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MATTHEW 5,17:
WHAT DID JESUS SAY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE RABBIS?

The object of this study is a number of verses that have always been of particular interest to researchers, from the Gospel according to Matthew (5,17-20) with particular attention given to 5,17. I intend to study them from the perspective of Judaism in Jesus' time and how it influenced the following phases, both linguistically and culturally. I will then focus on what, hypothetically, may have been the original form of the phrase in v. 17.

I must start by saying that even amid the various solutions proposed, there is general agreement among critics that with respect to the Greek text, Matthew must have modified the original verses 18-20, (re)written verse 17 and entirely composed v. 20¹. Notwithstanding this, it is still possible to work on the current text in order to restore its original meaning.

The general context in which Jesus pronounces this phrase is during the "Sermon on the Mount" (Chapters 5-7); while in the specific with reference to the letter of the Scripture and the necessity to avoid any divergence from it (5,18-20).

We will now analyse the Greek text, focusing on v. 17. The sentence referring to his own coming (cf. 10,34) is used by Jesus as a *prokatálepsis* to avoid any possible misunderstanding of what will be said in vv. 21-47². The verb *katalýō* (καταλύω), also found in other verses by Matthew (24,2; 26,61; 27,40), usually indicates the destruction of the Temple, while in this particular case it refers to abolition, that is the annulment of a law that had hitherto been valid. Scholars have focused much more on the verb *plērōō* (πληρώω), in order to understand what "fulfillment" meant to Jesus. There are, in fact, about ten interpretations based on the Semitic word roots found in the original version, or on the use of the Greek verb³.

¹ Cf. J.P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel. A Redactional Study of Matt. 5:17-48*, Rome: Biblical Institute Press 1976, p. 57 ff.

² M. Munari, *Il compimento della Torah. Gesù e la Scrittura in Mt. 5,17-48*, Milan: Edizioni Terra Santa 2013, p. 23.

³ W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, ICC 1988-1997, p. 485-486; see also M. Munari, *Il compimento*, p. 14-15.

Among these: “to add” (cf. *Talmud Bavli*⁴ *Shab.* 116b); the translation from the Aramaic *qyym* (קייים), “to establish, to realize”; “to obey” (cf. Rm 8,4); the complete execution of the Law by Jesus in person; the fulfillment of the Law on Jesus’ part, bringing on a new one which transcends the former, completing it; the fulfillment of the Law by Jesus, revealing the original sense of God’s plan; “to fill”, both in a material and a metaphorical sense (Mt 13,48 and 3,15; 23,32); the fulfillment of Law on Christ’s part by making other people capable of observing it; Jesus’ fulfillment of Law by way of bringing about a new kind of justice, that is, the Spirit of love; eschatological fulfilment of a prophecy finally realized. When used with reference to the Law, the verb is used exclusively for Jesus in accordance with Messianic beliefs, the only one that can complete Law and Prophets. Indeed, the very idea of fulfilment, the verb *plēróo*, is recognized as one of the most important ideas found in Matthew⁵. Nonetheless, it is also relevant in the other synoptic works and in the Gospel according to John (19,24.28.36-37), as well as in Pauline literature, in which the fulfilment of the Law is identified with love thy neighbour (Rm 13,8 and 10).

MATTHEW AND JUDAISM

As known, it is commonly agreed that the Gospel of Matthew was written in the context of the Jewish Palestinian culture and had strong ties to the Old Testament. Scholars have also highlighted the elements of conflict with the Jewish chiefs of the time. Matthew, writing towards the end of the I c.⁶, gives testimony of the years of conflict with Pharisaic Judaism, upon which rabbinic Judaism was then established, the classic form of Judaism found until the Medieval Ages. The debate is whether Matthew’s criticism comes from within tradition or if he already sees himself as external to Judaism, and the role assigned to the Law is an important element that may shed new light on the problem⁷.

⁴ From here onwards TB; with TY we intend the Jerusalem or the Palestinian Talmud.

⁵ Cf. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT), Grand Rapids–Cambridge: Eerdmans 2007, p. 10-12.

⁶ However, scholars such as J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. A commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC), Grand Rapids–Cambridge: Eerdmans 2005, p. 16, hypothesized the composition of the text before 70, rejecting the idea of a later writing.

⁷ Cf. É. Cuvillier, *Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel. Matthew and the First Century Judaism: a Contribution to the Debate*, NTS 55 (2009), p. 144-159 (in particular p. 149-150). Moreover, leaving apart the commentaries, see on this issue B. Corsani, *La posizione di Gesù di fronte alla legge secondo il Vangelo di Matteo e l’interpretazione di Mt 5,17-20*, RBR 3 (1968), p. 193-230; U. Luz, *Die Erfüllung des Gesetzes bei Matthäus (Mt 5,17-20)*, ZThK 75 (1978), p. 398-435. For the anti-Christian use, on Jewish part, of Mt 5,17 see M. Munari, *Il compimento*, p. 24, n. 71.

It is also well known that patristic sources bear witness to the existence of an original Semitic version of the Gospel of Matthew: Papias of Hierapolis (in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3,39,16), the most ancient author to report the news (early II c.), affirms that Matthew composed the “sayings” (*lógia*) in Hebrew, and that they were to be interpreted or translated later according to the capacity of each commentator. Later similar news was given by Girolamus (*Vir. Ill.* 3), who also spoke of a Hebrew version stored in the library founded by Pamphilus of Caesarea – and then by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Eusebius. There is also, among contemporary scholars, the hypothesis that the origin of the Gospel might have been a series of sayings and events regarding the life of Jesus, composed in Hebrew or Aramaic by the apostle Matthew, in compliance with what is commonly indicated as source Q⁸.

By further analyzing its Judaic context we may be able to better understand the text. As far as structure is concerned, we have already seen how vv. 17-20, linked to the preceding verses, contain the general principles through which subsequent particular cases can be examined⁹. This kind of structure, which by way of a *kelal* – a general foreword anticipates the dissertation, has been recognized as typically rabbinic¹⁰. Our hypothesis of work is that Jesus was thinking and speaking as a rabbi¹¹ addressing other rabbis.

The negative exhortation with which he opens his speech, as aforesaid, seems to be in clarification and in answer to possible objection. There are two main addressees: his followers, to whom he has already addressed in previous speeches, and the scribes and Pharisees mentioned at the end of the text as a basis for tackling the question of entrance to the Kingdom. Jesus assures them that he has no intention of abolishing “Law and Prophets”. We shall now try to set the phrase within the Jewish cultural context. For this purpose I will illustrate some Rabbinic texts which bear a strong resemblance to these verses in Matthew. When possible, they will date from the same context as the Gospel. Otherwise, it must be kept in mind that oral materials often have a much older origin than the moment when they were put down in writing and that a major part of them are discussions about older texts from the Bible period or the first centuries.

⁸ For discussion on this issue see M. Munari, *Il compimento*, p. 8-9.

⁹ D.C. Allison, *The Structure of the Sermon of the Mount*, JBL 106 (1987), p. 423-445, particularly p. 432.

¹⁰ For other links between the structure of Matthew and rabbinic literature see L.M. Wills, *Scribal Methods in Matthew and Mishnah Abot*, CBQ 63 (2001), p. 241-257.

¹¹ On Jesus as rabbi in the NT see A.J. Köstenberger, *Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel*, BBR 8 (1998), p. 97-128; B.H. Young, ‘Save the adulteress!’. *Ancient Jewish Responsa in the Gospels?*, NTS 41 (1995), p. 59-70.

The expression “Law and Prophets” is usually intended as the complex body of the Scripture¹², composed of two fundamental parts: the content (the norms), and the message of the prophets interpreted as anticipation. This duo, already present in the Old Testament (2 Macc 15,9; 4 Macc 18,10; Sir P 1,1.8-9) also appears elsewhere in the New Testament (in Mt also in 7,12, 11,13 and 22,40; Lc 16,16.29, 24,44; Jhn1,45; Ac 13,15, 24,14, 28,23; Rm 3,21) and in Qumran (CD 5,21-6,1; 1QS 1,3, 8,15-16; 4Q504 f 12 R iii11-13)¹³.

Although less abundant, rabbinic literature also gives us texts of interest, for instance in *Mishnah Megillah* 3,1: “If the townspeople sell the village square they must use the proceeds to purchase a synagogue. If they sell a synagogue they purchase with the proceeds an ark. If they sell an ark they purchase with the proceeds Torah covers. If they sell Torah covers they purchase with the proceeds scrolls of Scripture. If they sell scrolls of Scripture they purchase with the proceeds a Torah scroll. However, if they sold a Torah scroll they may not purchase scrolls of Scripture. Scrolls of Scripture they may not purchase Torah covers...”

In this excerpt one notices the union of the Torah and the books, which may be the Prophets’ or those we call “the Writings”. In Chapter 4,3, where instructions are given for the reading during the Shabbat it is said: “The Shema may not be repeated, nor may any one go before the ark, nor may priests raise their hands [to say the priest’s blessing], nor may they read in the Torah, nor read a section from the Prophets”. Similarly in *Rosh hashana* 4,6: “begin with Torah and end with a prophet”.

Although other parallelisms can be made, here one can already notice the liturgical affirmation of the association between excerpts of the Torah and the Prophets. This can also be found at the very beginning of one of the fundamental texts of rabbinic Judaism, *Pirque Avot*. Here it is possible to read that Moses received the Law on Sinai, and delivered it to Joshua, Joshua in turn handed it down to the Elders, from the Elders it descended to the prophets, and each of them delivered it to his successor until it met the men of the great assembly. Therefore, albeit the union of Law and Prophets is not very frequent, also given the fact that attention is almost exclusively focused on the Torah, its study and interpretation, as the only possible model of behaviour, it does seem however to have its own importance within the synagogal and liturgical context.

It is also important to consider that, in some texts, those that Christians normally consider writings are considered as prophets, such as *TB Berakot* 5a: “What is the meaning of what is written: «Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tables of stone, with the law and commandments, which I have written for their instruction (Ex 24,12)». «The Tables» are the ten commandments,

¹² P. Beauchamp, *Lecture christique de l’Ancient Testament*, Bib 81 (2000), p. 107, speaks of “formulas totalisantes”.

¹³ Cf. M. Munari, *Il compimento*, pp. 27-28, n. 85.

«Torah» is the Miqra (Bible), «norms» are the Mishnah, «that I wrote» the prophets and agiographers, «for their instruction» is the Talmud. It is understood that all those were given to Moses on the Sinai” (see also *TB Megillah* 27a).

That’s not all. Going on with his speech, Jesus reassures and affirms that not even a single letter will be eliminated from Scripture. The idea of something being inviolable, a general characteristic of those texts that are of a founding nature in any religious tradition, also exists in rabbinic literature in a very similar way to that of Jesus’s. See for instance *TB Erubim* 13a, whose protagonists are the famous Ishmael and R. Meir: R. Yehudah said, quoting R. Samuel, that learnt it from R. Meir: “When I was a student of R. Aqiba, I used to put sulphate in my ink and he said nothing. When I went to R. Ishmael, he said to me: «My son, what is your activity?». I replied: «I am a scribe». And he again: «My son, be accurate in your work, for it is a heavenly work; for if you omit one letter alone or add only one letter, the result would be your having destroyed the whole universe”.

Jewish commentators provide a great number of examples of how the exchange of similar letters or the omission of one can profoundly change the meaning of a word and by doing so, the whole Scripture, that could also result in a tremendous error within the mystic-qabbalistic reflection on the nature of the very letters. This idea can also be found in the words of Jesus: “For truly I say to you, until Heaven and Earth pass away, not an iota, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until all is accomplished”.

There is another interesting text related to this particular theme in *TY Sanhedrin* 2,6, which deals with God’s rejection of Salomon for having multiplied his wives. The story: “Who was his accuser? Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Levi, said: «The yud that is found in the word yrbh [multiply] was for him an allegation». Rabbi Shimeon, son of Yohai, taught: «The book of Deuteronomy rose and bowed in front of the Holy One», blessed be He, saying before Him: «Lord of the universe, you wrote in your Torah that any pact abolished in part is abolished in its entire form. Well, Solomon wants to cancel the yud from me». The Holy One said unto him: «Solomon and a thousand like him will be annihilated, but there is not a single word that from you will be abolished”.

One notes the emphasis on the impossibility of modifying any part of Scripture, even the slightest; the yud in this text is nothing but a iota in the Gospel (cf. *TB Sanh* 90a, *Ex Rab* 6,1, *Lev Rab* 19,2).

Jesus’s speaking about the preservation of all the letters of the Torah (v. 18) serves Him as a preamble to the fact that all the norms must be respected and taught, even the most minor: whoever does not do this will be the smallest in the Kingdom, whereas, whoever does will be considered great. Such ideas are also present in rabbinic Judaism. In *Pirqe Avot* 4:2 Ben Azzai exhorts all to follow the most minor norms as much so as the most important: it is in fact believed that people who transgress on the slightest of norms will tend to do so on the more important ones (see also *Sifré Deut.* 187). Likewise the gravity of making others incur in a sin, as in *TB Sanhedrin* 55a: “If in the case of trees, which neither eat

nor drink nor smell, the Torah decreed that they should be burnt and destroyed [Dt 12,3], because they had proved a stumbling block: how much more so [must thou destroy him] who seduces his neighbour from the path of life to that of death [...] He who causes his neighbour to fulfill a precept is regarded by Scripture as though he had done it himself" (ibidem 99b).

THE FULFILMENT AND THE WORDS OF JESUS

Having seen how the evangelist puts Jesus's phrase, by way of both the language used and the content, in a Judaic context, we can now examine v. 17 in a more detailed manner.

First of all, there are passages found in rabbinic literature that seem to quote Matthew, and this is quite rare¹⁴. The most famous of which is *TB Shabbath* 116ab / *Tosefta SaBbath* XIII, 5¹⁵. In this passage, Imma Shalom and R. Gamaliel want to demonstrate a Christian philosopher's corruptibility when dealing with a hereditary issue. After having received a golden lamp from the woman, he affirms that the daughter too had the right to the same. Gamaliel protested saying that this was against the Law and the philosopher said: "Since the day that you were exiled from your land the Law of Moses has been taken and the law of the Gospel given". The following day, Gamaliel gave him a donkey, and the philosopher says to have gone to the end of the *guilyonim*, that is the Gospel (*euaggélion*), and have found the contrary norm through the quotation: "I did not come to subtract from the Law of Moses, but¹⁶ to add to the Law of Moses". Not only have various scholars pointed out the presence of the same phrase in Mt 5,17, but they also underline the presence of allusions and additions to Mt 5,14-17 in the talmudic passage, in particular to the lamp and the ass (in Aramaic referring to the Gospel's bushel, *homer* changed into *hamor*). Others, on the contrary, think that *TB Shab* 116b is just a parody of

¹⁴ Cf. M. Munari, S. Lègasse, *Mt. 5, 17 et la prétendue tradition paracanonique*, in: J. Zmijewski, E. Nellessen (ed.), *Begegnung mit dem Wort. Festschrift für Heinrich Zimmermann* (BBB 53), Bonn: Hanstein 1980, p. 11-21, affirms that similar phrases in patristic and rabbinic sources arrive from the evangelical excerpt.

¹⁵ G. Michelini, *Matteo. Introduzione, traduzione e commento* (NVBTA 37), Milano: Edizioni San Paolo 2013, p. 102, highlights the importance and the rarity of such a quotation, to which he places side by side the present one in the so called *Vangelo ebraico di Matteo*. On the dating and interpretation of the talmudic text see T. Murcia, *Rabban Gamaliel, Imma Shalom et le philosophe: une citation des évangiles dans le Talmud? – Date et enjeux de B. Shabbat 116b*, REJ 169 (2010), No. 3, p. 313-348; D. Jaffé, *Les sages du Talmud et l'Évangile selon Matthieu: dans quelle mesure l'Évangile selon Matthieu était-il connu des tannaïm?*, RHR 226 (2009), No. 4, p. 583-611.

¹⁶ Reading אָלס.

the Syrian text of the Gospel used in the Church of Babilonia¹⁷. What interests us here is that this story in the Talmud demonstrates how the important debate of the fundamental issue of the relationship between Christianity and the Jewish Torah has been going on since the first centuries.

It is now time to analyse the expression at the base of this study, that is, Jesus stating that he has come not to abolish, but to give the Law fulfilment. Having already mentioned the most important hypotheses as to the interpretation of the expression, starting with the Greek text or possible Semitic antecedents, we will now continue in line with the Jewish tradition.

The fulfilment of the Torah is a fundamental idea of rabbinic Judaism, the same that prevailed in the very years in which the Gospel was written. R. Ishmael, a very important teacher who lived towards the end of I c., sustained that the divine word, utterly transcendent, went through a sort of contraction and emptying¹⁸ of itself at the moment it became a human language. A concept also found in Paul's (Fil, 2:7) *kénosis* (κένωσις). The oral Law, that also came from the Sinai, together with and in exegesis of the Scripture, functioned as a way to complete the Scripture by detecting the multiple meanings hidden to the limited capacity of the human language. According to rabbinic interpretation, the language of Torah presents a peculiar series of characteristics: it is human because it speaks to humans, but it is of divine origin because it is the instrument through which God manifests himself¹⁹. This means that the interpreter or reader himself, who holds an even greater almost unlimited sense of the meaning, collaborates in the fulfilment of a complex sense that has to be simplified to acquire a human communicative code. Hillel argued that any possible flaw in the system of the Law could be filled²⁰ by applying coherent exegetical systems, that he codified in the famous seven rules²¹ and the *Mishnah* highlights (*Hag* 1,8) that "there is little Scripture for many laws", some of which "hover in the air" or "are like mountains hanging by a string", because they have

¹⁷ V. H.M. Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (TSAJ 139), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011, p. 161.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Perani, *L'interpretazione della Bibbia presso i rabbi. Aspetti dell'ermeneutica rabbinica*, RiBi 45 (1997), p. 329-346.

¹⁹ W. Sibley Towner, *Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look*, HUCA 53 (1982), p. 101-135, in particular 128, reminds that the hermeneutical principle "The Torah speaks in the language of people" (cfr. *TB Ber* 31b) was associated with R. Ishmael. This was a cause of controversy with his contemporary R. Akiba, for whom the language of Torah differs from human language in that all the apparent redundancies etc. are clues to deeper meanings.

²⁰ D. Daube, *Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric*, HUCA 22 (1949), p. 239-264, in particular p. 247.

²¹ About his *middot* see W. Sibley Towner, *Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel*.

nothing (in the Torah) to depend upon. On this point Manns²² asserts: “Written Law traces the main lines of legislation: the oral one has only to complete it”²³.

Taking into consideration what has been determined so far, we may suppose that by completion of the Law Jesus expressed himself in the Jewish or rabbinic sense: that is, to give (divine) fullness of meaning to what (human) writing cannot fathom²⁴. This is justified by the fact that the following sentence of Jesus remains grounded in Scripture and exegetical methodology, especially when he affirms that he does not want to change a single letter. This may be understood as a declaration of the overall validity of the Law, but it may also be considered as an interpretation that adds further meaning without altering the text. This does not mean that Jesus will limit himself to the role of rabbi, teacher or exegete, since it is clearly said in rabbinic literature that study without practice is not enough. Therefore, in accord with the conceptual scheme of oral Law, fulfilment does not exclude the possibility that Jesus sees in his own life and death the completion of the Law itself. On the contrary, it seems to imply it.

The necessity of fulfilment was linked to a typical characteristic of Jewish exegesis, that is, the fact that the text must not be altered at all, as specified previously. As confirmed in the following text from *TB Sota* 33b: R. Eliezer, R. Jose’s son, said: “With this issue I demonstrated the falseness of Samaritan books [or scribes]. I said unto them: you have falsified your Torah but you have obtained nothing. You say that therebintians of More are Sichem and we also admit that the therebintias of More are Sichem; however, while we understood this through analogical deduction, how have you done this?”. The excerpt indicates a polemic towards Samaritans, since they solved the difficulties of their Pentateuch by modifying and amending its text. The rabbinic tradition deemed this falsification and

²² F. Manns, *Leggere la Mišnah*, translation of the French original *Pour lire la Mishna*, Jerusalem 1987, Brescia: G. Busi, Paideia 1987, p. 152.

²³ The idea of fulfilment transcends the boundaries of the Jewish world. In fact, in Cicero’s *De inv* I, 17, the author affirms that “what is not written can be found in what is written”. Greek philologists invented the concept of *anaplerosis*, for instance the *scholium* in Od 4,248 so defines this poem in comparison to the Iliad. Cf. A. Barchiesi, *La traccia del modello*, Pisa: Giardini 1984, p. 94.

²⁴ M. Grilli, *Quale rapporto tra i due Testamenti?*, Bologna: EDB 2007, p. 134-135, thinks that *plērōō* in this verse means to reveal the full meaning Torah had in the original design of God, and quotes (about 1 Ki 1,14) M. Limbeck, *Das Gesetz im Alten und Neuen Testament*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1997, p. 130. Also M. Vahrenhorst, “*Ihr sollt überhaupt nicht schwören*”. *Matthäus im halachischen Diskurs*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 2002, p. 236-243, thinks the verb indicates the role men have in interpreting and update the Law (he quotes, for example, *Sif Dev.* 336, *BerR* 1,14). B. Chilton, J. Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament*, London–New York: Rutledge 1995, p. 134-135, say that Jesus’ Torah meets the challenge of Jewish sages to themselves, that is not only to receive the Torah, but to repeat, to teach and to amplify it (as for Neusner, see Also *Disputa imaginaria tra un rabbino e Gesù*, Italian ed. by F. Bianchi, Casale Monferrato: Piemme 1996, p. 38-43).

recurred to other solutions, in this case analogical deduction (*gezerah shawah*, the second rule of Hillel).

However, the situation is far more complex because not only a letter of a text was considered unamendable, but also any cancellations or additions. A typical characteristic of rabbinic literature, in particular the halakic one, is the conservation of those norms that, exceeded by other reformist interpretations, ended up expressing the opinion of a minority. In fact, the rejected rules could not be eliminated but only reduced in importance and, though no longer in use, continued to be preserved, transmitted and studied.

On the assumption that “to complete the Law” means to restore meaning lost in human language by way of the oral Law and the behaviour thus originated, then further study of the Semitic *lexeis* to which Jesus or the evangelist refer, may take us further in our research, though Luz considers it rash to restore a Semitic original²⁵. With respect to “abolish”, for the Greek *katalýo*, various hypothesis have been made about the original Aramaic verb²⁶. One resulted in the verb *šary* (שרי) “to destroy”, also employed in the Syrian and Aramaic Palestinian translations of Matthew. Dalman, on the other hand²⁷, proposed *bathel* (בטל) and *qym* for *plēróo*; Munari²⁸ thought of *satar* (סתר), “to destroy”, but also of “to contradict somebody else’s arguments” that in Esd 5,12 is translated with *katalýo*.

Plēróo is more complex. Munari²⁹ listed and analysed in depth relevant proposals, taking into consideration verbs related to fulfilment in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac, in particular: *šalem*, *qwm* and *male*’ מלא קום שלם. Without going into detail here, *qwm*, with Torah as the direct object, can be considered to mean “to fulfill, to put into practice” more than “to complete”; with the word “prophecy”, it indicates its fulfilment. *Male*’ would be the closest linguistic parallel in Greek, that is the most faithful translation; *šalem* may refer to the ripeness of time, or of a prophecy or Scripture itself, or the execution of a command and, according to Munari, may be one of the possible candidates; he, however, observes that there are not convincing elements for any of the proposed verbs.

In my opinion, the reconstruction of the Semitic original cannot be done without acknowledging the use of rhetorical construction in that period. In fact, on the one hand it is based on parallelism in the repetition of the expression “I came”, and on the other hand on antithesis: “not for... but...”. Such antithesis is suitable for good word play, probably through the repetition of the same verb with two opposite

²⁵ U. Luz, *El evangelio según San Mateo*, Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme 2010, p. 370 ff.

²⁶ Cf. M. Munari, *Il compimento*, p. 26.

²⁷ G. Dalman, *Jesus Jeschua. Die drei Sprachen Jesu. Jesus in der Synagoge, auf dem Berge, bei Passahmahl, am Kreuz*, Leipzig: Hinrichs 1922, p. 53.

²⁸ M. Munari, *Il compimento*, p. 27.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 31 f.

meanings. In the following lines we will verify the hypothesis of having found that verb with a solution which, as far as I know, has never been previously proposed³⁰.

Besides the exegetical concept, the word “fulfilment” in rabbinic literature ended up indicating a precise corpus of laws or scholars’ opinions. Obviously we are talking about the *gemarah*, the comment to *Mishnah*, that together form the *Talmud*. As known, it is a root, present in both Hebrew and Aramaic, that means “to complete”, but it also means to “learn and teach” and “decide”, as we will see. In this sense, the discussion reported would be the completion of the oral Law present in the *Mishnah*. Other scholars, recurring to one of the meanings of the root *gmr* as documented in rabbinic literature, intend the *gemarah* as a definitive decision, often through a vote ending the very discussion³¹.

From a lexical and semantic point of view, in Semitic languages the root *gmr* is well documented and, from the basic meaning of “come” or “bring to an end”, it developed into the meaning of “destruction” (e.g. *mgrm* in Phoenician means “destruction”), and “to take revenge” (as in Ugaritic and, as we will see, perhaps also in Hebrew). The main meanings in later periods, contemporary to Jesus’ lifetime or later, are reported in dictionaries (e.g. Jastrow): “to finish”, “to bring to an end”, “to conclude”, that is “to make a decision”; “to destroy”, “to consume” (especially in the intensive conjugation); “to terminate”, “to cease” (intr.); “to know well”, “to learn”; “to teach orally”.

These are well documented in sources contemporary to or a little later than the events of the Gospels. For instance, the sense of “to abolish”, “to eliminate” can be found in the *Testament of Levi* of the Genizah of Cairo (D 18), where the verb is employed in the phrase “I eliminated those who commit violence”, or in the *Targum* in Job 1,16 and 22,20 or the Sal 109,23. In the Syriac version of Rm 2,27, in whose Greek text there is *τελέω*, *gmr* has the direct object “the Law” meaning its entire fulfilment.

The Christian liturgic texts in Syriac also document the two meanings of “to perfect” and “to consume”³². In some of them you can find an explicit connection between the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit and fire in reference to the Pentecostal fire; they use the verb *gmar*, that in Syriac means “to perfect”, to describe the effect of the Spirit’s descent on the Eucharistic offering. Furthermore the verb *gmar* is used in *Targum* 2 Cr 7,1 to describe the descent of fire from the sky on Solomon’s

³⁰ Only Adam Clarke, in his XIX c. commentary, wrote (*ad l.*). “It is worthy of observation, that the word גמר *gamar*, among the rabbis, signifies not only to fulfil, but also to teach; and, consequently, we may infer that our Lord intimated that the law and the prophets were still to be taught or inculcated by him and his disciples”; he doesn’t state explicitly that גמר underlies *plērōo* and draws conclusions far different from what I’m going to say.

³¹ J. Kaplan, *The Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud*, New York: Bloch 1933, p. 196-197.

³² S. Brock, *Fire from Heaven: from Abel’s Sacrifice to the Eucharist. A theme in Syriac Christianity, now in Fire from Heaven. Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (GB), Burlington: Ashgate, Aldershot 2006, p. 237-238.

offering. Thus, a semantic passage from “to consume” to “to perfect”³³ can be noted in ancient Syriac.

In the Hebrew Bible the verb was only employed five times and always in the Psalms, with the basic meaning of “to finish” or “to complete”; however, it can also indicate an abrupt and permanent interruption of what existed before. The Psalm 12,2 (and cf. 77,9) laments the disappearance of pious men among the sons of men; in 7,10 there is a prayer that the evil of sinners shall end³⁴; in 57,3 (and cf. 138,8) God is praised as He who brings to an accomplishment (without direct object³⁵.)

In the *Mishnah* the verb גמר appears a little less than two hundred times with the previously mentioned meanings. It is very often found when quotations of biblical passages are not complete, just like our “et cetera”; again, it is the same for those verbal phrases that indicate the ending of a work, a process, a prayer, a benediction and similar (e.g. *Ber* 3,2, *BabaM* 7,2, *Yom* 5,5); there is also a verbal phrase in which a passive and an active form of the verb are joined to intend a totally accomplished process (e.g. *Hal* 3,4); it can also indicate the sexual act as the completion of the female organ that had been left “bare” or “empty” (ערה, *Yebam* 6,1) by the man; the passive participle when found together with a noun indicates that the case in point constitutes an exact example of what is expressed by the noun (e.g. *Git* 5,8, an “ascertained theft”). Uses in the Talmud are analogous to these. From a semantic point of view, the verb *gmr* may without doubt be the one used by Jesus to indicate both the abolition and the fulfilment of the Law.

We can take a closer look at other relevant passages. In *Mishna Yadayim* 3,5 the passage refers to scrolls that render the hands impure (if touched). Then there is a passage about their content and the different opinions of the scholars are reported about whether or not the Qohelet and the Song of Songs make the readers impure. At the end of the discussion the opinion of Yochanan, son of Shmua, is reported through the words of Ben Azzai: *Yes, there was a divergence in opinions*, (חלק) *and yes, they composed it* (גמר). It is evident here, that the verb takes on the meaning of precisely defining the sense of an excerpt or an open issue, in order to clarify what is not totally complete in the Scripture or in the tradition (also see, in the same treaty, 4,1, and 4,3, the verbal phrase “they voted and decided”). It should be recalled that,

³³ On “to consume” there is the example of the *Peshitta* of Is 10,18; moreover, in the *Peshitta* of the *Pentateuch* the manuscript 5b1 of 5 c. has four times *gmar* with this meaning, while in the other manuscripts it has been substituted with *šallem* (for instance Gen 24,45).

³⁴ M. Dahood, *The Root gmr in the Psalms*, ThS 14 (1953), p. 595-597, accepting the idea of the closeness between *gmr* with *gml* roots, proposes an analogous semantic evolution in order to give a better meaning to the Psalms, where it is documented. In particular, for Psalm 7, the scholar proposes the amendment of *yigmor* by omitting the beginning *y* – , which was added by dittography of the final letter of the preceding word. This would obtain a text that suits the general sense of the Psalm: “Vindicate the violence of the wicked”.

³⁵ On the basis of the preceding note, Dahood proposes to translate here with “vindicator”, as Girolamus does in the *Vulgata*.

according to scholars like Flusser who proposes the root *qwm* קוּם as the basis of *plērōo* in the Gospel, the meaning of Mt 5,17 (which can also be compared to Rm 23,31), is actually that of establishing the real meaning of the Torah³⁶.

One can also compare *TB Shabbat* 63a in which the root has the meaning of “to learn” and is opposite *sbr* סָבַר, in the following phrase: “a man should first learn the tradition, and just then infer with logic deductions” (with these nouns the same opposites are found in *TB AbZar* 19a, *Yoma* 33a, *Gitt* 6b *Bbat* 77a; see also *Eruvim* 13a); or *TB Hull* 45b, in which R. Yehuda, talking of the spine and showing his interlocutor the position of nerve terminations, says: *Come and I will teach you the traditional Law, or a tradition*. Here there is the internal object of the same verb *gamar*; that is, finally, the *gemarah*.

In *TB Pesa* 87b, beginning with Hosea’s wife’s name Gomer, several different explanations are given as to the root *gmr*. In particular, the one proposed by R. Yehuda deserves attention: “for they tried to destroy (le gammer) the well being of Israel at the time”. Notice how, here in its intensive conjugation, the verb that can indicate fulfilment, a final decision or perfection, can also be used for destruction and annihilation.

Some uses of the noun *gemarah* גְמָרָה should also be highlighted. In *TB Bmets* 33ab it is employed in opposition to the *Mishnah* distinguishing between oral studies and written work; there is in fact a sort of classification, in increasing merit, of those who just study the Bible, those who study the *Mishnah* and those who entirely dedicate themselves to the *gemarah*, the most worthy.

Another excerpt of great interest is the very well known *TB Shabb* 31a. Here two very different characters are compared. Shammai, who is defined impatient, and Hillel, the opposite, who is an example of mildness. Among the anecdotes reported, there is one about a pagan banished by Shammai for having asked him to teach him all of the Torah while he stood on one leg. Appearing before Hillel with the request of becoming a proselyte, this is the master’s famous reply: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and fulfill it”. Sticking to Matthew’s Gospel, the golden rule appears in 7,12 where Jesus reiterates that it is all written in the Law and the Prophets. Well, in the talmudic text Hillel, dismissing the proselyte, uses the imperative form of the verb *gamar*, usually rendered with “learn it”, a possible meaning of the verb, as previously explained. However, on the basis of what we are saying, the literal translation of “to fulfill” can be left: the heart of the Law is circumscribed and defined: those who want to convert must respect that golden core (which encloses all of the Law itself) and to fulfill it.

However, the most interesting parallel is probably the comment (*peshet*) on Habakkuk, recovered in Qumran (1QpHab), a text in which critics have found ties

³⁶ D. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, Jerusalem: Magness Press 1988, p. 495.

to Matthew's biblical quotations³⁷. In the comment of Hab 2,24 we find: "God said to Habakkuk to write the things to come upon the last generation but he did not reveal to him the completeness of time. And what he said (Hab 2,2): «to let it be read»: its interpretation refers to the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God has shown all the mysteries of the words unto his servants, the prophets. (Hab 2,3): «the vision has an end; it is about the end and it won't lie». This is interpreted: the last period will last and it will go further than what The prophets announced, because the mysteries of God are wonderful" (1QpHab 7,18). The first thing one notes is an eschatological waiting expressed by the idea that the community of Essenes is living its final period, a real *praeparatio essenica* in anticipation of the *praeparatio evangelica*³⁸: this sense of waiting is also present in our Mt 5,18-19. Furthermore one notes how the prophets are denied the revelation of the time of fulfilment and of the mysteries, knowledge of which are exclusively reserved for the Master of Righteousness. The expression in Hebrew indicating the "ripeness of time" is גמר הקיץ *gmr hqz*, which demonstrates how *gmr* indicates an eschatological fulfilment (of knowledge) which can be achieved only by some, beginning with the prophets, but not only by them.

In conclusion, if our hypothesis is correct then Jesus chose word play to confirm that to him the whole Torah was still valid and that he did not have the least intention of abolishing anything therein: every single letter had a meaning for its own and in the unchangeable system of letters and words in the Bible. In order to do this he used a root that let him converse with and confront his interlocutors. In fact, this would explain the reference to scribes and Pharisees in v. 20: higher justice was tied to the proper fulfilment of the Torah. This implied the comprehension of what was meant, that which is obscured by human language, possibly obtainable orally, and finally, its implementation. To *gamar* the Law signified to explain every detail of the Scripture, finding all those meanings the word of God lost becoming human word and actualizing it for contemporary men. Thus, people were allowed to respect old and new *mitzwot* and to teach them correctly and this was what the Pharisees too were doing by oral law; of course Jesus and the Pharisees could have different ideas about the second meanings and the new *mitzwot*, as there wasn't always agreement among the tannaim themselves. To give Torah its full meaning was the same as to fully respect it: exegesis, as usual in Judaism, was *praxis*. Jesus shared this view, but he was a messianic Jew and looked at both human and messianic fulfilment of the Law: as the Messiah, after having fully interpreted the Torah, with his life, *praxis*, death and resurrection he could give it its messianic fulfilment.

³⁷ K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1968.

³⁸ V. F. Garcia Martinez, J. Trebolle Barrera, *Gli uomini di Qumran*, Italian ed. by A. Catastini, Brescia: Paideia 1996, p. 117.

If all this is true, Jesus would have said to have come “*lo’legammer ’aval ligmor hattorah*”, “not to abolish, but to give the Torah its full meaning”.

Matthew 5,17:
What Did Jesus Say in Dialogue with the Rabbis?

Summary

Mt 5,17-20 can be fully understood in the context of the hermeneutic work of the Jewish rabbis; the words used by Jesus refer to their exegetical methods and to the idea that the Torah cannot be modified. Jesus’ position anticipates one of the main elements of rabbinic Judaism. Given this context, this paper offers a new hypothesis about the original Aramaic version of Jesus’ words on the Torah’s fulfilment, in a time when the Pharisee’s position was starting to impose the importance of oral tradition alongside the written word of God. Using the root *gmr* Jesus enters into dialogue with contemporary Judaism, putting forward his own idea of fulfilment.

Keywords: Matthew, *gamar*, fulfilment, rabbinic Judaism.

Mt 5,17:
Was sagte Jesus im Dialog mit den Pharisäern?

Zusammenfassung

Mt 5,17-20 kann richtig verstanden werden im Kontext der Hermeneutik von jüdischen Rabbinen. Worte, die von JesuS verwendet wurden, beziehen sich auf deren exegetische Methoden sowie auf die Idee, dass die Thora nicht verändert werden darf. Die Haltung Jesu antizipiert eines der wichtigsten Elemente des rabbinischen Judentums. In diesem Kontext wird im folgenden Artikel eine neue Hypothese bezüglich der aramäischen Version der Worte Jesu über die Erfüllung der Thora vorgeschlagen. Es ist eine Zeit, in der die Haltung der Pharisäer hinsichtlich der Überlegenheit der mündlichen Tradition über das geschriebene Wort Gottes, zu überwiegen beginnt. Indem er die Wurzel *gmr* verwendet, tritt Jesus in einen Dialog mit dem gegenwärtigen Judentum und führt sein eigenes Verständnis der Erfüllung der Thora ein.

Schlüsselworte: Matthäusevangelium, *gamar*, Erfüllung, rabbinischer Judentum.

Mt 5,17:
Co Jezus powiedział w dialogu z faryzeuszami?

Streszczenie

Mt 5,17-20 może być prawidłowo rozumiany w kontekście hermeneutyki żydowskich rabinów. Słowa użyte przez Jezusa odnoszą się do ich metod egzegetycznych oraz idei, że Tora nie może być zmieniona. Postawa Jezusa antycypuje jeden z najważniejszych elementów rabinicznego judaizmu. Zakładając ten kontekst, w niniejszym artykule zaproponowano nową hipotezę na temat aramejskiej wersji słów Jezusa o wypełnieniu Tory w czasie, gdy pozycja faryzeuszy utrzymująca wyższość tradycji ustnej nad spisanim słowem Boga zaczynała dominować. Używając rdzenia *gmr*, Jezus wchodzi w dialog ze współczesnym Mu Judaizmem, wprowadzając swoje własne rozumienie wypełnienia Tory.

Słowa kluczowe: Ewangelia Mateusza, *gamar*, wypełnienie, judaizm rabiniczny.

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