

John 1:17

Pastor: John 1:17: The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth realized through Christ.

“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Yeshua the Messiah.”

In referencing John 1:17, it is easy to detect that the pastor is relying upon a rather simplistic understanding of God’s Law and God’s grace, presenting them as being polar opposites. Many, who have read John 1:17 isolated, have come to the false conclusion that grace somehow did not exist in the period of the “Old Testament.” It is assumed that grace is a concept that is only found in the “New Testament,” and that it is not present in the “Old Testament.” But anyone, who is honest, and who reads the Tanach objectively, can see the grace and mercy of God present throughout it. Furthermore, anyone, who reads the Apostolic Scriptures objectively, can likewise see the judgment and wrath of God present. The judgment and wrath of God are not “Old Testament” concepts exclusively, just as grace and mercy are not “New Testament” concepts exclusively.

John ch. 1, specifically vs. 1-34, is one of the most well-known and appreciated parts of the Bible, as it details the pre-existence and Divinity of Yeshua (John 1:1-4), the ministry of John the Immerser/Baptist (John 1:5-13, 19-34), and describes Yeshua as the Word made flesh:

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified about Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.”’ For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. **For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Yeshua the Messiah.** No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*” (John 1:14-18).

The context of John’s Gospel communicating these words undeniably regards the Incarnation and the entry of the Messiah into the world, as God Himself has taken on flesh as a human man in the person of Yeshua—Yeshua actually being considered the “only begotten God” or *monogenēs Theos* (μονογενής θεός). The God of Creation participating in humanity, in the person of Messiah Yeshua to offer permanent atonement for sins, is considered to be the greatest manifestation of grace and truth coming to the Earth.¹

The Torah was originally given by God to Moses to establish for the Ancient Israelites a code of conduct which would make them holy and set-apart from all the nations around them. The Torah or the Law was not only Divinely inspired, but when kept was to be something “for your good” (Deuteronomy 10:13). The Torah was certainly given by Moses to Israel as a means of God’s grace, in establishing a definite code of conduct and what He considered acceptable and unacceptable. If followed properly, obedience to the Torah is to bring God’s blessings to those who follow it. The challenge, of course, is that much of the witness of Scripture bears testimony to the fact that disobedience to God’s Law has been more commonplace.

While the scene of Mount Sinai and Moses being given the Torah by God is most awesome to consider, the entry of the Messiah—the One whom John the Immerser said “was before me²” (John 1:15, RSV)—into the world to provide Himself as a sacrifice, **is something that is clearly more important.** But Yeshua’s sacrifice on behalf of sinners—precisely because of their disobedience to God’s Law—by no means makes the Torah unimportant all of a sudden. It does, however, show us that the revelation of the Torah is *most incomplete* without the revelation of the Messiah.

¹ Be sure to consult the analysis of John 1:1-18 in *Salvation on the Line, Volume I: The Nature of Yeshua and His Divinity—Gospels and Acts*.

² Grk. *prōtos mou ēn* (πρώτος μου ἦν); John 1:1 has previously employed the same verb, *ēn* (ἦν): *Theos ēn ho logos* (θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος); “the Word was God.”

There is much discussion, and even some confusion, in Johannine scholarship, about how to view the assertion “For of His fullness we have all received, and **grace upon grace**” (John 1:16), or “**grace for grace**” (KJV). Difficulty ensues from the perspective one takes concerning the phrase *charin anti charitos* (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος), with a selection of interpreters concluding that one revelation of God’s grace has been replaced by a further revelation. While it is definite that God’s grace as revealed in the Torah is surely surpassed by God’s grace revealed in the Messiah—does one revelation of grace get *superseded* by another which follows?

This is precisely the contention of Douglas J. Moo: “If we give the preposition *anti* [ἀντί] its normal ‘substitutionary’ sense, this statement will mean that the grace by which the law was given has been displaced and superseded by the fuller measure of grace that has now come in Christ.”³ While Moo does not deny that there is grace from God witnessed in the Tanach Scriptures, he does, though, conclude “the grace by which believers now live comes in Christ ‘in place of’ that grace that accompanied the Mosaic law,”⁴ further arguing for a strong supersessionist or replacement theology theme to the Gospel of John.⁵ Moo is notably not alone, as there are various commentators on John who surely think that there is a strong contrast intended between Moses and Yeshua, with Yeshua “replacing” Moses to some (large) degree in John 1:16-17.⁶

How are readers to correctly view the clause *charin anti charitos* in John 1:16? Common renderings that you will encounter include: “one blessing after another” (NIV), “grace after grace” (HCSB), and “grace on top of grace” (LITV). The *BDAG* entry for the preposition *anti* (ἀντί) notes for us that “χάρις ἂν χάριτος *grace after or upon grace*” is how “God’s favor comes in ever new streams.”⁷ *AMG* further describes how *anti* is used “In John 1:16, trans. with ‘for’ in the phrase ‘and grace for grace,’ meaning grace upon grace, most abundant grace, one favor in place of or after another. God’s grace is not given once-and-for-all, but there is a renewal of it that is constant.”⁸ There are those who would make the linguistic argument that *anti* does not imply that God’s grace in the Messiah replaces God’s grace in the Mosaic Torah, but rather that God’s grace in the Messiah is a natural continuance of God’s grace first revealed in the Mosaic Torah.

The most commonly referenced ancient witness, where the preposition *anti* is used in the sense of God’s graces being displayed to people in a progressive order, is seen in the First Century Jewish philosopher Philo:

“On this account it is, that God always judiciously limits and brings out with wise moderation his first benefits [*charitas, χάριτας*], stopping them before those who partake of them become wanton through satiety; and then he bestows others in their stead; and again a third class of advantages instead of the second set [*heteras ant’ ekeinōn kai tritas anti tōn deuterōn, ἑτέρας ἀντ’ ἐκείνων καὶ τρίτας ἀντὶ τῶν δευτέρων*]” (*On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 145).⁹

Leon Morris actually indicates, “John does not use the preposition ἀντί apart from this passage”¹⁰ in Philo. Even while thinking that there is a strong contrast in John 1:16 intended between God’s Torah and

³ Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 372.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

The TNIV follows Moo’s suggested rendering: “grace in place of grace already given” (TNIV). The New Jerusalem Bible similarly has, “one gift replacing another.”

⁵ In *Ibid.* Moo argues that this would concern the work of the Messiah replacing Tanach institutions such as the Feast of Tabernacles, Passover, and even the people of Israel.

⁶ Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp 110-111; D.A. Carson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp 131-133.

⁷ *BDAG*, 88.

⁸ *Zodhiates, Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 190.

⁹ Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 147.

¹⁰ Morris, *John*, 110 fn#111.

God's grace, Morris still concludes that the main point of this verse is, "God's grace to His people is continuous and is never exhausted."¹¹

There is actually a much earlier usage of the preposition *anti* that more closely corresponds to what is seen in John 1:16, *charin anti charitos* (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος), appearing in the Fifth Century B.C.E. play *Helen* by Euripides (480-406 B.C.E.). In the dialogue King Theokymenos tells the woman Helen, *charis gar anti charitos elthetō* (χάρις γὰρ ἀντὶ χάριτος ἐλθέτω; *Helen* 1234).¹² This has been rendered as "May grace upon grace come to you!" (Clarke),¹³ "since favour is for favour due" (Way),¹⁴ or "Grace should be given in return for grace" (Lattimore).¹⁵ In his commentary on Euripides' *Helen*, William Allan notes how for *charis...anti charitos* (χάρις...ἀντὶ χάριτος), "the repetition emphasizes the reciprocity of favours."¹⁶

So is the clause *charin anti charitos* "grace in place of grace" *or* "grace upon/for grace"? Is the grace witnessed in God's Torah now to be replaced and superseded by the grace evidenced in God's Messiah? F.F. Bruce does not think that a sharp contrast between such graces is intended in John 1:16. He comments, "In the phrase 'grace upon grace' the preposition is *anti* but no satisfactory sense can be obtained by pressing it to mean 'instead of' here. What the followers of Christ draw from the ocean of divine fullness is grace upon grace—one wave of grace being constantly replaced by a fresh one."¹⁷ Yeshua's word in 2 Corinthians 12:9 should be remembered here: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

It is not at all a problem if readers of John 1:16-17 recognize that the grace of God witnessed in the Torah of Moses is *not limitless*—something to be contrasted on some level to the *limitless* grace of God provided in the permanent atonement of Yeshua the Messiah. This way, with one manifestation of God's grace leading to its greatest manifestation, the Torah would not be disrespected or even replaced. Instead, the Torah's necessary limitations could be recognized and the significance and value of the Messiah's completed work for sinners given their greater due honor. As Gary M. Burge notes, "John does not intend to show that the grace of Christ stands at odds with the revelation of Moses. The law likewise contains the grace of God and is an earlier display of it."¹⁸ Without the limited grace manifested in Moses, one cannot truly appreciate and understand the boundless grace manifested by the Messiah. There can be a contrast between Moses and Yeshua recognized in John 1:16, but sadly too many of today's Christians have pushed such a contrast to a point of considerable contradiction. And, this is not just a problematic choice of words, where Yeshua should be said to *surpass* Moses in significance, as opposed to *supersede* him.

To be fair, it does have to be acknowledged that not all interpreters of John 1:16, who take the preposition *anti* to mean "in replacement of," think low of the Mosaic Torah. In George R. Beasley-Murray's assessment, "ἀντὶ appears to indicate that fresh grace replaces grace received, and will do so perpetually, the salvation brought by the Word thus is defined in terms of inexhaustible grace."¹⁹ The replacement, then, is not presented in the form of Moses' Teaching being replaced by Yeshua's teachings—but how an exhaustible Mosaic grace is now to be overcome by an inexhaustible Messianic grace. Bruce Milne, also taking *anti* as meaning "in replacement of," concludes that the grace of Moses being replaced by the grace of the Messiah *does not* also mean that the Torah is abolished:

¹¹ Ibid., pp 110-111.

¹² The Greek source text has been accessed via the Perseus Collection <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>>.

¹³ E-Sword 8.0.8: Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible.

¹⁴ Euripides: *Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus Hecuba, The Daughters of Troy, Helen*, trans. Arthur S. Way (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 573.

¹⁵ Richmond Lattimore, trans., "Helen," in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Euripides II: The Cyclops, Heracles, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 242.

¹⁶ William Allan, ed., *Euripides Helen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 288.

¹⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 43.

¹⁸ Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 60.

¹⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Vol 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 15.

“This phrase is often understood as an unbroken series of ‘grace gifts’, so *one blessing after another* (NIV)...While this is a great truth which the New Testament elsewhere attests (*cf.* 2 Cor. 12:9), it is possible to take ‘instead’ (*anti*) in its more straightforward meaning of ‘replacing one thing by another’, and so view this phrase as asserting that the coming of God in his grace in Christ supersedes the grace of the ‘old covenant’ revelation. This interpretation can then be carried forward into verse 17, where the law given through Moses is in a sense set over against the *grace and truth* brought in Christ. This of course does not imply that the Old Testament revelation is set aside or the law abrogated. Rather it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and thus remains in force. This is how John consistently sees the Old Testament throughout his gospel.”²⁰

In view of the usages of the preposition *anti* (ἀντί) in both Philo (*On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 145) and Euripides (*Helen* 1234), we should significantly prefer *charin anti charitos* (χάριν ἀντί χάριτος) to be rendered along the lines of “**grace upon grace**” (RSV/NASU/NRSV/ESV) or “**grace for grace**” (KJV). About as far as any of us should prefer pushing *charin anti charitos* should be “**grace after grace**” (HCSB) or “**grace in exchange [anti] for grace**” (EXP),²¹ as the limited grace available to God’s people in the Torah of Moses does help us to see the magnanimity of the unlimited grace available in the completed work of Yeshua the Messiah. For, without the revelation of the Torah, none of us can really fathom the significance of the revelation of the Messiah!

Continuing in John 1:17, be immediately aware of how the KJV (and NKJV) presents an inappropriate level of contrast between God’s Law and God’s grace, by including the conjunction “*but*” in its English rendering: “For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” In the Greek of John 1:17 (either in the Textus Receptus used for the KJV, or the critical textual editions used for versions today) the conjunction “*but*” — which could be either *de* (δέ), *kai* (καί), or *alla* (ἀλλά)—is noticeably absent:

hoti ho nomos dia Mōuseōs edothē, hē charis kai hē alētheia dia Iēsou Christou egeneto (ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο).

“**for the law through Moses was given, the grace and the truth through Jesus Christ did come**” (YLT).²²

In contrast to the pastor or layreader who wants there to be a sharp distinction (or even contradiction) between God’s Law and God’s grace, various commentators on John largely recognize that John 1:17 is not at all to be taken as a degrading statement on the Torah. John 1:17 is frequently viewed from a prophetic vantage point, as the Torah points to the full grace of God that is only present in the Messiah. D.A. Carson, who does think that the Torah was in place mainly for the pre-resurrection era and is largely not to be followed today, states, “The flow of the passage and the burden of the [Gospel of John] as a whole magnify the fresh ‘grace’ that has come in Jesus Christ. That grace is necessarily greater than the ‘grace’ of the law whose function, in John’s view, was primarily to anticipate the coming of the Word.”²³ Here, no disparate contrast between the Torah and grace are intended, even by one who thinks that the time for following the Torah is over. A much better perspective of John 1:17, with the revelation of God’s Torah naturally pointing to the greater revelation of God’s Messiah, is offered by Beasley-Murray:

“The deliverance under the ‘first Redeemer’ (as the rabbis viewed Moses) issued in the gift of the Law; this was ‘given,’ not as a burden, but as a revelation of God’s will for his people (there is no hint of polemic against the Law). The redemption brought about by the ‘second Redeemer,’ the Logos-Christ, occasioned a

²⁰ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 49-50; for a similar conclusion see also Donald Guthrie, “John,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 931.

²¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “John,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:33.

²² The LITV and NLT also include “but” in their renderings, but is not indicated by *italics*.

²³ Carson, *John*, 133.

revelation of God and an experience of salvation characterized by ‘grace and truth.’ But this means the earlier revelation of the covenant faithfulness of God was brought to an eschatological fulfillment; the second Exodus under the Logos-Christ led to the new order of the eternal kingdom of God.”²⁴

Beasley-Murray’s comments indicate that Yeshua coming to Earth is by no means in contrast to God’s revealed will in the Tanach, as he is clear to state there “is no hint of polemic against the Law”²⁵ in John 1:17. Even though salvation history has progressed forward with the Messiah’s Kingdom in view, this is not at all in opposition to the Torah. In fact, Beasley-Murray makes an important observation on how John 1:18b says “He has explained *Him*,” using the verb *exēgeomai* (ἐξηγέομαι),²⁶ which emphasizes how significant the Messiah’s arrival onto the scene truly is:

“The term ἐξηγήσατο [*exēgēsato*] is related to the English term ‘exegesis’; in Josephus it is the technical term for the exposition of the Law by the rabbis. The object of the exposition from the Logos-Son is the Father. This ‘exegesis’ is peculiarly authoritative by virtue of the unity of the Son with God, expressed in the phrase ‘who is in the bosom of the Father,’ i.e., in closest fellowship with him (cf. 13:23).”²⁷

Indeed, no one reading John’s Gospel can overlook the fact that a right reading of Moses’ Teaching is mandatory for acknowledging Yeshua as the Messiah (John 1:45; 3:14; 5:46; 15:25). Yet no Believer should be under the delusion of thinking that if people have Moses’ Teaching, they do not need Yeshua’s teachings and most importantly **His salvation**. The Messiah is clear in John 6:62, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven.” Only with the Son of God present in our lives can we truly understand the will of the Father—even if such a will was, at least partially, delivered by servants of His like Moses.

David H. Stern’s remarks in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, concerning John 1:17, are also very valuable in how no denigration of Moses is intended here:

“It is sometimes thought that [this] verse demeans Moshe [Moses], but this is not the case. On the contrary, that a mere man for whom no claim to divinity has ever been made should even be compared with the Word of God incarnate shows how highly Yochanan [John] regards Moshe.

“Nor does he demean the *Torah*, God’s eternal ‘teaching’ about himself as given to Israel, by comparing it with **grace and truth**. Elsewhere Yeshua himself says that he did not come to abrogate the *Torah* but to fill it out (Mt. 5:17-20...), and preceded to follow this program by interpreting the *Torah* in ways that make its meaning and commands even clearer (Mt. 5:21-48).

“**Grace and truth** are personal attributes of God which Yeshua not only revealed in a unique way during his brief earthly lifetime, but, in his eternal capacity as the Word of God, has been continually bestowing on humanity since the dawn of creation. Grace, truth and the *Torah* are all from God, supreme expressions of who he is...”²⁸

Gail R. O’Day draws a similar conclusion: “The gift of the law through Moses (Exod 20:34) is placed next to a new gift: the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ. Verse 17 does not disparage the previous gift, but points to the gift now available through Jesus Christ as something wondrously new.”²⁹

It is true that in the First Century Jewish world, it would have been difficult for many Jewish people to see God’s salvation in terms other than *exclusively* the Exodus from Egypt and being brought to Mount Sinai. These are undeniably some of the most important events in human history, but as the Apostle Paul had to

²⁴ Beasley-Murray, 15.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “to set forth in great detail, expound” (BDAG, 349).

²⁷ Beasley-Murray, 16.

²⁸ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 156.

²⁹ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:523.

assert to the Romans, “now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (Romans 3:21). God’s righteousness had been made known in an event separate from the main event of the Pentateuch: the Exodus. Yet, this righteousness in Messiah Yeshua (Romans 3:22) is surely something which both the Torah and Prophets speak of and aim toward.

When the Torah was given to Moses at Mount Sinai, there was a distance between him and the Lord (Exodus 33:20; cf. John 1:18b). While grace is certainly found in the Torah and Tanach, grace would only become **fully manifest** with God Himself participating in humanity via the Incarnation of Yeshua. This does not mean that the Torah has been abolished or done away, given Yeshua’s own words on the matter (Matthew 5:17-19). But what it does mean, for us as His followers, is how it is not enough for us to only heed Moses’ Teaching; **we have to be spiritually regenerated with hearts filled with God’s love and mercy** and heed Yeshua’s teachings and words. We must never take for granted the sacrifice of the Messiah at Golgotha (Calvary), because He has absorbed onto Himself the capital penalties that the Torah demanded of us (Colossians 2:14). In Yeshua, the Torah is to experience grand fulfillment by those who emulate Him *and* who can understand the critical truth, “For if you really believed Moses, you would be bound to believe me; for it was about me that he wrote” (John 5:46, Phillips New Testament).