

## CLAIMS THAT JESUS CONTRADICTED THE JEWISH LAW IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT ARE UNFOUNDED

The Jewish Law, the Law of Moses, is tough to follow and people, especially Christians, have wanted to be free from its demands. But Jesus however said in the Sermon on the Mount that there would be no relaxing of any of it and in fact many of his own teachings are in the same no-nonsense judgemental tone as you find in the law. The threat he made that God will destroy body and spirit in Gehenna if you die in sin is worse than the threat of being stoned to death under the Law. Jesus affirmed the Law as the word of God.

Here are some attempts to get around his affirmation of the Law.

We are looking at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel.

“Jesus told us not to agree with the Law about hating enemies (Matthew 5:43). Thus he declared it wrong to follow the laws today. The New Testament is full of exhortations to love all people and be and peace with them. They also prove that the Law is dead.”

Jesus did not say that the Law said this. He was quoting a Jewish tradition of his own time for this text he recited commanding the hatred of enemies cannot be found in the Law. He asked people to renounce it. The Law is clear that if people are slain or stoned it is all their own fault meaning that they are killed because they have to be and not out of hate.

Jesus commanded turning the other cheek. That was not a contradiction of the Law for Jesus is discussing the abuse of the Law. Even Moses had to turn the other cheek at times.

Turn the other cheek means let reasonably minor offences go meaning you must keep retribution for big offences.

The Law commanded love of enemies (Leviticus 19:17,18).

The Law commanded brutal executions for those who committed certain sins such as adultery and failure to believe in the religion of the Hebrews.

How can the two commandments agree? How can we be expected to love enemies and then execute people cruelly? Some say that we are to love our enemies except the capital criminals. Others say that the capital criminals are not our enemies but God's. Others say that for anyone who hates God hates us by implication if we need him like he says. Perhaps the Law didn't realise this. Others say that it is somehow love to kill criminals in sadistic ways. We don't know. But if we believe that the Bible is God's word then we have to believe that the last could be right for there is no logic in claiming that the savage killings were love unless there is a God who has the power to make them for the best. The solution may be that God can hate people but we are not to for we don't know the enemy like he does for he sees the heart. We kill them not because we hate them but because he commanded it.

Anyone who says that Jesus abolished the Law to allow the love of enemies is wrong. It is blasphemous to suggest that God was hate before and is love now for he is in a timeless state where there is no changing. He would not be a God if he were untrustworthy.

“Matthew 5:31,32 has Jesus rejecting the rule of the Law permitting a man to give a certificate of divorce so the Law is not for us. Jesus taught that divorce was lawful when adultery had occurred. He said soon after that, that divorce for any other reason was against God's will.”

But Jesus already said that the Law was right so he can't be deliberately contradicting it. Some say, "If he was banning divorce except for adultery then he was not disputing the commandment he quoted for the Law permitted divorce." The law assumes divorce but it does not command it or permit it. He was simply clarifying the commandment not distorting or changing it. The real issue is not divorce but remarriage. Jesus could permit divorce but ban remarriage. So divorce in this sense ends the marriage but not in such a way that you can have a relationship with somebody new.

Jesus is saying that divorce is sinful when it is done with the possibility that the divorced one can marry again. The Law then could allow divorce without it being thought it can allow the man or woman to marry again. In other words it is really separation. Jesus is forbidding divorce that is intended to free the partners to marry again.

Matthew said that Jesus was opposed to a man having more than one wife (19:5,6). Christians may claim that the Torah gave polygamy its blessing. The Torah gives laws about polygamy but it does not say that it is right. It does permit it by implication for God could have forbidden it. But Jesus would have disagreed with this. Or he could have covered up the fact that its silence gives consent to polygamy. He said that the people were so stubborn that there were some sins Moses and by implication God couldn't condemn for they wanted to do them. So God had to keep silent to keep his people. That silence was one reason why Jesus said that the Law needed to be completed meaning by further teaching and clarification.

“Matthew's Jesus condemns oaths which the Law allowed.”

Jesus said it was evil to swear and that yes or no should do. All Jesus meant was that oaths should not be necessary for people should tell the truth. He did not forbid oaths. It may be objected that he intended to forbid oaths when he said that what went beyond yes or no was of the Devil. He meant evil in the sense of should not be necessary. Jesus did not say that oaths are wrong when they are necessary but that they should not be necessary for they would not be if we were honest. Oaths are necessary even if people only lie for grave reasons. See what Jesus is getting at? It is that lying is never ever justifiable.

“Matthew 5:40 says that if anybody wants to steal your tunic let him take your cloak too. The cloak was a very important garment and could mean life or death to the poor who were plentiful among the people Jesus was speaking to. They needed it to keep them warm at night. Thus Jesus was clearly abrogating the law of the Old Testament on self-defence”.

Nobody has ever taken Jesus literally when he said if anybody hits you on one cheek turn the other. Not even pacifist Christians do that. They say we should not hit back but try to get away which is not turning the other cheek. There are circumstances in which we should turn the other cheek just as there are circumstances as to when we should let somebody steal our cloak. We can survive without it if we try. And Jesus never said you should give away your cloak if you need it to live. The argument assumes that Jesus was making an iron law to cover all circumstances. He left it up to us to decide if we should let the cloak go.

“The Law decreed that priests were to dress a certain way. It encourages public prayers. Jesus was against this in Matthew 6 because he said that God prefers secrecy about such things.”

Jesus meant that it was wrong to do these things to show off. He would not have been preaching at all if he thought that it was wrong to be seen doing good. This is the Christian reply and that is all that I will say.

“Jesus forbade military service and political involvement when he said that a man cannot serve two masters for a clash would be inevitable so he should be the slave of God (Matthew 6:24). The Old Testament supported the military so the Law was done away”.

But the context was about God and money. Jesus was saying we cannot be committed to God and be equally committed to money. God must come first. These words do not prove that it is wrong to have money. All they say is that God must get all the commitment and if you are going to use money you must use it to serve God. You could change it to make it say that if you are going to be in the army then serve God through it but do not be attached to the job but to God.

“Matthew 7:1 has Jesus forbidding judgment while the Law sanctions it”.

He plainly said that he forbade it when unjust hypocritical standards were used. He was not against righteous judgment. He did not want people who were worse than you condemning or punishing you. The punishing is not bad in itself but it is wrong when it is done for the wrong reason and the only reason a hypocrite will punish you is because of spite.

“Jesus says that his law is a light burden (Matthew 11:30) which proves he cancelled the Jewish Law for it was a heavy burden.”

Not true. The heavy burden can become light when God helps you to carry it. Jesus was just saying that God has made the heavy load of the Law a lighter one not by watering it down but by being more cooperative.

“Jesus said according to Matthew that you must not call any man on earth your father but only him who is your Father in Heaven contradicting Leviticus 20:9.”

Jesus said this in Matthew 23 and the context was about leaders who would lead you away from God. If God is your Father in Heaven you will treat him as a Father by honouring your own father but only in as far as your father works for and commands the will of God.

“Jesus said that Christians are to ignore the decrees of the Torah because you don't put an old patch on new clothes

(Matthew 9).”

The context is about people complaining about Jesus’ disciples not doing any fasting while John the Baptist’s did. Jesus is not speaking about the Law at all but about man-made religious traditions. The Law is not even mentioned in the text.

The gospels say that Jesus died voluntarily on the cross to save us from sin which leads some to argue that Jesus wants us to practice suffering love and to take abuse from our enemies and implying an extreme endorsement of non-violence (page 34, Christ and Violence) which would be contrary to the attitude of the Law. It is different for a man who can rise from the dead to do things like that. Jesus had to die to atone but we don’t have to suffer for that though we do have to suffer for doing right.

Christians admit that Jesus never once broke the Law though some think the only time was when he told a man who wanted to bury his father to let the dead bury their own dead (page 32, The Metaphor of God Incarnate). But even this exception is a matter of dispute. Jesus believed he had an urgent mission. He needed the man to be part of it. The man doing this was more important than burying the dead. So it was not Jesus’ intention to break the Law. So Jesus was just urging the keeping of the bigger law because there was a conflict and both couldn’t be kept. But perhaps there was no conflict. The law that the dead must be buried didn’t require the man to bury his father if he had other relations to do it. Jesus believed that letting others keep the law of burial was better than breaking the Law that God and the kingdom of God comes first by telling the man he could bury his father. Under the circumstances, the man didn’t have this obligation.

It is thought that Jesus broke the Sabbath. Jesus when he let his followers pick food during the Sabbath replied that they were hungry and the Law wasn’t that strict for David was allowed to feed his men with bread forbidden to anyone but the priests. This was a protest against the overly strict application of the Sabbath not the Sabbath.

Matthew has not declared the Torah void. It deserves its reputation as a Gospel for Jewish Christians.

GOD A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED Keith Ward, OneWorld, Oxford, 2003 recognises that the Christian claim that the Jews were legalists caring only for the letter of the Law is false (page 79). It says the Jews rather than just worrying about legalistic outward obedience required good motives for this obedience just like Jesus taught that not killing was not enough and one needed to have a loving heart as well. Jesus was not contradicting the Law at all in the Sermon on the Mount (page 78).

For Jesus, the law of Moses is simply right and by fulfilling it he means finding a new way of respecting it. He made the law tougher. But what if it is true that Jesus abolished the ritual murders of certain "criminals" or "sinners" in the law? The law for example that adulterers must be murdered remains in force - it is just that God is going to murder them himself instead of asking us to do it. So there is no case for suggesting an abolition.