

Article

# The Multifaceted Reception of the Torah by Early Church Fathers

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the reception of the Torah by the Church Fathers who lived up to the beginning of the third century. Christians, having received the whole Torah through the Septuagint translation, became selective in the way they accepted it, adhering to it only with reservations. Christological and ethical concerns were at the heart of their acceptance or rejection of various aspects of the Torah. This article will gauge whether Christians had a positive, negative, or neutral evaluation of the Torah and will seek to identify the ways in which they perceived the Torah. By analysing the ways in which the Torah and at times other Old Testament texts were handled, their presentation of these Jewish Scriptures will be brought to light, highlighting different approaches employed in this regard. One notes the following stances: the Torah's commandments supplemented the Lord's teachings (the Didache); the Torah was read allegorically and typologically despite a Midrashic approach (*Epistle of Barnabas*); certain laws were believed to have been instituted as a result of the people's hardness of heart (Justin Martyr); natural law is distinct from the demands added to it after the Jews' wayward actions (Irenaeus); the temporal aspects of the law were superseded by its eternal aspects (Tertullian); whilst upholding the promises of the Law, the prophets were seen as going beyond the Law (Tertullian) or as giving the Law a spiritual interpretation (*Epistle of Barnabas*); and, rarely, the Law was held in very high regard (Clement of Alexandria). This paper is not concerned with any blatant rejection of the Torah and, indeed, the Tanakh at large (as was the case with Marcion), but rather with the subtler nuances that can be detected in other writers who had to rethink the validity and role/place of the Torah in the faith.

**Keywords:** Torah reception; Church Fathers; ethical concerns; typology; pedagogical tool



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## 1. Introduction

Despite the great variety that existed among the early Christian writers, this paper will focus on the reception history of the way the Torah, its meaning, and contents were interpreted by the Church Fathers ranging from those who had some strong connection to the Apostles to those who lived till just past the end of the second century. Living during a time when a particular religious tension between Christians and Jews was palpable, theirs was not an easy task of having to “inherit” the Jewish Scriptures and yet at the same time reinterpret them.<sup>1</sup> Christians, having received the whole Torah, became selective in the way they embraced it, adhering to it only with reservations. What is meant by the Torah here is, prevalently, what Christians call the Pentateuch, with a particular focus on the various legal texts and prescriptions that it contains.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will not be concerned with any blatant rejection of the Torah and, indeed, the Tanakh at large (as was the case with Marcion), but rather with the subtler nuances that can be detected in other writers who had to rethink the validity and role of the Torah in the faith. It gauges whether Christians had a positive, negative, or neutral evaluation of the Torah and will seek to identify the ways in which they presented it. It is true that the Fathers' teachings are not homogenous on every point. However, those who were finally recognized as belonging to this category had expressed themselves on foundational views

in a way that was harmonious with the rest. By analysing the ways in which the Torah and at times other Old Testament texts were handled, their presentation of these Jewish Scriptures will be brought to light, noting different approaches employed in this regard.

The early decades of Christianity were intriguing times as they involved a major reinterpretation of the Scriptures in order to understand their true meaning in the light of Christ. This was no easy task, particularly since new members of the community hailed from both the Jewish world and the non-Jewish one. Early and later patristic exegesis had to walk the tightrope between Jesus' affirmation that not an iota of the Law will be cancelled and his own attitude towards certain Mosaic laws which he seemed to have abrogated.

The Acts of the Apostles and Galatians in particular manifest the apostles' own struggles in trying to understand the relevance of the Law, particularly in the debates that arose between Peter and James on the one hand and Paul on the other, the former seeking to incorporate Jewish legal customs within Christianity, and the latter advocating a clear break in this regard.

## 2. Sources and Methods

The main sources that must be consulted and analysed here are, naturally, the writings of the early Church Fathers. Given the fact that the destruction of the Temple was a momentous event that impelled the surviving Jews to treat the question of canon more conclusively, and since Christians were going through that same process simultaneously (Barton 2000, p. 207), the focus of this article will be the writings that were penned around the time of the finalisation of that process as well as the subsequent decades during which one witnesses considerable reflection on the choices of Scripture made. The cut-off point is 220 A.D., which allows us to include Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria who were born as early as 145 and 153 A.D. respectively. Despite Origen's very valuable contribution to Christian theology, he is not included here as he was born too close to the end of the second century (c. 185 A.D.).

The methodology employed is a bibliographic one, whereby the Church Fathers are treated chronologically, and their reception of the Torah is gauged by way of content and tone. Dealing with their writings chronologically secures the discovery of possible developments of thought, though given the relatively short period of time that is under investigation, such a development may not be tangible. This study also includes a minor comparative analysis with the Jewish thought of the time in order to understand more clearly to what extent the Christian writings differed from the former in their presentation of the Torah.

## 3. The Various Witnesses

This paper first takes into consideration the extant Christian writings known as the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, dated between the turn of the first century and the mid-second century. The majority of these writers lived between the destruction of the Temple and the Bar Kokhba Revolt. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Leviticus, with all its priestly and ritual prescriptions, was one of the books that received the least attention among these early Christian writers.<sup>3</sup> The paper also includes witnesses who lived till just past the second century. This allows a greater possibility of comparing and/or contrasting writers over a longer span of time. It must be stated that, when perusing the collections of canonical books as given by early Christian witnesses, practically all of them include the five books of the Pentateuch, namely the Torah.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1. Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome's *First Letter to the Corinthians* (around 97 A.D.), the first document we will analyse, merges a Hellenistic mentality with a Judaeo-Christian one. The author praises the Corinthians who, he claims, "walked in the commandments of God" (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 1, p. 5), and he also points out that "The commandments and ordinances of the Lord were written upon the tablets of your hearts" (ibid., chp. 2, p. 5). The letter

is noted for its literal interpretation of the Old Testament. It has been pointed out that personages such as Cain, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Joseph and his brothers, Aaron, and Miriam are dealt with insofar as human qualities and dynamics are concerned, and not in their hermeneutical potential to point to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> When Clement admonishes the Corinthians “to turn to every age that has passed, and learn that, from generation to generation, the Lord has granted a place of repentance to all such as would be converted to Him” (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 7, p. 7), it is clear that his main aim is not to read the Books of the Law Christologically but rather to highlight their humanity and employ them for didactic purposes, namely for personal edification. This, indeed, was due to the fact that envy and strife had debilitated the Corinthian church which he was addressing.

Treating the Law as furnishing narratives apt for teaching purposes, Clement even mentions “the priests and all the Levites who minister at the altar of God” as gifts given by him (ibid., chp. 32, p. 13). He goes so far as to seemingly continue to uphold the Temple priesthood and sacrifices which must be offered on particular days and at specific times: “Those, therefore, who present their offerings at the appointed times, are accepted and blessed; for inasmuch as they follow the laws of the Lord, they sin not”.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Clement endorses the bishops and deacons of the new dispensation. Rather than pointing to the now useless Temple rituals which had reached fulfilment in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, he speaks of the election of the Levitical tribe for the priesthood as an example of how, in the midst of strife, the episcopate should be respected.<sup>7</sup> His exaltation of Moses’ love for and defence of his people in Exod 32,32 goes in the same direction. (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 53, p. 19). All such images have a hortatory function in a letter which is aimed at exhorting the Corinthians to repentance, humility, love, holiness, and unity.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the Law in Judaism, Harnack notes the following: “The Law was both *regula fidei* and *regula disciplinae*—the latter, indeed, is yet higher degree than the former—and it was the immediate rule of life for each individual Jew” (Harnack 1912, pp. 28–29). That the same applied to Clement too is clear.

### 3.2. The Epistle of Barnabas

Though not entirely shrouded in mystery, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (100 A.D.) raises a number of questions with regard to its author. He is believed to have been an Alexandrian Jew, yet at times he also expresses himself like a Gentile. The time in which the letter was written followed the destruction of the Temple and was imbued with a Jewish nationalistic spirit such as that of the Maccabees (Coxe 1995, pp. 133–34). It is not surprising, therefore, that the stance adopted towards Judaism was not a happy one, “the numerous inaccuracies which it contains with respect to Mosaic enactments and observances” (ibid., p. 134) bearing witness to this fact. In this vein, the episode of Exod 32,15–19 where Moses breaks the stone tablets is interpreted as indicating the Jew’s unworthiness of the covenant which, therefore, was passed on to Christians (Coxe 1995, chps. 4, 14, pp. 139, 146).

Barnabas’ exegesis is an intertextual one, allowing the prophets to throw light on the ordinances of the Torah. This applies particularly to the question of sacrifices which, as the prophets would teach, were not really needed by the Lord. Circumcision too is treated in the same way, since Jeremiah and others clearly show that the circumcision of the heart is what counts (Jer 4,4; 9,25–26). Likewise, because in Isa 1,13 God says how he despises the people’s Sabbath, it is taken to mean that the celebration of the eighth day, the day Jesus rose from the dead, is what has become pleasing to him. The Old Testament itself then becomes the regulator of how the Torah is to be read, even before any Christological discourse is put forward: “For he revealed all these things to us beforehand, that we should not rush forward as rash acceptors of their laws”.<sup>9</sup>

As for the exegetical method employed, the Torah was read by Barnabas allegorically and typologically. This is the case, for instance, with fasting, the goat sent into the wilderness, Isaac, and the red heifer offered in sacrifice—all of these are read in the light of Christ. A somewhat Midrashic approach is used when Barnabas seeks to interpret the command not to eat swine in the light of the divine proclamation “And I will establish my ordinances

among this people" (Deut 4,1). The commentator takes this to mean that God was referring to something of a spiritual nature, not merely to swine, thereby meaning that believers should not join themselves to those who are like swine. Similarly, Barnabas reads the other forbidden animals—the eagle, the hawk, the kite, the raven, etc.—in a figurative way, as though they were referring to people who do not earn their food by their toil.<sup>10</sup> Such a way of dealing with the text of the Law ensures its preservation, albeit at a higher, more spiritual level.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. *The Didache*

Another positive assessment of the Torah comes from the *Didache*, belonging to the sub-apostolic age (i.e., first cent. and very early second cent. A.D.). It focuses on the two ways, the one of life and the other of death, and gives instruction on various Christian realities such as baptism, the Eucharist, prayer and fasting, as well as the apostles, teachers, and prophets. In the text, the Torah's commandments (especially from Exodus 20) supplement the Lord's teachings, thereby giving a holistic view of virtuous behaviour that leads to life. This is reminiscent of the *Epistle of Barnabas* which, in like manner, speaks of the way of light and the way of darkness employing precepts taken from the Law of Moses (Coxe 1995, chps. 18–20, pp. 148–49). That a number of Torah stipulations were commendable and that the imposition of a law was not shunned can be seen in Barnabas' own admonition: "be good lawgivers to one another" (ibid., chp. 21, p. 149).

### 3.4. *Ignatius of Antioch*

Despite his several letters, Ignatius of Antioch (30–107 A.D.) notably never cites the Law as such, though he does refer to it, reflecting a certain distance from Judaism which believers hailing from the pagan world seem to have had (Simonetti 1985, p. 27). It was on a long voyage to Rome, where he would be thrown to the wild beasts, that Ignatius wrote a number of letters. In one of these, written to the Philadelphians, he criticises those who do not accept the Gospel unless they find it in the ancient Scriptures,<sup>12</sup> pointing out that for him, "Jesus Christ is the place of all that is ancient". Ignatius continues by comparing, rather than contrasting, the old and new dispensations: "The priests indeed are good, but the High Priest [here he is referring to Christ] is better, to whom the holy of holies has been committed. . . the Gospel possesses something transcendent [above the former dispensation]. . ." (Coxe 1995, chp. 9, p. 84). The longer version of the letter clearly shows Ignatius' intent to subordinate the Law to a higher rule which is at the service of love: "All then are good together, the law, the prophets, the apostles, the whole company [of others] that have believed through them: only if we love one another".<sup>13</sup> Cautiously, I would like to put forward the idea that, in his *Epistle to the Romans*, wherein he entreats the Christians of Rome not to hinder his being thrown to wild beasts, his self-depiction as one offering himself to God through martyrdom may be a subtle critique of Temple sacrifice, indicating that martyrdom for the sake of Christ is of a higher value than the latter:

"Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. . . . Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]". (Coxe 1995, chp. 4, p. 75).

This is all the more plausible since Ignatius seems to connect his martyrdom with Christ's Eucharist which, in fact, is a participation in his total sacrificial offering on the cross.

In his letter to the Magnesians, his language is even more withering, for he leaves no room whatsoever for Judaism: "It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity. . .".<sup>14</sup> It is here, for instance, that we find a reference to the abrogation of the Sabbath and the embracing of the Lord's Day.<sup>15</sup> However, one must distinguish between Judaism and the actual Jewish Scriptures, the latter of which Ignatius upholds when implying that both the Law and the prophets can lead to Christ, though several who possess them still refused him.<sup>16</sup>

*The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero* is considered spurious, but even if it was not written by him, it clearly reveals the general mentality of early Christians who read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, giving meaning to the former in relation to the latter. The writer makes the following assertion: “If any one makes light of the law or the prophets, which Christ fulfilled at His coming, let him be to thee as antichrist. If any one says that the Lord is a mere man, he is a Jew, a murderer of Christ” (Coxe 1995, chp. 2, p. 113). Clearly, the author does not mince his words. His starkly differing stances vis-à-vis the Jews and their Scriptures, respectively, show how the early Church, engaged as it was in heated and polemical debates with Jews over their treatment of Jesus and their interpretation of the Scriptures, was not dissuaded from upholding the validity, though qualified, of those same Scriptures. Nonetheless, Jews themselves did not perceive the Christians’ reverence for the Torah as being in any way satisfactory or acceptable. So much so, that by the end of the first century, a malediction aimed at them became part of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. According to one version of it, “May the apostates have no hope, unless they return to Your Torah, and may the Nazarenes and the Minim disappear in a moment”.<sup>17</sup> Here, clearly, the Jewish understanding of the Torah is a broad understanding of God’s teachings and not merely the first five books of the Bible or even their more restricted legal content. However, the Christians’ interpretation of it, including their Christological re-reading of the written Torah, constituted for Jews an unacceptable break with their own hermeneutics.

### 3.5. *The Epistle to Diognetus*

A writing that furnishes interesting evidence on early Christians’ understanding of the Torah is *The Epistle to Diognetus* from 130 A.D. Its criticism is not so much directed at the Torah as towards the Jews’ interpretation of it, partly reflecting the Oral Torah that was eventually recorded by the Talmudic rabbis. The author calls himself “a disciple (Mathetes) of the Apostles” (Coxe 1995, chp. 11, p. 29), thereby giving greater weight to his exposition. The letter is a kind of polemic that, to some extent, ridicules the kind of worship found among Jews and pagans alike. As for the former, it speaks of “their scrupulosity concerning meats, and their superstition as respects the Sabbaths, and their boasting about circumcision, and their fancies about fasting and the new moons, which are utterly ridiculous and unworthy of notice” (ibid., chp. 4, p. 26). The author, therefore, criticises the notion of non-kosher food, limitations concerning doing good on the Sabbath, rigorous rules concerning the beginning and the end of the Sabbath,<sup>18</sup> and circumcision as proof of election. He also criticizes a pagan-like belief that Jews could have had in offering sacrifices to God if they believed that he actually needed what they offered him. Hence, the critique was not directed at the Torah stipulations as such, as it was towards its wrong interpretation and the vanity and boasting that could ensue from observing it.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.6. *Justin Martyr*

In line with the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which sees other parts of the Old Testament itself as indicating a different approach to the Law, the philosopher Justin Martyr, the first apologist of the second century (100–circa 165 A.D.), highlighted the notion of a new covenant announced by Jeremiah as indicating the end of the previous one: “For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone; but *this* is for all universally... an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us...” (Justin 1995, chp. 11, p. 200; see also (Osborn 2004, p. 845)). Later, Tertullian too would move along the same line of thought.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in speaking of Christ as the Lawgiver and in insisting on the new covenant that was promised through Isa 55,3-5 (LXX version), Justin actually honoured the Law whilst elevating it through a reinterpretation. Like Barnabas, he too employed a typological approach. He claimed that the Jews wrongly interpreted the Law of Moses and that the Sabbath, circumcision, and the feasts were given “on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts”. (Justin 1995, chp. 18, p. 203); see also (Justin 1995, chp. 43, p. 216). Such a hermeneutical manoeuvre ensured the upholding of the divine origin of the Torah in its entirety, whilst simultaneously dispensing with certain

aspects of it. Justin adds weight to his teachings by claiming that Jesus is “the everlasting law and the everlasting covenant” (ibid., chp. 43, p. 216).

### 3.7. Melito of Sardis

The works of Melito (d. circa 190 A.D.) have survived in fragments or are known through other writings. Though it was Paul who first used the term types (τύποι) in 1 Cor 10,6, Melito developed it further, possibly even differently from Barnabas and Justin Martyr who had employed the concept too.<sup>21</sup> Melito gives value to the Law, to Israel, and to the Old Testament types insofar as they were a preparation for the Gospel, the Church, and the New Testament, respectively. Hence, he makes the following contrasts (Table 1):

**Table 1.** Melito’s contrasts between the Testaments.

Old Testament	New Testament
analogy (the Law)	fulfilment (the Gospel)
types (the people, i.e., Israel)	reality (the Church)
had former worth	the things of true worth have been revealed
provisional	everlasting

The Old Testament aspects shown above were drained of meaning with the coming of Christ and were transferred into the realities of the New Testament. Melito states: “In the same way that the type is depleted, conceding the image to what is intrinsically real, and the analogy is brought to completion through the elucidation of interpretation, so the law is fulfilled by the elucidation of the Gospel...”.<sup>22</sup> Hence, his view of the former dispensation is not a negative one, since he attributes temporary value to it inasmuch as it was a preparation for the new dispensation. In fact, in the Law itself, one can discern the mystery of the Lord, which then found its version of grace in the new dispensation (Melito 2016, chp. 58, p. 52). Melito also claims that it was on account of Christ that everything in the previous law took place and that it did so even better in the new dispensation (ibid., chp. 6, p. 38). Hence, since the Law has been superseded by the realities of Christ, it is no longer necessary (ibid., chps. 40–43, pp. 47–48).

### 3.8. Irenaeus of Lyon

Irenaeus (120–202 A.D.) is another important early writer who engages with the problem of the Torah, noting how the Jewish elders added to or removed parts of the Law or gave their own interpretation of it, thereby creating their own law that is opposed to the one of God (Irenaeus 1995, Bk IV, chp. 12, n. 1, p. 475). Clearly, in criticizing their man-made traditions by resorting to Scripture to bolster his argument,<sup>23</sup> he also had in mind the traditions which were continually being created and which constituted the oral law of the rabbis. This would later become codified in the Mishnah and the Gemarah, forming the Talmud. Irenaeus continued by emphasising that love was the fulfilment of the Law, noting how healing on the Sabbath was not against the Law.

Before inspecting Irenaeus’ exegesis of Matthew 5, one must point out that Matthew seeks to present Jesus as the new Moses. By this, one should not suppose that Jesus was giving a new Law. Rather, he was interpreting it correctly. Noting Christ’s statements in Matt 5,21.27.33.38.43 (“You have heard that it was said... But I tell you...”), the Christian thinker stated that Christ “extended and fulfilled” (Irenaeus 1995, Bk IV, chp. 13, n. 1, p. 477) the natural precepts of the Law, as was the case with adultery, killing, and taking an oath, where Jesus broadened the understanding of the Law.<sup>24</sup> Here, Irenaeus disagreed with Marcion who saw in these statements of the Lord an overturning of Old Testament Law. On the contrary, Irenaeus noted how Jesus taught the people to do what the scribes and Pharisees ordered them to do since they sat on Moses’ seat, and that observing the commandments would cause the inquisitive young man to enter into life (Irenaeus 1995,

Bk IV, chp. 12, n. 4–5, pp. 476–77). He does, nonetheless, point to the transitory and subordinate nature of the Law (*ibid.*, chp. 14, n. 3, p. 479). It is transitory since Christ said he would no longer call the disciples servants, thereby showing that it is he who had subjugated them to the Law at the beginning, only leading them to freedom at a later stage (*ibid.*, chp. 13, n. 4, p. 478). Its subordinate, temporal, and typological nature comes from Exod 25,40 where God orders Moses to build all things according to the pattern he had seen on the mountain, and from 1 Cor 10,11 where Paul affirms that the rock the Jews drank from was Christ. Thus, whilst affirming the divine provenance of the Law, Irenaeus also notes the relative importance of some aspects of it, particularly those related to the temple, the Levitical priesthood, and the sacrificial cult.

The theologian of Lyon upheld the primary importance of the Decalogue but opined that God added more laws to it because the people's idolatry at the incident of the golden calf showed that they wanted to be subjugated to slavery.

“Preparing man for this life, the Lord Himself did speak in His own person to all alike the words of the Decalogue; and therefore, in like manner, do they remain permanently with us, receiving by means of His advent in the flesh, extension and increase, but not abrogation.

The laws of bondage, however, were one by one promulgated to the people by Moses, suited for their instruction or for their punishment, as Moses himself declared... The things, therefore, which were given for bondage, and for a sign to them, He cancelled by the new covenant of liberty”.<sup>25</sup>

The laws were, therefore, interpreted negatively as constituting such a yoke of slavery. He picked out Ezekiel's words in this regard: “And their eyes were after the desire of their heart; and I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments in which they shall not live” (Ezek 20,24); (Irenaeus 1995, Bk IV, chp. 15, n. 1, p. 479). Like Justin, Irenaeus mentioned the hardness of the hearts of the people as a reason for the giving of certain laws—here, he cited Jesus' words in Matt 19,7-8 in his debate on divorce. For him, the process by which God gave the Law's various components was a staggered one, reflecting the moral stature of his people, but Irenaeus' defence of the Decalogue—which contains the natural precepts of the Law—shows his regard for ethical concerns which rise above the confines of specific religious communities.

### 3.9. Tertullian

The next writer to be discussed here is Tertullian (145–220 A.D.). By the time he started writing, the clear distinctions that had arisen between Jews and Christians had led to their going separate ways, compelling Christians to give strong arguments for their acceptance or otherwise of Jewish scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

In Tertullian's writings, one sees a recourse to Scripture itself in order to deprive the Law of its force, for instance, when he mentions Adam, Noah, Enoch, and Melchizedek as having been uncircumcised and inobservant of the Sabbath (Tertullian 1995b, chp. 2, pp. 152–53). He speaks of temporal and eternal aspects of the Law (Sabbath, circumcision, sacrifices...), stating that the former were superseded by the latter (*ibid.*, chp. 3–6, pp. 153–57). He goes through Scripture with a fine-tooth comb, as when he distinguishes between “Your sabbaths” and “My sabbaths” to show that there is a temporal sabbath and an eternal one (*ibid.*, chp. 4, p. 155; cf. Isa 1,13; Ezek 22,8). Hence, the temporal one was to come to an end, particularly by pointing to certain prophetic announcements which are presented as overturning certain Torah ordinances.<sup>27</sup> In this light, presenting Christ as the “giver of the new law” (Tertullian 1995b, chp. 6, p. 157) is intriguing since, by doing so, Tertullian does not present Law as such in negative terms. In fact, he obtains proof of the coming of this new Law from the old one itself as well as from the prophets. Tertullian singles out these two sections of the Tanakh claiming that they had announced Christ. He thereby affirmed the validity of the Law with respect to its *promises*.

Basing himself on Paul's teachings, Tertullian stated that the Law "has been abolished, even by passing from shadow to substance—that is, from figurative types to the reality, which is Christ" (Tertullian 1995a, Bk V, chp. 19, p. 471). Here, Tertullian faces a challenge, namely that of relativizing the Old Testament Law and simultaneously upholding its divine origin.<sup>28</sup> This is so because he was addressing Marcion who had rejected the God of the Old Testament as though he were not the Father of Jesus Christ. Tertullian went about this problem by noting that a shadow cannot be separated from the body which creates it. He also averred that, in Paul's criticism of those who had come up with rules on abstention, the problem was not the Law of Moses, but rather that these persons were not united to the Head, that is Christ. Even in the case where Paul makes a distinction between a righteousness presumably obtained through the observance of the Law and a righteousness that comes from God (Phil 3,9), Tertullian opines that righteousness obtained not through the Law but "through him" implies that the Law belonged to him.

### 3.10. *Clement of Alexandria*

The last writer to be discussed is Clement of Alexandria (153–217 A.D.), not that the Torah is not dealt with by later Christian commentators, but for the sake of sticking to the first two centuries of Christianity. With Clement, one finds the most positive formulation of the Law. We may begin with the fact that he presents Moses as being superior to the Greek legislators, even claiming that Plato was aided by the books of Moses when formulating his legislation and that he furnished the Greeks with virtues such as valour, temperance, wisdom, and justice.<sup>29</sup> Because it emanates from God, Clement states succinctly: "It accordingly conducts to the divine" (Clement of Alexandria 1995, Bk I, chp. 26, p. 338). He praises Moses and the Mosaic law as the latter leads to the establishment of justice and right living in society, leading to goodness and nobility.

Reflecting Heb 12,4-11, which speaks of God's discipline, Clement compares the effect of the Law to the work of a bodily healer who uses painful means in order to bring wholeness to the body. He cites from Deut 8,2-3.5 to prove his point. He also uses Paul's words in Rom 2,17-20 where the apostle shows a highly positive regard for the Law. Clement affirms: "For both the law and the Gospel are the energy of one Lord" (ibid., 27, p. 340). To cite one example of his defence of the Law, it has been claimed that Clement was influenced by the Jewish philosopher Philo when, basing himself on the teachings of the Torah, he spoke against usury:

"In addition to confirming the influence of Philo, Clement turns from the defence of morality established by the Mosaic code to practical ways individuals might use biblical proscriptions to demonstrate Christian love and charity to one another out of gratitude and devotion to God. Clement provides no scripture as justification for this ban against usury, but it is undeniable that he is drawing from Deuteronomy because of the mention of the 'law'..." (Ihssen 2011, pp. 131–32)

This is just one practical way in which Clement views the validity of the Law as being beneficial and conducive, not only to a right civic way of living but even to a Christian one. Without a doubt, Clement of Alexandria is the Father of the Church of the first two centuries who held the Law in the highest regard. This was possibly due to his penchant for philosophical thought (which became evermore central in Christian reasoning) and his awareness that the Law offers an indispensable guide to correct behaviour. The fact that the tensions between Christians and Jews had subsided somewhat may have been another influential factor in this regard.

This is not the place to discuss Origen's writings, as they pertain to the third century. However, his position partly epitomises the general teachings of the Fathers of the first two centuries, namely that the Torah is still significantly valid, but he makes that claim in a more positive manner. It has been stated that his hermeneutical approach is "a paradigm for a non-supersessionist Christian reading of the Old Testament" (White 2002, p. 38). His take on the Law is that it must be read spiritually (by which he meant something more than

what is implied by an allegorical reading). Hence, both Jews and Christians should read these same texts, but their interpretation will be different.

#### 4. A Comparison with Jewish Thought

The Torah essentially constituted an important part of the Scriptures of Jesus and the early Christians. This explains why it was a source of information and verification in its own right for the New Testament writers. Paul would also use it in his rhetorical style of writing as one genre of proof to bolster his arguments, a tool in the art of persuasion. Manlio Simonetti notes how the writers of the New Testament, imbued as they were by the Jewish mentality from which they stemmed, used Jewish exegetical procedures to explain the Scriptures. This method, indeed, had been employed by Jesus himself as well as by Paul, who interpreted different Scriptures in light of each other, sometimes in a Midrashic way (Simonetti 1985, pp. 19–21). What is more, the technique of *peshar* was employed by Jesus when, for instance, he explained the text of Isa 61,1-2 in the synagogue. Simonetti adds that, beyond these formal elements of exegesis, one should consider the difference in the content or result of exegesis undertaken by Christians vis-à-vis that of Jews. This applies particularly to the texts which both considered messianic, but which Christians alone applied to Christ. Eventually, even non-messianic texts would be given Christological interpretations (ibid., p. 21).

The value given to the Torah by early Christians was gauged by the extent to which the Christ event affirmed its validity and gave it meaning.<sup>30</sup> The same applied to other types of Old Testament books, such as prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Speaking of Christians and Jews, McDonald claims that “The most important reason for their separation was, of course, not only a difference in the Jewish Christians’ understanding of Jesus as the hoped-for Messiah but also their understanding of the nature and role of the Torah”. (McDonald 2023, p. 29). For this reason, Christians adopted various approaches to the Law, spurred by the new interpretation of it by Jesus and also by Paul.

However, the value of the Torah was also gauged by the ethical weight it carried. Both in the Christological interpretation and in the ethical considerations, what is intriguing is the creative ways by which the Fathers managed to uphold the importance of the Law whilst concurrently showing how and why it was secondary to the Gospel of Christ. It is worth noting that, prior to the turn of the millennium, the Jewish writings that were appearing showed particular concern with protecting Judaism and its Scriptures.<sup>31</sup> In view of the fact that the Torah, that is the Pentateuch, was considered by Jews as the kernel of the entire revelation given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, the oral law which was eventually codified as the Mishnah around 200 A.D. represented the huge effort made by Jews to preserve and exalt the Torah. The fact that the word “torah” was translated as “nomos”, meaning “law” in Greek, meant a narrowing of the broad meaning of the term in Hebrew, which has a more positive evaluation than “nomos”.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Torah was translated as Pentateuch (“five scrolls”), this being a very neutral term that lacks the rich theological connotations of the word “torah”.

#### 5. Conclusions

The early Church found itself in a very peculiar position because, at one and the same time, it sought to uphold the Word of God embodied in the Torah and also to give it a significantly new interpretation that simultaneously relativized it. The polemical milieu in which this hermeneutic unfolded surely contributed to the development of Christian thought about the Torah. What Klinghoffer states about Paul must have been applicable to other exponents of the Christian faith too, though to varying degrees: “What really outraged so many of the Jews who heard Paul can be expressed simply: He presented himself as an exponent of, and an expert in, their faith, but what he really sought to do was undermine it from within” (Klinghoffer 2006, p. 106).

By the second half of the second century, the Church steered away from the heated debates concerning the validity of the Law and the Old Testament in general, clearly

embracing the Scriptures which revealed the covenant with the Jewish people. However, this involved a major rethinking and reinterpretation of these texts, which was multifaceted. Throughout this process, in line with the fact that the Church Fathers did not always produce a perfectly coherent and harmonious theology, these writers can be said to have had differing stances vis-à-vis the Torah. In the late first and second centuries, there was no single, monolithic way of dealing with the Torah. The value of the Law depended on its writers, their audiences, a penchant for the method of Jewish exegesis or, at the other end of the spectrum, a polemical stance vis-à-vis Jewish interpretation. The way the Torah was dealt with was indeed multifaceted.

The most negative views were that certain laws were instituted as a result of the people's hardness of heart (Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon) and that the Jews interpreted the Scriptures incorrectly (Justin Martyr). The majority, however, were more positive. The most basic were the views that the Torah was a useful pedagogical tool in terms of its narratives, highlighting human attitudes that must be nurtured or shunned (Clement of Rome) and that the Torah's commandments supplemented the Lord's teachings (the Didache). The Torah was also valued but subordinated to love (Ignatius of Antioch). Finally, it was held in the highest regard by Clement of Alexandria due to its ability to show the right course of action and correct living in society. In this respect, the Law was not shunned but it was somehow preserved.

There were also interpretations that were rather critical of Torah stipulations: the Scriptures themselves, particularly prophetic literature, relativize the dictates of the Old Testament laws; moreover, the latter are spiritualised by the prophets (Barnabas). Similarly, whilst upholding the promises of the Law, the prophets were seen as going beyond it (Tertullian), and the Law had value inasmuch as it was a preparation for Christ and the New Testament, but it has since been superseded (Melito of Sardis). Hence, despite such positive readings of the Law, it was, however, generally seen as being subordinate to Christ and the Gospel.

It can be safely stated that such approaches were laying the foundations for later biblical exegesis concerning the dictates of the Torah. It is quite intriguing that the argumentations presented around the turn of the first century do not often base themselves on the authority of Jesus' words as such, nor on Paul's writings concerning justification by faith instead of the works of the Law (though we find exceptions such as is Clement of Rome's assertion that we are not justified by our abilities or efforts but by faith) (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 32, p. 13). Rather, they mostly seek to extract the real meaning of the Torah from the Jewish Scriptures themselves, whilst gradually introducing the idea of typology in relation to Christ. In this regard, the necessity of allowing these texts to throw light on the fulfilment brought about by Jesus rendered the very Law indispensable at least insofar as it foreshadowed a better future that was yet to unfold in and through Jesus.

The earliest Fathers had already pointed out that Jesus is attested by Moses and that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Torah. As mentioned above, the *Epistle of Barnabas* presents Moses as breaking the two tables as though to allow the old covenant to pave the way to the new one which would be sealed by Jesus (Coxe 1995, chp. 4, p. 139). In this sense, Jesus is seen as the fulfilment of the promises made earlier (ibid., chp. 5, p. 139). Melito of Sardis uses a Pauline concept, that of "type", and reads the Gospel of John in this light, seeing Jesus' work of salvation as fulfilling that which was presented in the type, namely the Jewish Passover (Melito 2016, chps. 31–32, p. 45).

However, one notes that, rather than highlighting the different results of Jewish and Christian exegesis (as Origen did later due to his claim to a spiritual reading of the Torah), the earlier Fathers were eager to emphasize the negative aetiology of the Torah in terms of a problematic Jewish spiritual disposition, its wrong interpretation by Jews, its being only a shadow of the eternal Law, and hence its temporary quality and its subordination to higher realities. Precepts that were in line with a Christian ethic—such as those embodied by the ten commandments, loving one's neighbour, and practising justice—were not dispensed with. Moreover, at no point was the Torah's divinely inspired quality considered

compromised. Rather, the negative aspects stated above had their flip sides which, among others, were the reality of an eternal divine Law, a spiritual understanding of the Law, and a Christological reading of the Old Testament. However, it was in its appreciation as a source of ethical guidelines that the Law seems to have been valued equally by Jews and Christians alike.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As (McDonald 2023, p. 20) points out, New Testament authors made extensive use of the Jewish Scriptures, at times using scriptural passages to create their own texts without citing those passages formally. “The authority of these sacred texts can be seen in the NT writings, whose authors regularly wrote with scripture as they made their case for Jesus’ identity, teachings, and mission, and for their core beliefs, guidance for Christian behaviour, and mission”.
- <sup>2</sup> Though “torah” is usually believed to derive from yārâ through its Hiphil form hôrâ (“to teach”), its etymology is somewhat contested; cf. (Selman 2003, pp. 497–98). See also (Oswald 2016) for its various shades of meaning.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. (Balás and Bingham 2004, p. 273). Adding it to a number of other books outside the Pentateuch, the authors speak of “the more limited role of these books in the development of early Christian thought”.
- <sup>4</sup> These include Melito, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril, Epiphanius, Gregory, Amphilochius, Hilary, Jerome, Rufinus, Augustine, Carthage and Alexandrinus (A). Sinaiticus (Ⲙ) has several losses or omissions in the Pentateuchal section. Cf. (McDonald 2002, pp. 585–88).
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 4, p. 6); (Simonetti 1985, pp. 25–26) mentions Rahab’s scarlet cord as an exception inasmuch as it is a prefiguration of the blood of Jesus.
- <sup>6</sup> (Clement of Rome 1995, chp. 40, p. 16). During the time when this letter was written, there existed so-called Ebionites, Jewish followers of Jesus, some of whom upheld a Pharisaic observance of the Torah and Jewish practices: cf. (Klinghoffer 2006, p. 92).
- <sup>7</sup> Here, he employs the narrative of Num 17 concerning the blossoming of the Levite’s rod.
- <sup>8</sup> The second letter of Clement, which seems to be a homily, has no reference to the Books of Moses (except for one minor citation), for which reason it will not be discussed here.
- <sup>9</sup> (Coxe 1995, chp. 3, p. 138). In like manner, Irenaeus of Lyon employs the use of various prophetic texts and psalms in order to emphasize the fact that what mattered to God was not animal sacrifices, but rather the right disposition of the heart; cf. (Irenaeus 1995, Bk IV, chps. 17–18, pp. 482–86).
- <sup>10</sup> (Talamo 1904, p. 22) had noted the way that several Fathers spiritualised the concept of slavery but that, whilst holding that interior liberty is superior to bodily freedom, they still encouraged respect for the equal dignity of all.
- <sup>11</sup> This term is found in the shorter version of the letter. The longer letter has the term “archives” instead of Scriptures. Though this is somewhat obscure, one may presume he is referring to the old institutions of the Jewish faith. Cf. (Coxe 1995, chp. 8, p. 84).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., chp. 9, p. 85. But see also (Ignatius of Antioch 1995, chp. 6, p. 82) where he admonishes his readers not to listen to anyone who preaches Judaism to them.
- <sup>13</sup> (Coxe 1995, chp. 10, p. 63). In the longer version, rather than “to Judaize”, one finds the phrase “to cherish in the mind a Judaism which has now come to an end”.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. (ibid., chp. 9, pp. 62–63). On the other hand, in the spurious Coxe (1995, chp. 13, ANF 1, p. 119), the Sabbath retains some degree of importance: “If any one fasts on the Lord’s Day or on the Sabbath, except on the paschal Sabbath only, he is a murderer of Christ”.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. (Coxe 1995, chp. 5, p. 88). Speaking of those who deny Christ, he states: “These persons neither have the prophets persuaded, nor the law of Moses, nor the Gospel even to this day, nor the sufferings we have individually endured”.
- <sup>16</sup> (Klinghoffer 2006, p. 116). One might assume that the Minim also fell under the umbrella of the apostates. See also (Horbury 1982, p. 19).
- <sup>17</sup> This concept seems to be implied by the phrase “waiting upon the stars and the moon”, which Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 26 n. 6 interprets as referring to the custom of bringing work to a halt before the three stars of moderate size appeared on Friday evening.

- <sup>18</sup> In (Coxe 1995, chp. 1, pp. 153–55). Papias (70–155 A.D.), bishop of Hierapolis, in Phrygia, contrasts “strange commandments” to those given by the Lord, thereby revealing his understanding of Torah prescriptions. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 153 notes that “strange commandments” means “commandments belonging to others”, these being foreign to Christians. One might suspect that Papias’ understanding of Torah legislation failed to attribute to it a positive evaluation which was characteristic of the writings of other Church Fathers.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. (Tertullian 1995b, chp. 5, p. 156) on how the prophets themselves went beyond the Law when, for instance, Mal 1,10–11 (LXX) prophesied that sacrifices would be offered to God in every land, and not just in the land of promise as had been indicated by Lev 17,1–9 and Deut 12,1–26. Likewise, Ps 51,17 speaks about a contrite spirit which is like a sacrifice to God, and Isa 1,11 criticizes the multitude of sacrifices.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. (Melito 2016, p. 31). Stewart-Sykes points out that there were variations in the way the concept of “type” was interpreted by different early writers; cf. *ibid.*, p. 38.
- <sup>21</sup> (Melito 2016, chp. 43, p. 47). Stewart-Sykes, (Melito 2016, p. 32), states: “Melito compares these types to sculptors’ working models, and to metaphors: they are of use only until the finished work has been made. The people of Israel are as the artist’s model, a preliminary sketch for the Church”.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* He cites Isa 1,22 referring to the adding of water to wine, thereby denoting the watering down of the Law, and Matt 15,3 where the Lord Jesus himself criticizes the traditions they created.
- <sup>23</sup> (Levine and Brettler 2011, p. 11) claim that Jesus’ statements here are not an antithesis, but a form of intensification that functions as a fence around the Torah.
- <sup>24</sup> (Irenaeus 1995, Bk IV, chp. 16, n. 4–5, pp. 481–82). Here, A. Cleveland Coxe adds the following note next to the mention of the Decalogue: “Most noteworthy among primitive testimonies to the catholic reception of the Decalogue”.
- <sup>25</sup> The second century A.D. saw the rise of the early rabbinic guild that produced the Mishnah which was based heavily on scriptural law; cf. (Lightstone 2002, p. 183).
- <sup>26</sup> See note 19 above.
- <sup>27</sup> (Osborn 2004, 1:849): “Nature is the primary norm for all, common to all people, in whose hearts it is inscribed (De Cor. 5–6). This was made explicit in the Decalogue, but the law proceeds from Moses to its final fulfillment in Christ (Adv. Marc. 4,15–16)”.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. (Clement of Alexandria 1995, Bk I, chps. 25–26, pp. 338–39) and (Clement of Alexandria 1995, Bk II, chp. 18, pp. 365–69) respectively. In this latter chapter, the theologian imparts teachings on love by referring to the Torah (specifically Leviticus and Deuteronomy). See also (Clement of Alexandria 1995, Bk II, chp. 5, pp. 351–53).
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Bk I, chp. 27, pp. 339–40. The full version runs as follows: “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you”.
- <sup>30</sup> (Simonetti 1985, p. 23) speaks of the spiritualisation of the Law in the writings of Paul.
- <sup>31</sup> In an article entitled “Self-portrayal as a ‘Fence around Torah’: An Ethical Critique of Eleazar’s Martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 6:18–31”, *StBiSl* 14/2 (Attard 2022, pp. 33–55), I have tried to show that the positive portrayal of Eleazar’s persona is at the service of avowing allegiance to the Torah, thereby guaranteeing its survival.
- <sup>32</sup> See note 2 above.

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