JESUS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

In an article published in a recent issue of the *Sunday School Times* Professor Harnack of Berlin defends the thesis that Jesus had no intention of doing away with the law of the Old Testament, but that unconsciously to himself he assumed toward it such an attitude as logically involved its abolition. Comparing the position of Jesus to that of Luther, who while still regarding himself a loyal son of the church had really broken with the church and was engaged in an effort to destroy it, Professor Harnack affirms that "objectively the attitude of Jesus toward the law involves a contradiction, but subjectively, that is for himself, he was not conscious of it." The early church, Harnack goes on to maintain, endeavored to walk in the footsteps of Jesus in this matter, but found the position impossible. It was Paul who first discovered that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth, a position in which the Fourth Gospel follows the apostle to the Gentiles. In other words, the position of Jesus may be compared to that of one who is seeking to strengthen an old building by supporting buttresses but is in fact unconsciously to himself undermining its foundation and preparing it for its downfall.

Such an interpretation of Jesus is of course entirely intelligible. Many a teacher and thinker has failed to see the full implications of the positions to which his own thinking has led him. It is proverbial that the followers of a progressive thinker usually outrun their teacher. An important forward step is rarely accomplished wholly in one generation. To the example of Luther cited by Harnack
scores of others might be added. Many men have builded better or worse than they knew or intended.

There is moreover unquestionably a certain element of truth in Harnack’s view respecting Jesus. He was not an iconoclast. He did not expect or intend to inaugurate an anti-legal movement within the Jewish community, or at once to create a community of independent ethical thinkers. He recognized the necessity of leadership and the fact that time is an important factor in all healthy transformations of thought. Much of his most far-reaching teaching concerning law was conveyed incidentally and without effort on his part to point out the full implications. It is true also that if Jesus assumed an attitude of freedom in respect to the law, the early church did not at once apprehend this, or follow him in this attitude.

It is to be observed also that the position which Professor Harnack takes issues in the same result for Christian practice today as the view which finds in Jesus himself the conscious repudiation of the authority of the Old Testament law. For while maintaining that Jesus intended to defend the law Harnack is equally clear in maintaining that Paul’s explicit application of the Law was the necessary consequence of the attitude which Jesus, without fully apprehending its significance, assumed toward the Law. “The bud which Jesus placed in the Old Jewish stalk could result only in the decay of Judaism and the founding of a new religion, the religion of Jesus Christ. . . . Not in his preaching did Jesus teach this, but in his person, his work, his sufferings, in his resurrection, did his disciples learn it.” The question at issue is not then one of ethics, but of history, and its implications are not ethical, but christological; not what should be the Christian’s attitude toward the law, but what was Christ’s attitude, and how are we to rank him in respect to ethical insight.

It must of course be dealt with on purely critical and exegetical grounds. For our conclusions not only respecting the substance of Jesus’ teaching but as concerns the precise intellectual quality of Jesus as a teacher we are dependent solely on the records of the New Testament. A discerning literary criticism and a faithful exegesis are the instruments by which we must derive from these records our information as to what Jesus did and how he did it.
The passage which Harnack expressly cites in defense of his view is Matt. 5:17, 18, "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished." He adds that there are many more passages and testimonies, and refers by implication to the command of Jesus to the leper to show himself to the priest, his assertion in Matt. 23:3 that whatever the Pharisees commanded should be observed, and the setting-aside of the Mosaic law of divorce grounded, he says, on an older law.

It is not our present purpose to examine these passages in detail, or to criticize Harnack's exegesis of them. It is our desire chiefly on the one hand to call attention to the significance of the issue which Harnack's paper raises, and on the other hand to express our conviction that his interpretation of Jesus' attitude is critically and exegetically indefensible. It ascribes to Jesus a lower intellectual power and less keen insight into moral questions, and a less clear apprehension of the significance of his own teaching than the New Testament warrants us in ascribing to him. We have grown somewhat familiar in recent years with the view that in the field of eschatology Jesus adopted the current messianic ideas of the Pharisees and allowed himself to cherish expectations respecting the coming of the kingdom and his own personal return as the Christ of judgment which subsequent history has shown to be quite without foundation. The view that Jesus was similarly lacking in penetration in reference to the implications of his own fundamental ethical position is perhaps only the natural sequel to this common notion with reference to his attitude on questions of eschatology. But it is a little surprising to find Professor Harnack, whom we have understood as repudiating the view referred to respecting Jesus' attitude toward eschatology, now advocating it in respect to Jesus' ethical position. There are indeed utterances of Jesus which standing by themselves might seem to sustain the view that he desired to continue the statutes of the Old Testament in force unabated, and even that he desired to perpetuate Pharisaic scribism. But there are others which as clearly indicate a complete emancipation of his mind from the authority of the Old Testament law, and an attitude of independent judgment upon
questions of morals and religion based upon his own insight into the moral world and his own interpretation of moral experience. So clear and strong is the testimony of these latter passages, so evident is it that the early church did not fully apprehend the position of Jesus on this matter that if it be necessary to interpret such utterances as Matt. 5:17, 18 and 23:3 as affirming the perpetuity of the Old Testament statutes, they may well be accounted for as modified under the influence of the thought of the church. How, indeed, can Harnack escape some such position respecting Matt. 23:3, in view of his affirmation that Jesus repudiated the Pharisaic additions to the law?

But even aside from any such critical emendation of the testimony of the gospels we are persuaded that their total evidence warrants no other conclusion than that Jesus, while abstaining from any direct assault upon the law, and recognizing the necessity that his followers should continue in relation to the existing system and in a measure under the leadership of the recognized teachers of the day, did also clearly claim for himself and for all other men of clear moral judgment, the right of independent thought in the realm of morals and religion, and was fully aware that this position involved the essential repudiation of the authority of the Old Testament law as such to limit the thought, constrain the conscience, or control the action of men of his own time or of later times.

Harnack underestimates the intellectuality of Jesus, and overestimates his likeness to Luther. He builded not better than he thought, but better than Harnack thinks. He was not the forerunner of Paul, unconsciously sowing seed which bore fruit only in the days of the greater apostle who followed him, but the clear-visioned prophet, and the tactful teacher. The teachings to which we owe our emancipation from the enslavement of the present to the past were not put forth by him in ignorance of their real significance and in an effort to buttress up that which he was really undermining, nor was it he but his contemporaries and the later church that failed to perceive their full significance.