

Matthew 11:13

Pastor: Matthew 11:13: The Law of Moses was only in effect until John the Baptist.

“For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.”

It is very easy to envision Christian layreaders, or even various pastors, quote the Messiah’s word of Matthew 11:13, in an effort to dismiss the continued relevancy of the Torah in the post-resurrection era. Yeshua first lauds John the Immerser, by stating, “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist!” (Matthew 11:11a). Describing him as “born of woman” is likely taken from various Tanach sentiments (Job 14:1; 15:14), representative of the normal human order. John the Immerser is pristine among mortals. However, it is also noted, “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11b). It is not difficult to recognize how there is a contrast between John the Immerser and Yeshua the Messiah.

John the Immerser/Baptist is a transitional figure from what has come in the past, and what Yeshua the Messiah will inaugurate via His ministry activities—something he will not be around to experience (cf. Matthew 14:10ff). Yeshua observed, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). The statement about the Kingdom of Heaven either experiencing violence, or being entered into violently, is representative of how when God’s Kingdom begins to manifest itself on the platform of history—controversy and violence will erupt.¹

The arrival of John the Immerser onto the scene in the First Century C.E., immediately before the ministry of Yeshua of Nazareth, was indeed a sign that a significant shift was going to take place. John the Immerser represented the culmination, but also the closing, of a previous chapter in God’s plan of salvation history. Take important note of what Matthew 11:13 says: *pantes gar hoi prophētai kai ho nomos heōs Iōannou eprophēteusan* (πάντες γὰρ οἱ προφήται καὶ ὁ νόμος ἕως Ἰωάννου ἐπροφήτευσαν), “for~all the prophets and the law until John prophesied” (Brown and Comfort).² Textually, the issue from Matthew 11:13 involves how one approaches *prophēteuō* (προφητεύω), “**to foretell someth. that lies in the future, foretell, prophesy**” (BDAG).³ When it is properly recognized how anticipated prophetic fulfillment from the Torah and the Prophets until John the Immerser (*heōs Iōannou*) is what is being spoken of by Yeshua, then it can be properly evaluated whether or not an abrogation of Moses’ Teaching is even something possibly in view. As will be seen there are various Christian commentators who do not see an abolishment of the relevance of the Tanach or Old Testament, at all being what is described.

It is witnessed that there are examiners, some of whom do not at all believe in the continued validity of God’s Torah, who recognize that the issue in Matthew 11:13 is a transition into a new period of salvation history, brought about by the work of the Messiah:

- D.A. Carson: “The Baptist belongs to the last stage of the divine economy before the inauguration of the kingdom (as in Luke 16:16)...here the point is to set out the redemptive-historical turning point that has brought about the transformation of perspectives explained in vv. 11-12...[T]he primary function of the OT in Matthew’s Gospel [is]: it points to Jesus and the kingdom...The Prophets and the Law prophesied until then and, implicitly, prophesied of this new era.”⁴
- Donald A. Hagner: “The totality of God’s previous revealing activity...and the expectation for the future built up in the writings of the OT culminate in John...For Matthew, the law and the prophets bear a united witness to Jesus...This statement...cannot be understood to mean that John himself was the goal of the OT, since he has been identified already as the

¹ Consult the further discussion in the FAQ, “Violent Seize Kingdom of God.”

² Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, trans., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 39.

³ BDAG, 890.

⁴ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:268.

forerunner of someone else (v 9), but that John serves as a transition to the new (contrast Luke 16:16) and as such is here included with the new...The point is that a key turning point has been reached, marking off the old from the new.”⁵

- R.T. France: “It was not only the prophets who pointed forward to what was to come; the law, too, had this function, preparing the way for a fuller revelation of the will of God which was to come in the time of fulfillment, and which Matthew now finds present in the ministry of Jesus...With the coming of John, the last and greatest of the prophets, that forward-pointing role is complete.”⁶

It would be entirely fair to take the statement of Matthew 11:13, “For all the prophets and the Torah prophesied until the time of John” (TLV), as representing how the Tanach or Old Testament Scriptures isolated and on their own are incomplete. The vantage point of Yeshua, in making this statement, is highlighting the predictive prophecy component of the Tanach, and how such a purpose was to culminate with the arrival of John the Immerser. As the New Jerusalem Bible puts Matthew 11:13, “Because it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading.” Following John the Immerser, would be Yeshua the Messiah, and the new realities that His work would inaugurate. Leon Morris properly stresses that the central focus of God’s revelation and activity, is not supposed to be the Torah and the Prophets, but rather the Messiah. This hardly means that the Tanach or Old Testament Scriptures are to be cast aside, but they are secondary to the Living Yeshua they prophesied about and foretold:

“This means that the whole of the Old Testament revelation is viewed as preliminary to the coming of Jesus. It is interesting that the Law is said to prophesy as well as the prophets; both had their origin in God and both conveyed the word of God to people. Both indeed conveyed the authentic word of God, but Jesus is saying that both were of limited duration. They both did their work until the coming of John, the herald of the incarnate Son of God in whom came the definitive revelation. *Until* has the force of ‘up to John but not beyond him.’ This does not mean that now that John has come the law and the prophets may be discarded. The whole Christian revelation insists on the continuing significance of both law and prophets. But until the ministry of John the law and the prophets were the sum of the divine revelation; nothing could be set alongside them. Jesus is saying that with his coming a new age has dawned. The law and the prophets are no longer the revelation that is the key to everything else. The revelation made in Christ is the key to the revelation in the law and the prophets.”⁷

The NEB offers a useful paraphrase of Matthew 11:13, “For all the prophets and the Law foretold things to come until John appeared.” Until John the Immerser arrived on the scene, who would be a herald of the Messiah, the main purpose of the Tanach Scriptures was to prophesy of His arrival. Yeshua notes that John came in the spirit of Elijah (Matthew 11:14; cf. Malachi 3:1; 4:5). With Yeshua the Messiah having arrived on the scene, far from the Torah and the Prophets being dismissed as irrelevant, or dusty Bible history, the Tanach Scriptures become subsumed into the mission of the Messiah. As Michael J. Wilkins states, “John is the culmination of a long history of prophecy that looked forward to the arrival of the messianic kingdom. That prophetic hope has been realized in John’s preparation for Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom of heaven.”⁸ The parallel word of Peter in Acts 3:24 is, “all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and *his* successors onward, also announced these days.” And indeed, not only is the Messianic Kingdom one where the Torah will go forth from Zion to be taught to the nations (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3),⁹ it is also one where all of Planet Earth will be keeping the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23).¹⁰ *This is hardly a dismissal of the Torah’s validity!*

⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Vol 33a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), pp 307-308.

⁶ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 431.

⁷ Leon Morris, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 283.

⁸ Michael J. Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 417.

⁹ Consult the author’s exegesis paper on Micah 4:1-4 and Isaiah 2:2-4, “The Torah Will Go Forth From Zion,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

¹⁰ Consult the entry for Isaiah 66:23 in the *Messianic Sabbath Helper*.

Yeshua's remark of Matthew 11:13 is not disparaging of the Torah and the Prophets, the Tanach or Old Testament Scriptures. Yeshua's statement cannot be used to dismiss the ongoing relevancy of the Torah and Prophets as a means of guiding His followers in ways of holiness and piety. Yeshua's statement can be used to emphasize how the Torah and Prophets by themselves are *incomplete without Him and being a part of His Kingdom*. "The Law and the Prophets *were proclaimed* until John¹¹; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached" (Luke 16:16).

¹¹ Grk. *ho nomos kai ho prophētai mechri Iōannou* (ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται μέχρι Ἰωάννου); "the law and the prophets [were proclaimed] until John" (Brown and Comfort, 276).

The RSV has rendered this rather neutrally as, "The law and the prophets were until John." This was inappropriately followed by the NRSV with, "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came."