

**January 6 2008**  
**Theophany**

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Among the problems through which the apostolic congregations had to find their way, few were as difficult as the connection between the Gospel and the Torah. This question required not only a theological answer, but also practical guidance of a pastoral kind. That is to say, early Christians needed to know, not only how Jesus related to the Law, but also how, in practice, they themselves were related to Judaism. In considerable measure the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul were devoted to this double question.

The same twofold problem was addressed in the Gospel of Matthew. For Matthew the question of how the Gospel and the Torah were related was inseparable from the problem of how the Christians were related to Jews. Matthew did not answer this question by simply distinguishing between the Gospel and the Law. He did not say that Christians have the Gospel, while Jews are stuck with the Law.

This rather simple answer, in Matthew's eyes, would have implied a radical discontinuity in the history of salvation. Instead of "fulfilling" the Law and the Prophets, Jesus would simply have abrogated them. There would be no necessary, theological connection between the New Testament and the Old, and Christians would be rootless with respect to history.

Beginning his treatment of this question, Matthew cited the saying of Jesus, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (5: 17). And in what sense did Jesus "fulfill" the Law and the Prophets? According to Matthew this "fulfillment" had to do with the teaching of Jesus--the Gospel--as it related to the Torah. And how was the Gospel related to the Torah? By a kind of radical "excess": "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness *exceeds* the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5: 20).

Matthew then illustrated this "excess" by a series of antitheses between Gospel righteousness and that of the scribes and Pharisees. These Jews would soon find themselves "outstripped," as it were, by the Christians, who exceeded them by their deeper, more radical adherence to the Law. In this series of antitheses, Jesus contrasted *His* understanding of the Torah with that of Judaism's official teachers: "You have heard . . . but I say . . ." This dominical "I" appears repeatedly through this section (5: 20,22,26,28,32,34,39,44), indicating Jesus' authority to understand and interpret the Torah at its very root. According to the crowds that heard Him, "He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (7: 29).

First, Jesus tapped deeply into the Torah's prohibition of murder in order to condemn all animosity, belligerence, rancor, and violent speech (5: 21-26). Not even

these smaller forms of murder, so to speak, were compatible with the Gospel's radical understanding of the Torah.

Second, the Law's true Interpreter delved into the divine intention in its prohibition of adultery, declaring that it included lustful thoughts and even divorce (5: 27-32). Gospel righteousness would thus place the Torah's teaching on chastity and marriage profoundly into the Christian heart.

Third, the Torah's interdiction of perjury, intended to safeguard the holiness of the divine Name, was enlarged to include all unwarranted invocations of that Name for merely human purposes, even in attestation to the truth (5:33-37). Once again, Jesus' attention to reverence in this matter laid bare the divine intention at the very base of the Torah.

Fourth, the Torah's provision for measured retaliation, intended to limit man's bent toward vengeance, was transformed into a command to eliminate from the heart all forms of revenge or coercive resistance to an evildoer (5: 38-42). Even a vengeful disposition was incompatible with the Gospel's understanding of the mercy inherent in the Torah.

Fifth, the Torah's command to love one's neighbor was henceforth to be understood as including one's enemies (5:43-48). Those dedicated to Gospel righteousness were to act in love in circumstances where it was not humanly expected. Jesus revealed the requirement of such love at the very foundation of the Torah.

This five-fold contrast--a kind of *Chumash*, as it were--between Gospel righteousness and that of the scribes and Pharisees would oblige the Christians to "out-Jews" in placing the Torah profoundly into their hearts. Although Matthew does not say so, perhaps this effort of love would provoke the Jews to a proper jealousy (Romans 11:11).

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