

When Was The Old Covenant Fulfilled?

William Bell, Jr.

The question of when the law of Moses was fulfilled is yet a matter of controversy. Typically among Amillennialism, the question is answered with a fulfillment ending when the Lord died on the cross. On the other hand, Dispensationalism typically holds that the law is not yet fulfilled and will not be fulfilled until an alleged *yet future* return of Christ.

Texts cited to support the Amillennial position are John 19:30, Eph. 2:15 and Col. 2:14. The latter texts are addressed here only by implication. Forthcoming writings address them more specifically. Such is not the scope of this writing which focuses on the basic foundational issues.

Some even use Matt. 5:17-18. It is alleged that these passages teach the law was done away at the cross. However, upon close examination, that position cannot be maintained. The following experience demonstrates the point.

The Dining Room Discussion

In 1982, as the controversy mounted over my views on eschatology, a brother came to my home to discuss where I might have gone wrong in my studies on Christ's return. Confidently, he affirmed with certainty that he knew that Christ did not return in AD 70 because "the law was fulfilled at the cross." At the time, we were sitting in my dining room at opposite ends of the dinner table.

I then asked the brother if he was aware of the "end-time" prophecies in the Old Covenant, particularly Daniel 12:2-3, which prophesied of the resurrection and judgment. We looked at Psalms 96:13, Daniel 7:13-14 and Hosea 13:14, comparing the latter with 1 Cor. 15:55, among other texts.

Then I posed this question: "Since you have placed the fulfillment of the Old Covenant at the cross, where must you then place the second coming now that we've noticed that it was prophesied in the Old Covenant?"

At that point, his mouth flew wide open, his bottom jaw almost leveled with the tabletop. Very reluctantly he admitted it would have to be at the cross. I then asked him how he liked the consequences of his position and his mouth closed. Our study was interrupted and he never questioned me again about the issue.

Dilemmas in Debate

Other examples of crow fishing on the fulfillment of the law were exposed during a series of debates held in the early nineties between Don K. Preston, Jack Scott and myself, with Amillennialists.

Our opponents argued in one debate similar to the above that the law was all fulfilled at the cross. When pressed on that point, they changed and in later speeches and debates argued that it would not all be fulfilled until an alleged future end of time.

Realizing this dilemma, their final answer was the bulk of the prophecies would be fulfilled at the cross, with the remaining prophecies at the end of time. These among many were their most embarrassing moments. My opponent refused a second debate.

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Matthew 5:17-18

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What did Christ mean when he said not one jot or tittle would in any wise pass from the law till all is fulfilled? While Christ said he came fulfill the law, he also stated the time and event which fulfilled the law. That event and time is “the passing of heaven and earth.” Clearly, Christ said, “till heaven and earth pass.”

Next, he states what it means to fulfill the law, “till **all** is fulfilled.” To ensure that no one misunderstood what He means by all, Jesus said that not one jot or tittle (loosely expressed, not one dotting of an “i” or crossing of a “t”) would pass till all were fulfilled.

The Lord’s statements would follow this pattern: The law would pass when “heaven and earth passes away.” The law would pass when “all is fulfilled.” Therefore, when heaven and earth passes, all is fulfilled.

Because these two phrases are equal, “when heaven and earth passes” and when “all is fulfilled” then we have identified the time when every “i” is dotted and when every “t” is crossed. Further, because heaven and earth did not pass away at Jesus’ first coming, that could not be the passing of the law.

How Are Christ’s Words to be Interpreted?

When examining more of the Lord’s teachings on the end of the law, we can expand our thinking on how his words are to be interpreted. Luke 18:31-34, offers some additional insight.

“Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished.

For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon.

They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.’

But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.”

A few points are worthy of note. One, Jesus took the twelve aside to tell them about His crucifixion and death. Secondly, that text specifically mentions “all things that are written in the “prophets.” Thirdly, they did not at that time, understand what Jesus meant.

Here we would like to make two observations regarding all things being fulfilled. The location for the events of this text is Jerusalem. Thus, only the events which take place at the time of the Christ’s death in Jerusalem could be under consideration. Those events are specifically identified in Matt. 20:18-19.

“Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”

Thus, all the events noted take place in Jerusalem, and are associated with Christ’s death.

A second observation to be made is that Jesus includes his resurrection the third day, which may suggest that he spoke more comprehensively about the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. In other words, his resurrection on the third day was not accomplished in the words, “It is finished, (John 19:30), which were spoken from the cross.

Thirdly, the Lukan text cites that it is the prophets which are being fulfilled. So, we must not be guilty of presenting this text as relating only to the civil institutions of the law. Clearly, Christ names the prophets.

Luke 24:44-47

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A more complete picture of Christ's teaching on when the law is fulfilled develops after his resurrection. He meets again with His disciples and the twelve apostles are present, minus Judas, (Luke 24:33). Later, he states the following:

"Then He said to them, 'these are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me'" (v. 44).

Jesus here brings to mind the previous conversations he had with the apostles concerning the particular subject of "all things which must be fulfilled which were written in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms." This would include Matthew 5:17, 18, Luke 16:17; 18:31; and 21:22.

What is the point here? Namely, that Jesus is clarifying to ensure a complete and full understanding of what He meant during His personal ministry prior to His death in all the references to the fulfillment of all things. Therefore, this text offers commentary and explanation of the previous ones.

It is that which no one should misunderstand or misapply its meaning and usefulness in interpreting the other passages. Further, no passage in the epistles should be made to contradict this one which Jesus says explains what He meant about the fulfilling of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms concerning him.

Christ Makes No Mention or Distinction of Civil Versus The Prophets

Observe that Jesus does not say the law only, the civil institutions or the law exclusive of the prophets. Rather, He used all the terms by which they commonly referred to the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Therefore, no one may rightfully argue that Jesus spoke during His ministry or in this text of the law versus the prophets and vice versa when speaking of fulfillment.

"And he opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures, "This is the third point the reader was asked to keep in mind. Remember, during Jesus' personal ministry, the disciples did not understand what He meant. See Luke 18:31-34 again.

At this time, after his resurrection, the Lord makes certain that no misunderstanding occurs because He "opens" their understanding that they might "comprehend" the true meaning of His previous utterances. Therefore, let us listen carefully to what Jesus meant.

"Then He said to them, Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

These words are very important. They mentioned three very key events critical to our understanding. They are (a) the suffering and death of Christ, (b) His subsequent resurrection on the third day, and (c), the preaching of the gospel to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

What Did Christ Say Would Fulfill The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms?

Can one truthfully answer the “cross” and leave it at that? Not if the text is read and comprehended as Jesus states it. The Lord mentions not one, but three separate and distinct events; His death on the cross, His resurrection on the third day, and the fulfillment of the great commission.

Compare Matt. 28:19, “Go into all the world and teach “all nations.” They began in Jerusalem (Acts 1 & 2), but went into all the world to proclaim salvation to all the nations (Rom. 1:5; 10:18; 16:26; 1 Thess. 1:8; Tit. 2:11; Col. 1:6, 23 and Jude 3).

It is transparently clear that the great commission which fulfills the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms was not fulfilled at the cross. Christ emphatically commanded the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit before they began fulfilling the great commission.

The Fulfillment of the Law and the Great Commission

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The text in Luke 24:44-47, connects the fulfillment of the great commission with the fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. Christ quotes from Isaiah 2:2-5, citing that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. Let's examine the text.

Christ taught that the end of Jerusalem would come once the great commission was fulfilled.

"Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it.

Many people shall come and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the Lord."

- The word of the Lord which goes forth from Jerusalem is the word of repentance for remission of sins, (Acts 2:38; 11:18; 13:38; 20:21)
- The mountain of the Lord is Zion, (Heb. 12:22, 23; Rev. 14:1)
- The judgment is the time of the end, i.e. the end of Jewish age, Matt. 24:14; 28:18-20.

Christ prophesied that the end of the Old Covenant Jerusalem would come once the commission was fulfilled, which is also the time of the Jewish heaven and earth passed away. (Matthew 24:14, 29-35). Therefore, Luke 24:44-47, is a parallel text to both Matthew 5:17-18, and Luke 21:20-22.

"And" the Coordinating Conjunction

In further proof that Christ did not limit the passing of the Old Covenant at His death on the cross is His use of "and" in the text. He says the Christ must suffer, and rise from the dead the third day, and the great commission must be preached to all the nations.

It is the same "and" used in texts like Mark 16:16; He who believes and is baptized shall be saved. See also Acts 2:38, "repent and be baptized. As well removed the "and" coupling faith/repentance and baptism as to remove the "and" coupling the death, resurrection, and great commission as absolutely essential to fulfilling the law.

Therefore, not until the great commission has been preached to all the nations would the Old Covenant be fulfilled. The fulfillment of the Old Covenant ends with (a) judgment upon the nations at the time of

the end, and (b) with those who are saved of the house of Jacob and the Gentiles walking in the light of God's salvation, (Isa. 2:5; Rev. 21:24)

Any view of fulfillment of the Law of Moses, which does not incorporate the Prophets and the Psalms, with Jesus' death and resurrection, the fulfillment of the great commission and the end of the heaven and earth fails to meet the scriptural objective.

In the words of Paul, "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which **the prophets** *and* **Moses** said would come that **the Christ would suffer, that he would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles**" (Acts 26:22-23).

Once again, we see the parallel to Luke 24:44-47. Paul declared the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in three major events:

- Christ's sufferings, *and*
- Christ's resurrection from the dead, *and*
- The preaching of light (the gospel) to all nations, i.e. to the Jewish people, *and* to the Gentiles

Until these were met, the law could not pass. They were all fulfilled by the time Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70.