ESTRATTO

Matthew THIESSEN

Abolishers of the Law in Early Judaism and Matthew 5,17-20
Abilishers of the Law in Early Judaism and Matthew 5,17-20

Matthew’s view of the Jewish law has divided scholarship on the First Gospel. While most interpreters conclude that Matthew believed that Jewish followers of Jesus ought to observe the law, a number of scholars continue to resist this interpretation. As R. Deines argues, Matthew 5,17-20, although seemingly affirming obedience to the law, “forms the cornerstone for both interpretative traditions.” In part, the disagreement revolves around the interpretation of the verb πληρόω (“to fulfill”). Does Matthew intend to signify the salvation-historical fulfillment of the law so that it no longer requires keeping? Or does Matthew’s Jesus use πληρόω synonymously with ποιεω (“to do”; cf. Matt 5,19)?

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1 I am thankful to both Joel Marcus of Duke Divinity School and participants in the Matthew Section at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA, November 24, 2009, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.


4 Deines, “Not the Law”, 70.


Despite the significant attention scholars have given to the meaning of ἀποκαταστάσει Matthew’s Jesus uses the verb only once in Matt 5:17-20 (and, more broadly, in the Sermon on the Mount). In contrast, twice in Matthew 5:17 Jesus says that he has not come to abolish (καταλύω) the law or the prophets, while once in verse 19 he warns that anyone abolishing (λύω) the smallest of commandments, or teaching others to do so, will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. The threefold occurrence of the words καταλύω and λύω suggests that their meanings are of central importance for understanding Matthew’s concerns in this passage, yet few have attempted to understand their usage in Matt 5:17-20 in light of other occurrences of the word in Jewish literature. The following argument addresses this lacuna in the secondary literature by focusing on two particular events around which these words cluster: the Antiochan persecution and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Although Jewish literature uses καταλύω and λύω with reference to the abolishment of the law elsewhere, I believe that their use in reference to the Antiochan persecution and the destruction of the Temple are particularly informative for understanding Matthew’s concerns in Matt 5:17-20.

7 In contrast to D.L. Balch (“The Greek Political Topos περὶ νόμων and Matthew 5:17, 19, and 16:19”, Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches [ed. D.L. Balch] [Minneapolis, MN 1991] 68-84 [79]), F. Buchsel (“λύω”, TDNT IV, 328-356) demonstrates that the cognates (καταλύω and λύω) may be used synonymously when referring to the law. Cf., for instance, the discussions of καταλύω in U. Luz, “Die Erfüllung des Gesetzes bei Matthäus (Mt 5:17-20)”, ZTK 75.4 (1978) 398-435, and Balch, “The Greek Political Topos”. (Καταλύω never occurs in the LXX translation of the HB in reference to abolishing the law. This usage also occurs in non-Jewish Greek literature. For instance, Dio Chrysostom claims that a city cannot be saved if the law has been abolished (λυθέντος, Oration 75.10). Similarly, Josephus uses καταλύω in reference to Julius Caesar, who, he says, overthrew Roman democracy (καταλύσει τῆς δημοκρατίας), bringing great evils upon the entire city of Rome (A.J. 19.173-174), thereby demonstrating that abolishment of any people’s law has disastrous consequences. Josephus likewise claims that Izates’ subjects accused him of abolishing ancestral customs and embracing foreign (i.e. Jewish) customs (καταλύσαντα μὲν τὰ πάτρια ξένων δὲ ἐραστήρι ἐθῶν γενόμενον, A.J. 20.81).

8 Outside of these two clusters, (καταλύω is used another eighteen times in Jewish literature in relation to the law, almost all of which deal with laws such as Sabbath, circumcision, dietary laws, and temple service.

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I. The Hellenizers and the Antiochan Persecution

The events surrounding what is often referred to as the Antiochan persecution were ingrained in the minds of many Second Temple Jews. At least four detailed works, 1, 2, and 4 Maccabees as well as the five-volume work of Jason of Cyrene, were written to retell this episode of Jewish history, while four other works, Daniel, the Testament of Moses, and Josephus’s Antiquities and the Jewish War also recount or allude to these events. Further, 1 Macc 4,36-59, 2 Macc 1,1-2,18, and 10,1-8 describe the celebration of the rededication of the Temple after this attack, a celebration that Josephus makes clear in Ant. 12.324-25 was observed throughout the late Second Temple period. In light of the importance which many Jews accorded these events, it is noteworthy that three authors use the words καταλύω, λύω, and κατάλυσις twelve times in four different accounts of the Antiochian persecution: three times in 2 Maccabees, six times in 4 Maccabees, twice in Antiquities, and once in the War.

As the author of 2 Maccabees summarizes his work, he says that, through zeal for Judaism, the people repelled Antiochus Epiphanes and “restored the laws that were about to be abolished” (τους μέλλοντας καταλύσθαι νόμους ἐπανορθώσαι, 2,22). But who was threatening to abolish the law? According to 2 Macc 4,9-11, it was Jason, the brother of the high priest Onias, who bought Antiochus’s support in order to supplant his brother as high priest, who desired to build a gymnasium, and who wanted to make the men of Jerusalem citizens of Antioch. The author portrays these reforms as innovations that led to the introduction of new customs and to the abolishment (καταλύω) of lawful living and the neglect of the temple cult. Finally, in 2 Macc 8,15-17, Judas Maccabeus gathers an army together and inspires them with the accusation that their enemies had abolished their ancestral way of life (τὴν τῆς προγονικῆς πολιτείας κατάλυσιν). The result of this law abolishment, according to 2 Macc 4,16-17, was that “harsh disaster surrounded them, and those whose ways of living they admired and wished to imitate completely became hostile and punished them”, for “irreverence to the divine laws is no light matter”.

The author of 4 Maccabees picks up and expands upon this theme of law abolishment. This is not surprising given the probability that 4 Maccabees used 2 Maccabees as a source, as J.W. van Henten ar-
gues. Nonetheless, the increased frequency of καταλύω in 4 Maccabees demonstrates that the author is not merely passively preserving this link between the word and the Antiochan persecution, already established by 2 Maccabees, but is further emphasizing this connection. Antiochus abolishes (καταλύω) the Jewish high priest Onias, and unlawfully makes Onias’s brother Jason high priest (4,15-16). In a manner befitting his law-abolishing appointment to the high priesthood, Jason repays Antiochus for the office by changing the nation’s way of life and government including the building of a gymnasium to replace the abolished Temple service (ἀλλὰ καὶ καταλύσαν τὴν τοῦ ἱεροῦ κηδεμονίαν, 4,20). 4 Maccabees 4,21, following 2 Maccabees, links this abolishing of the law to the Antiochan persecution. Jason’s unlawful actions anger divine justice and lead to the Antiochan persecution. According to 4 Macc 4,24, Antiochus is not able to abolish (καταλύσαι) the observance of the law because many Jews abolished (καταλυομένας) his decrees and punishments. One example of such abolishment of Antiochus’s decrees occurs in 4 Maccabees 5, when Antiochus tries to force a priest named Eleazzer to eat pork. The old priest’s response to Antiochus is as follows: “Do not think that it would be a small sin to eat unclean food, for to transgress the law in small or larger matters is of equal seriousness, for in each the law is disdained” (5,19-21). Eleazzer argues that the eating of unclean meat, even under compulsion of death, is an abolishment of the ancestral law (τὸν πάτριον καταλύσαι νόμον, 5,33). The author states that reason guided Eleazzer despite torture and the maddening waves of emotion and that his example strengthened others’ loyalty to the law since he did not abolish (κατέλυσας) the holiness of which he spoke (7,9).

The remainder of 4 Maccabees relates the martyrdoms of seven brothers and their mother. Ironically, it is the machinations of Antiochus, not the laws, which are abolished. Through reason the Jews abolished his tyranny (8,15; 11,24), abolished the fear of tortures (14,8), abolished Antiochus’s violence (17,2), and brought about Antiochus’s own abolishment (11,25). These five occurrences of

10 J.W. Van Henten, The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People. A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees (JSISup 57; Leiden 1997) 70-73. This increased frequency coincides with the argument of H.-J. Klauck (4 Makkabäerbuch [JSHRZ; Gütersloh 1989] 664-665) that the author is trying to persuade Jews not to assimilate to the wider culture.
κατάλυσις and κατάλυμα, along with the similar use previously mentioned in 4,24, counterpose the attempt to abolish the law and thus account for its frequent use in this sense. Both Eleazar and the mother with her seven sons demonstrated a commitment to law observance in the face of persecution. The author asserts that the tombs of the priest and the family should contain the following inscription: “Here are buried an old priest and old woman and seven sons because of the violence of the tyrant who wished to abolish the way of life of the Hebrews” (τὴν Ἑβραίων πολιτείαν καταλύσατο θέλοντος, 17,9).

Josephus also links Jewish law abolishment to the Antiochian persecution 11. In his description of the conflicts between the Maccabees and those who supported Antiochus IV’s reforms, he portrays the latter group admitting to Antiochus’s son that they have abolished their ancestral customs (πάτριον αὐτῶν καταλύσαντας) and have adopted Antiochus’s commands (A.J. 12.364). Further, in relating how Herod unlawfully appointed Aristobulus III high priest, Josephus states in A.J. 15.41 that “Antiochus Epiphanes had abolished (ἐλύσε τοῦ νόμον) this law first when he removed Jesus and appointed his brother Onias”. Finally, Josephus claims that Antiochus, “carried away by his ungovernable passions, . . . put pressure upon the Jews to abolish their ancestral customs, leaving their infants uncircumcised and sacrificing swine upon the altar” (ἡμᾶς Ἰουδαίους καταλύσαντας τὰ πάτρια βρέφη τῆς αὐτῶν φυλάττειν ἀπερίτμητα καὶ σὺς ἐπιθύειν τῷ βωμῷ, B.J. 1.34).

2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and Josephus (both in Antiquities and War) all link their accounts of the Antiochian persecution to an abolishment of the law. We have, therefore, twelve occurrences of κατάλυμα, λύμα, and κατάλυσις in four accounts of the Antiochian persecution. It is unlikely that this cluster of occurrences is a coincidence; instead, it appears that there existed a common tradition linking the Antiochian persecution to a prior law abolishment by Jews and that one of the preferred words for describing their behaviour was (κατα)λύμα.

11 Josephus is dependent upon 1 Maccabees, which has already linked Jewish law abolishment to the Antiochian persecution, although 1 Maccabees does not use the word (κατα)λύμα. Cf. I.M. GAFNI, “Josephus and 1 Maccabees”, Josephus, the Bible, and History (eds. L.H. Feldman – G. Hata) (Detroit, MI 1989) 116-131. Since 1 Maccabees contains no occurrences of (κατα)λύμα/κατάλυσις, its use here presumably comes from Josephus himself.
While 2 Maccabees was written in Judea between 124 and 63 B.C.E. 12, 4 Maccabees 13 and Josephus’s works were written in the latter half of the first century C.E., in the Jewish diaspora, demonstrating a geographically and temporally widespread tradition linking a prior Jewish abolishment of the law with the Antiochan persecution. These writers view this attack on circumcision, Sabbath, Temple cult, and food laws as an attack on the Jewish or Hebrew πολιτεία, and upon Jewish ancestral customs. It is important to note that, according to each of these three authors, it was a Jewish group that was closely involved in the abolishment of the Jewish law in an attempt at Hellenization (2 Macc 4,7-15; 4 Macc 4,15-21; A.J. 12.240-256; 12.362-66 [cf. also 1 Macc 1,11-15]) 14. Divine wrath, in the form of the persecution, was the consequence of this law abolishment.

II. The Zealots of Josephus’s *Jewish War*

We turn now to the second event around which the words καταλύω, λύω, and κατάλυσις cluster: the Jewish Revolt as Josephus describes it in the *Jewish War*. On the brink of the revolt, Josephus pauses to recount Agrippa’s speech to the people in which he counsels against going to war:

12 Cf. van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 50-56; J.A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (AB 41; Garden City, N.Y. 1976) 62-64. Since the work reflects a positive opinion of the Romans (4,1; 8,10.36; 11,34-38), it is unlikely that it was written after Pompey’s interference in Jewish affairs in 63 B.C.E.


14 E. Bickerman (*The God of the Maccabees*: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt [SJLA 32; Leiden 1979]) has made a strong case for the historicity of these accounts, though J. Scurlock (“167 BCE: Hellenism or Reform?”, *JSJ* 31:2 [2000] 125-161), amongst others, provides an alternative account placing the primary blame on Antiochus IV. As Bickerman (*Maccabees*, 89-90) notes, Antiochus’s knowledge of specific Jewish practices to attack demonstrates collusion with those who were familiar with Judaism, most likely Jewish people. Whether Bickerman’s historical reconstruction is correct or not, this is precisely how these early sources, and most likely many Jewish people familiar with such works, viewed the Antiochan persecution.
Consider, too, the difficulty of preserving your religious rules from contamination, even were you engaging a less formidable foe; and how, if compelled to transgress the very principles on which you chiefly build your hopes of God’s assistance, you will alienate Him from you. If you observe your sabbath customs and refuse to take any action on that day, you will undoubtedly be easily defeated, as were your forefathers by Pompey, when the besieged remained inactive; if, on the contrary, you transgress the law of your ancestors, I fail to see what further object you will have for hostilities, since your one aim is to preserve inviolate all the institutions of your fathers (γὰρ ὑμῖν μια τὸ μὴ τῶν πατρίων τι καταλύσαι). How could you invoke the aid of the Deity, after deliberately omitting to pay Him the service which you owe Him? (B.J. 2.391-93)

Agrippa states that while the people are considering rebellion because they do not want to abolish their ancestral customs, by going to war they will cease Sabbath observance in order to fight, thereby alienating themselves from God. Throughout his account of the subsequent revolt, Josephus demonstrates the ways in which the Zealots were guilty of this law abolition and therefore caused the destruction of both the city and the Temple. This connection between Zealot law abolition and divine wrath is made evident by the numerous occurrences of καταλύσω, λύω, and κατάλυσις referring specifically to the actions of the Zealots among the divided populace of Jerusalem during the war.

First, the Zealots choose a high priest by lot, a procedure which, according to Josephus, is an abrogation (κατάλυσις) of the established practice (B.J. 4.154). As a result, many of the priests bemoan this event, considering it to be the abolition of the priestly honours (καταλύσις, B.J. 4.157). Further, John of Gischala tells the Zealots that they would face the wrath of the people because they have abolished their laws and law courts (ὑπὲρ καταλύσεως νόμων καὶ δικαστηρίων, B.J. 4.223). Similarly, Jesus the high priest addresses the Idumeans in an attempt to gain their support against the Zealots: “Join us in extirpating these tyrants, who have abolished (καταλύσαντος) our tribunals, trampled our laws” (B.J. 4.258). One Zealot even remorsefully confesses that both the Idumeans and Zealots are guilty because they have “abolished the institutions of their forefathers” (καταλύσωσι τὰ πάτρια, B.J. 4.348). Finally, according to Josephus, the Zealots leave the dead unburied: “The Zealots, however, carried barbarity so far as to grant
interment to none, whether slain within the city or on the roads; but, as though they had covenanted to annul the laws of nature along with those of their country (ἀλλὰ καθάπερ συνθήκας πεποιημένοι τοῖς τής πατρίδος συγκαταλύσαι καὶ τοὺς τής φύσεως νόμους), and to their outrages upon humanity to add pollution of Heaven itself, they left the dead putrefying in the sun” (B.J. 4.381-382). Josephus’s account of the revolt repeatedly portrays the Zealots in the act of abolishing the Jewish Law. Accordingly, Josephus states that “it is the Romans who may well be found to have been the upholders of our laws, while the laws’ enemies, that is, the Zealots, were within the walls” (B.J. 4.184).

While these various abolishments are evidence of the lawlessness of the Zealots, it is one action in particular, the Zealot occupation and subsequent pollution of the Temple precincts, that Josephus believes was the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. In speaking of this occupation of the Temple, he says: “[T]hey would surely have proceeded to greater heights, had aught greater than the sanctuary remained for them to abolish” (εἰ τί τῶν ἱερῶν καταλύσαι μεῖζον ἔχων, B.J. 4.171). It was a direct result of the Zealot occupation and defilement of the Temple that God’s punishment came upon the entire nation. As Josephus concludes:

Every human ordinance was trampled under foot, every dictate of religion ridiculed by these men, who scoffed at the oracles of the prophets as imposters’ fables, … by the transgression of which the Zealots brought upon their country the fulfillment of the prophecies directed against it. For there was an ancient saying of inspired men that the city would be taken and the sanctuary burnt to the ground by right of war, whencesoever it should be visited by sedition and native hands should be the first to defile God’s sacred precincts (B.J. 4.388).

Elsewhere, Josephus makes a similar remark stressing the way in which the Romans demonstrated respect for the Temple precincts, even though some Jewish people entered the holy places, “with hands yet hot from the blood of their countrymen” (B.J. 4.183).

For Josephus, the rebels were abolishers of the law, as seen most acutely in the Zealots’ assaults on the Temple precinct and cult. And, as Agrippa had warned immediately prior to the outbreak of the revolt, because they abolished the law, God abandoned them and brought upon them and the rest of the nation the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Again, the pattern is confirmed that those
who abolish the law bring divine judgment upon the people as a whole. Eight times Josephus uses καταλύω, λύω, or καταλύσις to describe the actions of the Zealots during the Jewish Revolt, demonstrating that he believes the horrific events of 70 C.E. were the direct result of the law-abolishing Zealots. Josephus does his best to distance the Jewish people from the “bandits”, “rebels”, and “Zealots”, so that he can maintain their innocence in the rebellion. His use of (καταλύομαι exclusively for the Zealots’ actions during the revolt demonstrates that it is the transgressions of the Zealots in particular which are blamed.

III. Matthew 5,17-20 and Accusations against Matthew’s Community

We turn now to the threefold occurrence of (καταλύω in Matt 5,17-20. Is Jesus guilty of abolishing the law? Presumably this was no academic question but a response to the charge that he was a law abolisher, leveled perhaps by certain scribes or Pharisees as suggested by Jesus’ dismissive reference to their righteousness in 5,20 as well as by their antagonistic presence throughout Matthew’s Gospel. Considering the above rehearsal of law abolishment in Jewish history, the dangerous nature of this charge becomes apparent; the consistent emphasis on the Hellenizers of 167 B.C.E. as law abiders whose actions provoked the Antiochan persecution may stand behind such an accusation. Consequently, such a charge could be deployed in the following way: “Join with us against the law-

15 M. GOODMAN, The Ruling Class of Judaea (Cambridge 1987) 199, argues that Josephus is providing a scapegoat for the divine hostility evidenced in the destruction, while M. BOHRMANN, Flavius Josephus, The Zealots and Yavne. Towards a Rereading of The War of the Jews (Bern 1989) 192-277, argues that Jewish moderates held the Zealots responsible for the destruction because of their lawless violence. Similarly, J. MARCUS, “The Jewish War and the Sitz im Leben of Mark”, JBL 111.3 (1992) 441-462, has argued that Mark 11,17 and 13,14 refer to the Zealot occupation of the Temple, and that Mark partially attributes God’s judgment on Jerusalem to this action.

16 Matt 5,17.19.20 have no parallels in Mark or Luke. Verse 18 has parallels in Luke 16,17 and 21,33 which lack λύω, leading most scholars to attribute the verse to Q. For analysis of Matthew’s redactional activity in this pericope, see MEIER, Law and History, 41-115.

abolishing followers of this law-abolishing Jesus so that we might guard ourselves against God’s wrath, which led to the persecution under Antiochus IV”.

On the other hand, in the aftermath of the events of 70 C.E., it appears that certain Jewish groups accused one another of being the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. We have seen that Josephus, one of Matthew’s contemporaries, accuses his ideological rivals, the Zealots, of being law abolishers who brought about God’s judgment upon all of the Jewish people. Was the early Christian movement also the object of such accusations? Matt 5,17-20 seems to suggest that it indeed was and that throughout his gospel, but most vehemently in these verses, Matthew is answering this charge. Given the probability that the air was rife with the accusations of various Jewish groups against their rivals in the wake of the devastating results of the revolt, this seems a distinct possibility. This interpretation provides a strong connection to the preceding material in Matthew 5, since it could be argued that the persecution, reviling, and slandering that Matthew believes his community to be enduring, and to which he refers in 5,10-12, were accusations that they were law-abolishers who were responsible for the Temple’s destruction. In response, Matthew calls his readers in 5,13-16 to let their light shine so that others see their good works (i.e. their law observance) and praise God.

19 In contrast to R.H. Gundry, Matthew. A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution (Grand Rapids, MI 1994) 599-609, and J. Nolland, The Gospel of Matthew. A Commentary on the Greek Text (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI 2005) 17, who argue for a pre-70 dating for Matthew, the majority of interpreters place the composition of Matthew’s gospel in the latter third of the first century C.E. This provenance better explains Matthew’s use of Mark’s gospel, as well as the apparent allusion to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in Matt 22,7.
20 These accusations should not be interpreted as malicious. It is entirely conceivable, as S. von Dobbeler, “Auf der Grenze. Ethos und Identität der matthäischen Gemeinde nach Mt 15,1-20”, BZ 45 (2001) 55-79 (63), argues, that those who accused Matthew’s community of law abolishment did so out of deep concern for Israel’s destiny.
21 Deines, Gerechtigkeit, 137-181, believes that the Beatitudes, and 5,1-16 more broadly, signal the irrelevance of the Law, since Jesus speaks of people participating in the kingdom of heaven without any reference to Torah.

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Since Jesus did not come to abolish the law as Matthew makes clear in 5,17-19, the members of the Matthean community are supposed to live in a way that their opponents would not be able to bring such charges against them: “Matthew’s position is that the whole Mosaic law must be observed (by Jewish Christians) until the eschaton has come in its fullness” 22. The Sermon on the Mount indicates the strictness of the law observance required.

Moving to the offensive in 5,20, Matthew’s Jesus levels his accusation against the scribes and Pharisees by calling into question their own righteousness. Matthew, similar to Qumranic claims that the Pharisees were seekers of smooth things 23, asserts that the followers of Jesus hold to a higher degree of righteousness than do the Pharisees. As J.A. Overman argues, “The nub of this contention is legal interpretation and piety or praxis. He believes the competing group distorts the law for their agenda and ends. His community, as a result of the interpretation provided for them through Jesus, is the group that should guide God’s people in this place and time” 24. Consequently, Matthew counters claims that the Jesus

observance. Yet 5,16 appears to undermine this interpretation and in fact leads quite nicely into 5,17-20’s explicit emphasis upon the law.


23 Cf. CD 1.14-2.1; The Thanksgiving Psalms 10.31-38; 12.9-11; 4Q177; 4Q163 fragment 23 2.10-13; 4Q169 fragments 2–4, and in contrast to the claims of Josephus (cf. B.J. 1.110; 2.162; Vita 191; A.J. 17.41) and Luke’s Paul (Acts 22,3; 26,5), who describe the Pharisees as “precise” (δικαιοσύνη) in their interpretation of the law. On these references to the Pharisees in Qumran literature, see, most recently, J.C. VanderKam, “The Pharisees and the Dead Sea Scrolls”, In Quest of the Historical Pharisees (eds. J. Neusner – B.D. Chilton) (Waco, TX 2007) 225-236, 459-462. If this identification is incorrect, it would not take away from Matthew’s criticism that the Pharisees’ ethical righteousness is insufficient, since B. Przybylski, Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought (SNTSMS 41; Cambridge 1980), has demonstrated that the word δικαιοσύνη in Matthew always refers to ethical righteousness, not forensic righteousness.

movement brought about the destruction of the Temple and God’s wrath by pointing out the Pharisees’ law-keeping inadequacies 25.

As we have seen, Josephus blamed the events of 70 C.E. on the Zealots whom he repeatedly accused of abolishing the law, demonstrating the possibility that others laid the blame on Jewish followers of Jesus, whom they viewed as law aboli0shers 26. It is conceivable that a group competing for the loyalties of other Jews, such as the Pharisees, argued that Jesus came to abolish the law and that his movement was the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem. What better way to discredit them as contenders for a leading role in the post-70 Jewish community than to claim that Jesus himself was a law aboli0sher? Matthew’s gospel should therefore be understood, in part, as a response to such charges.

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I have argued that the threefold occurrence of the verbs καταλύω and λύω in Matt 5,17-20 is evidence of an accusation leveled at Jesus and the Jewish community that followed him. It has been seen that there is a high density of occurrences of these words in two locations — accounts of the Antiochian persecution, and Josephus’s account of the Zealots in the Jewish War. Matthew 5,17-20 should, therefore, be read against the backdrop of these two verbal clusters. In these verses, Matthew answers the dangerous accusation that his community members are law aboli0shers and consequently a threat to all Jews. Just as the authors of 2 and 4 Maccabees believed that the Jewish Hellenizers brought about the Antiochian persecution, and just as Josephus argued that the law-aboli0shing Zealots brought about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, so, too, some may have argued that Jewish-Christian abandonment of ancestral customs occasioned divine wrath. If so, the correct response of other Jewish groups to Matthew’s community should conform to Moses’ command, as mentioned by Jose-


26 Possible confirmation for this suggestion can be found in Josephus’s claim that the high priest Ananus put James, the brother of Jesus, and some of his companions to death on the accusation that they were law transgressors (παρανομησάντοι, A.J. 20.200).
phus in *A.J.* 4.310, to resist and uproot, if possible, those who attempt to abolish the constitution (καταλύειν… πολιτείαν). The Gospel of Matthew consistently works against this understanding of Jesus; instead, Jesus is a new Moses who comes to enable faithful Torah observance 27. As P.J. Hartin argues, “Matthew’s Jesus does not take issue with the Torah as such, for the Torah is God’s expressed will. Instead, Matthew’s Jesus claims the role as official interpreter of God’s will, of God’s Torah” 28. The controversies with the scribes and the Pharisees provide Matthew with a platform to demonstrate that while Jesus’ Halakhah may have differed from that of the Pharisees, he (and his followers) still faithfully observed the law 29. It is inMatt 5,17-20 and the subsequent Matthean Antitheses in 5,21-48 30 that Matthew makes this claim most emphatically on behalf of and in defense of both Jesus and his law-observant Jewish followers.

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**SUMMARY**

Three times within Matt 5,17-20 passage Matthew uses the verb (καταλύω), signaling its importance. Consequently, I will focus on two historical events around which these words cluster: the Antiochan persecution and the destruction of the Temple. Since Jewish literature characterizes the Hellenizers of the Maccabean period as law abolishers, labeling a group as such implicated it in endangering the nation. As Josephus’ *Jewish War* demonstrates, after the Jewish Revolt, law abolishers were blamed for the Temple’s destruction. Thus, Matthew addresses the charge that Jesus abolished the law and, in so doing, brought about the destruction of the Temple.

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