

MATTHEW'S JESUS AND THE LEX TALONIS

Was Jesus a man of peace who wanted people to refrain from retribution and live in peace?

“Jesus forbade the state to punish for he spoke against the statute of an eye for an eye which was revealed by God in the Torah (Matthew 5:38,39). This proves that the capital laws and the laws of revenge and retribution are finished too. Luke never mentioned Jesus’ opposition to the law of tit for tat.”

When Jesus told the Church to punish (Matthew 18:15-17) this interpretation is unlikely. Only hypocrites would object to the state punishing when it can help God. It is hypocrisy to argue that Jesus meant to reject violence totally as some do (page 46, Christ and Violence) for he castigated the Jews with his violent words and he protested when he was hit for allegedly insulting the High Priest and he wrecked the Temple though Christians make the spurious allegation that we don’t know if he actually hit anybody or not. We must remember that to insult anybody is verbal violence and non-violent aggression is violent for it hurts the feelings of those who are trying to do what you do not want them to do. Jesus could not have come out against violence without being obviously hypocritical and coming across as a mental case. Punishment is the same thing as revenge so Jesus was not forbidding revenge but only its abuse.

Jesus said we should not take an eye for an eye for we should not resist the evil man but turn the other cheek. He is saying what we have to do when we are attacked during the attack. We don’t take the Law into our own hands and try to avenge but turn the other cheek. He does not say that it is wrong to take an eye for an eye when following a just trial it is legal and reasonable to. He is not protesting against the rule but its abuse and its being taken out of context. He is talking about the rule being used in individual affairs and not state affairs and since he did not come to alter the Law we know that this use of the rule is an abuse. You can imagine somebody saying, “You have been told not to kill but I say to you do not kill a man you see killing.” The man is not doing away with the killing law but applying the correct understanding to it. Some argue that since the Law of tit for tat he quoted was a legal law and part of the Law for the theocracy of the Israelites that it was civil law that Jesus was abolishing. You know that this interpretation is wrong.

It is acknowledged by Christians that the abolition of an eye for an eye refers not to the Jewish law but to an exaggeration of it that led to people taking an eye for an eye without legal safeguards and who took the law into their own hands (page 37-39, Hard Sayings). If Jesus had wanted rid of the whole rule he would have quoted the bit about judges having to decide if it should be done as well.

The pacifist Christian book, Christ and Violence, says that when Jesus said we must not resist our enemy instead of taking an eye for an eye he meant that we must not do exactly to others what they have done to us and must not see the person who injures us as an enemy (page 48). The bit about not resisting came before the eye for an eye so it means we must not resist our enemy by doing to him what he would do to us before he has the chance. Jesus was not attacking the rule as it stood in the Old Testament but the twisted version of it that said, “Do unto others before they do unto you”.

We read that Jesus used a Greek word meaning to stand opposed to for resist and used much the same word when quoting the command leaving the passage something like this, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye opposed to an eye, a tooth opposed to a tooth.’ But I say to you do not stand opposed to an evil man”. This use of the same word and the fact that the man is said to be there in front of you proves that Jesus meant not that the rule was wrong but that the application of it to this situation when a man wants to gouge out your eye and he is there in front of you and do you that to him before he has the chance was immoral.

It is certain that Christ forbade private retaliation and was not talking about people and their relationship to the government and most Catholic scholars agree that the pacifist interpretation is flawed (page 211, The Jesus Event).

The book, The Enigma of Evil (pages 108-9), states that when Jesus seemingly did away with the law of an eye for an eye what he was doing was telling the people to stop taking it literally. I used to take this position: “What the law is about is not knocking out a tooth for a tooth but making somebody justly pay some other way for knocking out your tooth for an eye for an eye literally leaves everybody blind. The law agrees that it is just to knock out a tooth for a tooth but the command to take a tooth for a tooth only means you make a person suffer and atone for punching your tooth out. The eye for eye law was being taken out of the context for after it was given God said that any master who destroyed a slave’s eye had to pay for it by losing the slave. The slave could have been as important to him as an eye doing all the work in the house. So God himself said it was not to be taken literally though you have to pay back a person for hurting you in full.” The eye for eye rule applied to the Hebrew people and not their slaves who were regarded as inferior in value. So to pluck out the eye of a slave was not as bad as doing this to an ordinary freeman. Set My Exiles Free argues that financial compensation was commanded when two men fought and one was seriously injured with the money being paid to the injured man shows that

the eye for eye was not literal (page 193). Perhaps the eye for eye cannot apply here for the attacker was provoked and the victim deserved a lot of what he got. But we cannot confuse law schools interpretation of the law with the law itself. We don't know if the financial compensation was allowed by God in this case.

Thomas Aquinas taught that since Jesus did not say what we are not to resist evil we cannot pounce on his words and say they commanded absolute pacifism. He specified two ways of not resisting evil. The first is overlooking injuries when it is the right thing for the other person to do it say if they strike you in a rage and you know they will be sorry as soon as they have done it. The second is a vice for it is letting attackers do their worst (Question 1239, Radio Replies 2). Jesus must have meant the first for he would have been clearer had he meant the second and the Jews would have left him and not listened anymore had he dared to teach the second.