



Question: Did Jesus consistently teach Jews to be obedient to the Mosaic Law?

—John Harrison

Answer from Prof N. T. Wright, University of St Andrews

The answer is: ‘yes and no.’ Like many Jews of his day, Jesus saw the **Mosaic Law** not simply as a list of commands to be obeyed, but as a program and prophecy to be worked out and fulfilled. He saw the Exodus (the central drama of the Mosaic Law) as a foretaste of the upcoming ‘new exodus’ through which not only Israel but the whole world would be liberated from slavery, not just political but personal. He saw creation, the start of the Mosaic Law, as the blueprint for what God really intended. He saw the great sacrificial codes as the signs of God’s provision for human sin, and understood his own vocation as including the ultimate fulfillment of that provision.

Above all, Jesus saw the song of triumph of Exodus 15, and the similar songs towards the end of Deuteronomy, as celebrations of God’s sovereign rule (“God’s kingdom”) over not only Israel but the whole world, and made that kingdom the central feature of his own vocation and proclamation. In line with Exodus 19 and Isaiah 40-55, he saw the entire vocation of Israel, rooted in the covenants spelled out in the Mosaic Law, as being the light of the world, and believed that he was standing at the great corner of history when all this would come true at last.

In this sense, Jesus did indeed “teach Jews to be obedient to the Mosaic Law.” But he clearly did not do this in the sense that the **Rabbis** were starting to develop in his day, and continued more thoroughly thereafter, the sense (that is) of discovering every possible “command” in the **Pentateuch** and figuring out how to be sure of obeying it.

In technical language, this is because Jesus put **eschatology** rather than ethics at the center of his program: “the time is fulfilled,” he said (Mark 1:15). This meant that several existing aspects of the Law, like the food and purity regulations, were declared redundant (Mark 7)—not because they were stupid or irrational, but because they were part of the first main stage of God’s saving plan, and Jesus believed he was launching the final stage, the time of fulfillment. His own rigorous ethic was rooted, not in a list of commands, but in the Creator’s original intention (Mark 10:2-12). For his followers to be “obedient” to this vision, rooted in the scriptures, meant for them to follow Jesus himself and share in his project.

We cannot understand Jesus simply as a teacher of behavior. The four gospels indicate throughout that he understood himself, and was understood by followers and opponents alike, as launching a movement through which God’s plan for Israel and the world would be fulfilled. This rich “obedience” to the Mosaic Law sets everything else in proper context. Of course, it has been easy for scholars to use supposedly critical methods to

construct alternative scenarios. But this one has the virtue of simplicity, historical plausibility, and giving full weight to the evidence.

N.T. Wright is Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He is the author of many books, including the recent titles, *Simply Jesus* (2011) and *How God Became King* (2012) both published by Harper One in San Francisco.

Glossary

Mosaic Law is the Law ('Torah') given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, set out in detail in the Pentateuch.

Rabbis were law-teachers who led the Jews after the Temple's destruction in AD 70. Their work was later codified in the Mishnah.

Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.

Eschatology refers to ideas about the end or last period of history or existence.