference to the least commandments. To the great commandments, as men classify them, even very small Christians may be obedient; but it requires the most tender conscience to be always scrupulous about the least commandments (53).*

The text most definitely is not teaching that the Law of Moses would be a binding law throughout the Christian administration. In fact, in his "marriage" metaphor, designed to emphasize the changing of laws, Paul wrote:

*For the woman who has a husband, is bound by law to the husband while he is living; but if the husband dies, **she is discharged from the law of the husband**. So if then, while the husband lives, if she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if the husband dies, **she is free from the law**, so that she is no adulteress, though she is joined to another man. Wherefore, my brothers, **you also are made dead to the law through the body of Christ**; that you should be joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit unto God (Romans 7:2-4).*

If Christians are equally obligated to the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ, they are in a state of spiritual adultery! This is a most unenviable consequence of the doctrine under review.

In an excellent discussion of this untenable theory, so common with various theologians, the scholarly R.C. Foster wrote:

***“The view that He [Christ] merely deepened and emphasized the law in the Sermon on the Mount will not bear investigation” (469).***

I would encourage those who have access to Foster’s tremendous work, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, to carefully study the material on the **“Sermon on the Mount” (462-487)**.

In concluding this section of our article, we are compelled to make this observation. Jesus emphatically affirmed that neither a **“jot”** nor a **“tittle”** (terms used to represent the minutest portions of the documents) would “pass away from the law” until “all things be accomplished” (**v. 18**). If Christ did **not** fulfill the law, and it will remain until “heaven and earth pass away,” then **all** of the Law—every jot and tittle—remains! Or, to say it in another way—all the commands, from the greatest to the least, still are in force.

### **Garbled Language**

It will not do to filter “the law,” so to speak, separating the “ceremonial” from the “moral,” rejecting the former while claiming to retain the latter—as attempted by the Seventh-day Adventists (though they cling to the Sabbath and the abstention from pork idea, both of which were in the “ceremonial” category). This is a false distinction.

Nor will it work to claim that by practicing the teaching of Jesus we are “keeping the Law.” For example when the Christian honours Christ as his “Passover” (**1 Corinthians 5:7**), or when one submits to the covenant of “circumcision” (**in baptism – Colossians 2:11-12**), he is **not** obeying the commandments of the Law. The Old and New are two different systems. The “types” of the Old Testament foreshadowed the “anti-types” of the New, but one cannot claim he is “keeping the law of Moses” when he yields to New Testament ordinances. This is an irresponsible confusion of the two covenants, and a garbled use of language.

Neither is it valid to contend that while the law’s “curse” expired, the **law itself** remains. Paul stated that *“as many as **are** of the works of the law **are** under a curse”* (**Galatians 3:10**). The law and the curse were joined. A law, with no penalty, is no law at all! The fact is the entire law, together with its demands and curse, passed away. Only fifteen verses later the apostle declared that: *“we are no longer under a tutor [the law]”* (**24-25**). How can that point possibly be ignored? The former covenant was replaced with a **“better covenant”** (**Hebrews 8:6**)—unless, of course, one wishes to rip the entire book of Hebrews from the Bible.

Does this mean that the Old Testament is of no value today? Of course not; far from it! The **legacy** of that body of literature is vast, wonderful, and abiding (**Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11**). There is a divine link between the Old and the New Testaments. But does that mean that the Christian is under the former regime in this age, with its body of law to which he is obligated? It does not. Should one be teaching that Christians ought to be observing the commandments of the Law of Moses today from the greatest to the least? To so argue is to leave a distinctly erroneous impression.

Though we do not have the inclination at this time to review the full range of arguments being advanced in support of the notion that the Law of Moses was not abrogated by the death of Christ, we do wish to address one further aspect of it.

### **Nailed to the Cross**

In his letter to the Colossian saints, Paul the Apostle reminded these Christians that prior to their conversion to the Lord, they were *“dead through [their] trespasses.”* But they were made *“alive”* together with Christ, who forgave all their sins. The apostle then contends that Christ *“blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross”* (Colossians 2:13-14).

This would involve *“the legal bond of ordinances to which the Jew had agreed and to which even the Gentile’s conscience had in some degree given assent (Romans 2:14, 15)”* (Ashby, 1533; see also: Abbott, 255; Eadie, 163-164; Vincent, 908, and many additional scholars).

It has become fashionable in some quarters, however, to allege that this text has no reference to the abolition of the Law of Moses. Rather, it is supposed to refer to the *“note”* of sin-debt that stood against the Christian prior to his conversion. In response to this theory we offer the following considerations.

### **The Context**

The immediate context argues otherwise. In the sentence that follows, Paul draws his conclusion: *“Let no man, therefore, judge [condemn] you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day or a new moon or a Sabbath day: which are a shadow of the things to come, but the body is Christ’s”* (v. 16).

Especially note the *“therefore,”* which connects certain elements of the law (the parts standing for the whole) with that *“nailed to the cross.”* This is too obvious to miss. Thayer identified the *“handwriting”* as a metaphorical reference to *“the Mosaic law”*



(668). See also Vaughan (11.201) and Lenski (114). Peake states: “It is generally agreed that the reference here is to the Law [of Moses] (cf. Ephesians 2:15)” (4.527).

### **The Grammar**

Observe the double use of “**was**” (past tense verb) in **verse 14**, indicating that the system is operative no longer. A.T. Robertson commented that the verbal “*has taken*” is a *perfect tense form which, “emphasizes the permanence of the removal of the bond” (which he identifies as “the Mosaic law”), “that has been paid and cancelled and cannot be presented again”* (4.494).

### **The Parallelism**

This text unquestionably is parallel in a number of aspects to Paul’s instruction to the Ephesians in chapter two of that letter (these two books have a number of striking parallels).

*For he [Christ] is our peace, who made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and brake down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in himself of the two one new man, so making peace; and might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby* (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Noted Bible scholar, David J. Williams, says that Paul’s reference to “the Jewish law in **Ephesians 2:15**” is “decisive for the interpretation of **Colossians 2:14**” (189). Both refer to the same situation.

*R.C. Fosters states: A great need of the Christian world today is the clear recognition that we are not under the law, but the gospel; that the law was nailed to the cross and passed out of force when the new will was probated at Pentecost* (469).

He also pointed out that neither Catholicism nor Protestantism has entertained a clear perception regarding this matter.

To dismiss the theme of the “law of Moses” from **Colossians 2:14**, because of a predisposition one entertains with reference to the perpetuity of the Law, is both irresponsible and reprehensible.

## Conclusion

There should be tremendous concern among the Lord's people when a teaching this fundamental has become so terribly misconstrued, and is fed "intravenously" to sincere young men who are anxious to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

### **Works Cited**

- Abbott, T. K. (1897), *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark).
- Ashby, Ernest G. (1979), "The Letter to the Colossians," *The New Layman's Bible Commentary*, G.C.D. Howly, F.F. Bruce, H.L. Ellison, Eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).
- Eadie, John (1957), *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).
- Foster, R.C. (1971), *Studies in the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker).
- Lenski, R.C.H. (1961), *Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg).
- McGarvey, J.W. (1875, reprint), *Commentary on Matthew and Mark* (Des Moines, IA: Eugene Smith).
- Peake, A.S. (1956), "The Epistle to the Colossians," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).
- Robertson, A.T. (1931), *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman).
- Thayer, J.H. (1958), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark).
- Vaughan, Curtis (1978), "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebelin, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).
- Vincent, M.R. (1972 Ed.), *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers & Authors).
- Williams, David J. (1999), *Paul's Metaphors* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson).

### **Scripture References**

Matthew 5; Luke 16:16; Matthew 5-7; Matthew 18:15-17; Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 24:2; Luke 21:6; Matthew 26:61, 27:40; 2 Corinthians 5:1; Luke 24:44; Galatians 3:10; John 8:29, 46; 1 Peter 2:22; Galatians 3:24-25; Luke 16:17; Romans 7:2-4; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Colossians 2:11-12; Hebrews 8:6; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Colossians 2:13-14; Romans 2:14, 15; Ephesians 2:15; Ephesians 2:14-16; Colossians 2:14.

[BACK](#)