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The 'Yoke of the Torah' as a source of joy in Judaism and Jesus's use of the yoke metaphor in Matthew 11:29–30

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In Matthew 11:29–30, Jesus uses the image of a yoke in his interaction with the Pharisees. It is most common to interpret these verses as depicting the Jewish leaders – placing the 'yoke of the Torah' upon the people as an oppressive burden, in contrast to Jesus's teaching, offering a different kind of yoke – one that is light and provides rest for the soul. In this article, it is argued that this contrast is insufficient for an appropriate understanding of Jesus's use of the yoke metaphor. Firstly, to portray the 'yoke of the Torah' as an unbearable burden would be in tension with Jewish tradition, in which this 'yoke' is regarded as a source of joy. The first part of this article therefore explored the concept of the 'joy of the Torah' within Jewish tradition, the very context in which the New Testament was written and within which it should be interpreted. It turned out that this joy is a prominent aspect in Jewish religious life, connected to the image of taking up the 'yoke of the Kingdom'. It is within this view of the term yoke that Jesus speaks to the Jewish leaders. The second part of the article proposed an alternative reading of Jesus's reference to his own teaching as a 'yoke'. If Jesus's message opposed concrete obedience to the Torah, this would not only contradict the understanding of the yoke of the Torah as a source of joy among his audience, but also contradict his own affirmation of the Torah, as, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount. An intertextual analysis of the words used in Matthew 11:28–30 elucidated that Jesus's use of the yoke metaphor echoes a positive use of this image, specifically by Jeremiah and Ecclesiasticus. Thus, there is much more continuity with the Old Testament and Jewish usage of the yoke metaphor than is suggested in the traditional exegesis of this passage.

Contribution: Finally, it is concluded that this not only sheds new light on the use of the yoke metaphor by Jesus in this passage, but it could also stimulate a fruitful dialogue with the Jewish tradition on how to live with the Torah as a source of joy. Moreover, this interpretation aligns with the whole framework of Matthew's Gospel, never abolishing the Law, as underscored in the dissertation of Francois Viljoen, to whom this contribution is offered as a token of friendship.

Keywords: Jesus and the Torah in Matthew; 'Take my yoke upon you'; Matthew 11:29–30; yoke of the Kingdom; joy of the Torah; Simchat Torah; Jewish interpretation; intertextuality; Jesus and the Pharisees; rest for the soul.

Introduction

Jesus's use of the image of a yoke in his interaction with the Pharisees in Matthew 11 is frequently interpreted as emphasising a contrast between his own teaching and that of the Jewish scribes. According to this interpretation, the Jewish leaders are depicted as placing the ritual and cultic demands arising from the Pharisaic interpretation of the law, upon the people as an oppressive burden. In contrast to that 'yoke of the Torah', Jesus's teaching is understood as offering a different kind of yoke – one that is light and provides rest for the soul. But is this truly the contrast Jesus intended to draw? This article argues that it is not.

To portray the 'yoke of the Torah' as an unbearable burden would be in tension with the Jewish tradition, in which taking upon oneself the 'yoke of the Kingdom' is regarded as a source of joy. The first part of this article – offered in honour of Francois Viljoen as both a scholar and a friend – explores the concept of the 'joy of the Torah' within Jewish tradition, the very context in which the New Testament was written and within which it should be interpreted.

The second part of the article proposes an alternative reading of Jesus's reference to his teaching as a *yoke*. If Jesus were opposing his message to the yoke of the Torah, this would create a

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theological dissonance with his own affirmation of the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount. There, in Matthew 5:17–20, he explicitly states that he has not come to abolish the Law – a statement that Viljoen (2016:6) considers 'pivotal to Matthew's teaching of the Law, not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but within the whole framework of his Gospel'.

How then should we understand Jesus's invitation to take up his yoke as 'easy' and 'light'? This article seeks to illuminate the metaphor of the yoke in Matthew 11:28–30 by examining the intertextual echoes that inform Jesus's words.

Simchat Torah

The joy of the Law occupies a central place in Jewish life under the Torah. Israel lives by the voice of God. The *Shema Yisrael* from Deuteronomy 6:4 expresses the deepest foundation that sustains Israel: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one'. This confession is proclaimed in every synagogue service with a raised voice and intense attention. Here, one finds the profoundest source of joy in the Jewish experience of faith: the awareness of being permitted to live by the voice of God, as expressed in his Torah.

A culmination of this joy is expressed in the festival that bears its name: *Simchat Torah* [Rejoicing in the Torah] celebrated at the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). This festival is itself already rich with joy. According to the explicit commandments in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16, the Feast of Tabernacles is still celebrated today by rejoicing before the Lord for seven days (see Lv 23:40; Dt 16:13, 14). In Jewish tradition, it has become customary to conclude the annual cycle of Torah readings at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, and to begin the new cycle – starting again with Genesis 1 – during the same service. This practice is of ancient origin. Equally old is the custom of linking the exuberant joy of the harvest – celebrated during *Sukkot* – with the delight in the gift of God's Word at Mount Sinai. In this sense, the latter further developed into the feast of *Simchat Torah*, which may be regarded as a new festival: a celebration of joy over the Law. Yet it remains intimately connected to *Sukkot* and the joy it prescribes, and thus to the way it was surely already celebrated in the time of the New Testament. Israel's ultimate joy lies not in the harvest but in the reception of the Torah.

This is celebrated in a literal and physical manner: the Torah scrolls are taken from the ark and carried around the *bimah* [reading table] and throughout the synagogue in joyous procession. This is done while dancing. It is considered a great honour to lead the procession, holding the Torah scroll close to one's heart.

Young children are included in this celebration. They are given soft toy Torahs to hold and join the procession, dancing behind the scrolls. They learn that this is Israel's greatest source of joy – that God has spoken in his Torah, and that this Word can be pressed to one's heart. Naturally, this is also taught in religious education, but the children also learn it in a physical, embodied way by participating in the joyful carrying of the Torah. It is hoped that, when they become *b'nai mitzvah* [children of the Law] – they too will be able to fully take part in this joyous celebration.

Joy as a commandment

In Judaism, joy is, firstly and foremost, a commandment. This commandment is not defined or initiated by the emotions of believers, or by any subjective response to the Word – feelings that may at times be lofty and elevated, but at other times, however, distant or diminished. It is commanded by the Lord. Leviticus 23:40 states: 'Rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days', and Deuteronomy 16:14–15 commands:

> Be joyful at your Feast ... For seven days celebrate the Feast to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

Here, in concentrated form, we see the essence of what is intended in the entire service of God, as described in Deuteronomy 12:12, 'Rejoice before the LORD your God – you, your sons and daughters, your men servants and maid servants, and the Levite from your towns'.

Psalm 119:174 proclaims: 'Your law is my delight'. This joy in the Torah is especially expressed in the festivals, and most fully in the festival of *Simchat Torah* – the rejoicing over the Law. In this way, Psalm 100 takes on concrete form: 'Worship the LORD with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs.'

This is the starting point: a divine commandment – one that is not contingent upon human emotional experience but is presented to the people of God as a solemn and sacred obligation.

Joy as practice

In Judaism, joy is also a matter of human effort. This is closely connected to the idea of joy as a commandment. The essential point is that this command must be obeyed and that individuals are called to exert themselves in fulfilling it. A commandment that one reflects upon, discusses, and studies holds great significance – but it only achieves its purpose when it is enacted. According to Jewish thought, such an achievement is considered to be within the realm of human capability. God does not command joy if it would be impossible to respond to it. Precisely, the command to rejoice leads, through the effort of rejoicing, to the deeper purpose of fulfilling the commandments, namely that we perform them with joy.

In his book, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Solomon Schechter (1961) challenges the notion that obedience to the Law is burdensome. He observes that many Christians of his time hold this view of Judaism: that the Law is a yoke that weighs heavily upon the shoulders of Jews, ultimately preventing them from experiencing true joy in their relationship with God (Schechter 1961:154). According to *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, this 'stereotypically negative charge of Jewish

legalism' has, even today, 'not fully evaporated from Christian critiques of Judaism, whether popular or scholarly' (eds. Levine & Brettler 2011:515). Yet, as Schechter notes, anyone who has witnessed the beginning of the Sabbath in a Jewish household and observes it or has spoken with Jews who eagerly anticipate the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) as an opportunity to express joy before God, will realise that the Law is not a heavy burden. It is not something under which Jews groan (Schechter 1961:148). The author of this contribution to the *Festschrift* recognises this from his own experience, as well as that of his students.

An early and characteristic *midrash* underscores the importance of practising this joy. This concerns a discussion in the *Tosefta* (Peah 3:8), about the commandment found in Deuteronomy 24:19:

> When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

The *midrash* includes the following story (cf. Neusner 2002):

> A certain righteous man forgot a sheaf in the middle of his field. He said to his son, 'Go and bring me the following thank offering: a bull for a burnt offering and a bull for a peace offering'. (p. 65)

A parallel tradition even adds that he prepared a festive meal for his friends. His son asked him:

> 'Father, why are you so joyful about fulfilling this commandment, more than all the other commandments of the Torah?'

His father replied:

> The LORD has given us all the commandments of the Torah so that we may fulfil them consciously. But this one commandment He gave so that we might also serve Him unconsciously. For if someone were to try to fulfil this commandment intentionally, he would not have truly fulfilled it. (cf. Neusner 2002:65)

Indeed, if I *intentionally* forget a sheaf, I have not forgotten it at all – I have acted deliberately, possibly seeking to earn merit. But if I *truly* forget the sheaf, without being aware of it, I fulfil God's commandment unknowingly. It is precisely this that leads the man to his highest joy, prompting him to offer thanks to God.

This *midrash* illustrates three key points. Firstly, it implicitly reveals the underlying intention behind the fulfilment of the commandments: doing what God commands brings joy before his presence. It is a meaningful achievement that produces genuine happiness. Secondly, the *midrash* about the forgotten sheaf shows that the highest joy in fulfilling the commandments is ultimately not in human hands. If one tries to fulfil this particular commandment deliberately, one fails to fulfil it at all. This insight carries broader implications: the deepest joy in fulfilling the commandments cannot be seized or manufactured by human effort alone. And yet, thirdly, this does not mean that the path to such joy is closed off. On the contrary, a way is indicated for attaining that very joy. This never stands apart from concrete action, from the specific deeds connected to the specific commandments of the Torah. Joy grows and flourishes through the concrete practice of Torah obedience.

Sincere intention

This brings us to some reflections within Jewish tradition concerning the proper intention in fulfilling the commandments. The central concept, repeatedly emphasised in this context, is that the commandments are to be fulfilled *lishma* – that is, for their own sake, for the sake of the Name of the One who gave them.

A well-known saying by Antigonos of Sokho encapsulates this idea, he used to say:

> Be not like slaves that minister the master for the sake of receiving a bounty, but be like slaves that minister the master not for the sake of receiving a bounty; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you. (Mishna, Avot I,3, transl.; Danby 1933)

Although the Mishnah was compiled at the end of the 2nd century CE, it contains ancient sayings that were transmitted orally for decades – sometimes even for centuries. Antigonos of Sokho, for example, taught in the 2nd century BCE. Recent research has shown that oral traditions are more stable than previously assumed.

In connection with Leviticus 1:9 where the offerings are described as a *pleasing aroma* to the LORD, the Sages remark, 'This means that you shall perform what God has commanded with no other intention than to bring pleasure to Him who created the world' (*Talmud*, Zebachim 37a).

Rabbinic tradition repeatedly warns against a host of improper motives for observing the commandments: fear of punishment, concern for public opinion, and whether one can genuinely rejoice in the fulfilment of the commandments (cf. *Talmud*, Sota 22b).

A *midrash*, interpreting Numbers 27:22 – 'Moses did as the LORD commanded him' – explains that 'as the LORD commanded him' signifies that Moses was filled with joy (*Sifre Numeri* 141; cf. Urbach 2001:391). Similarly, on Deuteronomy 26:14, 'I have done according to all that You commanded me', the *midrash* notes: 'This means: I have rejoiced in doing so, and I have brought joy to others through it' (*Sifra*:128a).

Those commandments, which are fulfilled with joy, are accounted to a person as righteousness, an ancient *midrash* teaches (*Mechilta* 66b, cf. Schechter 1961:150). This demonstrates the absence of ulterior motives: where there is joy in doing what God has commanded, the act itself becomes the way of being connected with God.

This is why, as another *midrash* suggests, there are no hot springs in Jerusalem. At the Sea of Galilee, there are delightful thermal springs (*Sifre* Be-ha'alotekha, par. 89; cf. Urbach 2001:393). Had such springs existed in Jerusalem, the

commandment to make pilgrimage there three times a year might have been carried out with ulterior motives. Thus, the absence of such comforts ensures that this commandment is to be fulfilled with sincere intent. In this way, the joy of communion with God is found in the very act of performing the Torah.

The yoke of the Kingdom

The general principle is the following: tremble with joy when you are about to fulfil a commandment. For in doing so, one takes upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the realm in which God himself reigns as king. How could he be closer than to the one who shoulders the yoke of his Kingdom? Hence, the call to tremble with joy is directed to those who stand on the threshold of fulfilling what God has commanded (Schechter 1961:150).

To reach this joy, the commandment must be carried out with the right intention. Two individuals may perform precisely the same external action, while only one truly serves God with joy, and the other does not even fulfil the commandment at all. The Talmud offers a striking interpretation of Hosea 14:10, the words that conclude his prophecy: 'The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.' The *midrash* compares this to two people who slaughter and roast their Passover lamb. One eats it as the fulfilment of God's commandment, while the other eats it merely as he would eat any other meal – simply for the enjoyment of good food. For the first, who eats in response to God's Word, the verse applies: *the righteous walk in them* – he walks in the way of the LORD. For the second who eats with no such intent, however, it is said: *the rebellious stumble in them* (*Talmud*, Nazir 23a; cf. Urbach 2001:393, 394).

The same commandment, even enacted in outwardly identical ways, becomes for one person a path of divine communion and for the other a stumbling block. For one, it serves as a connection to God; for others, it becomes a matter detached from God, and it thus distances them even further from him.

This, the rabbis taught, depends on the disposition of the heart. A pointed statement from the Talmud reflects on Psalm 112:1: 'Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in His commands'. The blessing belongs to the one who performs the commandments not for the sake of the reward they may bring, but out of joy in the commandments themselves, as expressions of God's will (*Talmud*, Avoda zarah 19a; cf. Schechter 1961:162).

Joy as a reward

In Judaism, joy is firstly and foremost a divine instruction. Secondly, it is also a human practice, requiring a sincere intention. By embodying obedience in conduct, the commandments become embedded in daily life, and one may experience the nearness of the Kingdom of God. Hence the call: *Tremble with joy as you take upon yourself the yoke of the Kingdom.*

There is still a third aspect. The experience of joy is in itself also part of the reward for fulfilling the commandments. This reward is not confined to some distant future; rather, the joy found in doing the commandments is already a foretaste of the reward that God attaches to obedience.

To describe this idea, the rabbis developed the concept of *simcha shel mitzvah* [the joy that is inherent in the commandment itself]. This joy begins even in the fulfilment of a small commandment. The ancient tractate *Avot* records a wise saying by Rabbi Azzai, who draws this conclusion:

> Run to fulfil the lightest duty even as the weightiest, and flee from transgression; for one duty draws another duty in its train, and one transgression draws another transgression in its train; for the reward of a duty [*done*] is a duty [*to be done*], and the reward of one transgression is [*another*] transgression (*Mishna,* Avot IV,2; transl. Danby).

Fulfilling a *mitzvah* [commandment or duty] places the believer within a spiritual cycle that leads to the fulfilment of further commandments. Within that cycle, one will begin to perceive the nearness of God. That is why even the smallest commandment may be given great attention, as a way of experiencing the joy that arises as the reward for obedience. This pursuit of fulfilling a *mitzvah* is experienced very concretely in Judaism. There is often a visible delight in doing something simply because it offers an opportunity to fulfil a commandment.

Perhaps the clearest example of this cultivation of joy through the performance of a specific commandment can be found in the customs surrounding the celebration of the Sabbath as a day of gladness. The Sabbath is the sign of the covenantal bond between God and his people. At the beginning of Friday evening, the Sabbath is welcomed as a bride: received with bows and sung to with songs reminiscent of a wedding celebration. After the synagogue service, a special meal is prepared at home in honour of the Sabbath. This meal includes songs and distinctive dishes.

It is deeply moving to hear in *Yad Vashem* [the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem] the testimonies of those who, even in the concentration camps, tried to imitate a Sabbath meal. A rabbi recounts how his parents, when he was a child, would treat the crust of bread they had managed to save during the week as Sabbath bread. A small piece of potato was treated as if it were fish, and even water was spoken of as their Sabbath soup, with appropriate blessings pronounced over each. The meals of the past were relived with whatever was available to retain the joy of the Sabbath.

In the quest for concrete obedience to God's commandments, and in cultivating that obedience down to the smallest detail, the reward of keeping the commandments is already made manifest: the joy of connection with God. That is *simcha shel mitzvah*.

The reason that such joy is tied to the commandments, lies in the fact that the commandments connect the one who fulfils them with their source, that is God, who offers them to

his people. At the same time, this present joy points toward a future joy – one that is even greater still. Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo (2008:288) writes, 'On Sabbath, Jews live in the future.' Of course, he adds, it is not realistic to live in a future time zone. And yet, that is precisely what Judaism has done for thousands of years. The attitude is clear: Why not enjoy now what anyway is going to happen in the future? Why not borrow something from the future? (Cardozo 2008:288). Cardozo points out that music, particularly the songs sung on Sabbath evening, can serve as a bridge to that coming world. Song lifts people beyond the present and can become a gateway to joy.

Take my yoke upon you

The metaphor of the yoke of the commandments does not evoke negative feelings in Jewish tradition. On the contrary, it refers to the observance of the commandments as something that brings one closer to the King, and therefore, it is a source of deep joy.

What then is the consequence of this for interpreting Jesus's invitation in Matthew 11, where he uses the same image of a yoke: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me … and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Mt 11:29, 30)?

At first hearing, it seems that Jesus is offering something completely different from what people had known until then. This is also how the text has often been interpreted. Jesus is thought to be speaking against the Pharisees, who imposed heavy burdens on the people. Grundmann (1986:317) states, 'Jesus places his yoke in contrast to the yoke of rabbinic interpretation of the law', and Albright and Mann (1971:146) is just as clear, 'An easy yoke and a light burden are offered in exchange for the arbitrary demands of Pharisaic legalism and the uncertainties of ever-proliferating case law'.

But is that really the contrast the Gospel is making here? If that is the case, then speaking from a Christian point of view, all the reflections mentioned above regarding the joy of the law in Judaism can at best be observed as an outdated phase in history.

Is this truly the contrast at issue here? In his conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus's reference to the image of a yoke would in any case not be understood by them as an attack on their way of thinking, because they did not see the yoke they were bearing as a cause of sorrow. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that the light burden Jesus offers is meant to free people from observing the Torah. As previously indicated, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not promote a lifestyle for his disciples that disregards the law – on the contrary.

Against what background, then, does Jesus speak these words? How would this metaphor have been understood at that time?

The yoke as a biblical image

In his words, Jesus closely aligns himself with a tradition that was well known. He literally refers to several passages from Scripture, both explicitly and implicitly quoting them.

The metaphor of the 'yoke' in the Hebrew Bible is ambivalent, carrying both negative and positive connotations. In a negative sense, a yoke is used to symbolise oppression by enemies. Most often, Babylon is mentioned in this context, which placed a heavy yoke upon Israel. In such cases, the breaking of that yoke signifies liberation, bringing great joy to God's people (e.g. Is 9:3; 10:27; 14:5, 25; Jr 27:9, 11; 28:2, 4, 11, 14; 30:8; Ezk 34:27).

However, the image of a yoke is also frequently used in a positive sense in the Bible. It then refers to walking in the ways of the Lord – a protective yoke resting on the shoulders – entirely in line with the positive usage emphasised in subsequent Jewish tradition. In Jeremiah 5:5, for example, the yoke is mentioned alongside 'the way of the Lord' and 'the requirements' of God (Jr 5:4; cf. the similar use of the image in Jr 2:20). The prophet accuses the people of having broken this yoke and torn off the bonds that secured it, symbolising their rejection of the Torah. In this context, the breaking of the yoke is not an act of liberation but one of covenantal unfaithfulness. Breaking this yoke is certainly not something to rejoice in.

A little further in this prophecy, we find a verse that is quoted verbatim in Matthew 11. God calls his people to 'look for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and to walk in it'. Here, the prophet urges the people to take up again the yoke they had broken. Thus, Jeremiah 6:16 states: 'you will find rest for your souls'.

In this positive sense, the image of a yoke also appears in *Jesus ben Sirach* (Ecclus 51:23–27), where Wisdom invites:

> Come to me, enter the house of instruction. How long will you be in need of these things, and will your soul thirst for them? I opened my mouth and spoke: Gain wisdom for yourselves without money. Bow your neck under her yoke and let your soul accept instruction. She is near at hand to be found. See with your own eyes: I have laboured only a little, and I have found much rest for myself.

The invitation, the terms labour (in the Greek of Sirach: *ekopiasa*) and rest [*anapausis*], along with the motif of the salvific yoke, establish strong intertextual connections with Matthew 11:28–30.

The same themes are also found in Sirach 6. There too, Wisdom – understood in *Sirach* as the righteous life in accordance with God's Torah – lifts her inviting voice, calling people to bow their neck under her yoke: 'Put your feet into her fetters, and your neck into her collar. Bend your shoulders and carry her, and do not be weary of her bonds' (Sirach 6:24, 25). 'For in the end, you will find the rest she gives, and

she will become your joy' (Sirach 6:28). Thus, by taking up the yoke of Wisdom, understood as a life according to the commandments, you will find rest [*anapausis*]. 'Her bonds will become a strong protection and her collar a glorious robe. Her yoke is a golden ornament, and her bonds are a cord of blue' (Sirach 6:29, 30). The echoes of these words in Matthew 11 are unmistakable. Evidently, Jesus's words closely align with this well-known tradition.

The yoke metaphor as a positive image

These intertextual connections lead to the conclusion that Jesus's invitation in Matthew 11 primarily draws on the tradition that speaks positively about the yoke as the way one lives with God and his Word. This implies that there is no strong contrast here between Jesus's use of the yoke image and the way his contemporaries thought about the yoke of the Torah. On the contrary, both Jesus and the Pharisees align in their use of the yoke metaphor with those scriptural passages that value the yoke positively – both as the yoke of God's wisdom and as the yoke of following God's ways by keeping his Torah. There is a close connection both thematically and in terms of form and terminology.

The difference between Jesus and those Jewish leaders who do not accept him does not lie in contrasting the heavy yoke of the Torah with the light burden of freedom from the law. It rather concerns the question of how one can live such a life. Where is the source of connection with God? Ultimately, the great difference is found in the One who speaks here: Jesus himself, the Messiah of Israel. Jesus calls people to come to him and follow him. In listening to God's will, the crucial question is to be connected to him. That connection to him makes living with the yoke of the Torah different because he himself is present in that yoke of his Kingdom.

Conclusion

Much of what has been thoughtfully developed in Jewish tradition regarding the yoke of the Kingdom remains meaningful – also to non-Jews who have come to discover that the way to life with God is opened to them by taking upon oneself the yoke of Jesus.

Firstly, the previously noted notion of joy as beginning with God, rather than with one's own emotional state – as strongly emphasised within Jewish tradition – is evidently significant, also for a Christian life with God's Word. Secondly, the principle of attentively hearing his Word and responding through action as a means of communion with him, retains enduring significance. Thirdly, attention should be drawn to the aspect of the joy found in fulfilling God's commandments as a foretaste of an even greater joy to come. All three of these dimensions call for further reflection within the Christian context: joy as a calling, as a matter of concrete obedience, and as both affirmation and anticipation of greater joy to come.

All of this is brought into a new perspective through the words of Jesus. The decisive difference is that Jesus himself, through his Spirit, accompanies the Word he speaks to us – so that he himself is present within the yoke of his teaching. This, again, aligns with the message of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: it is by doing the will of the Father that one responds rightly to his words (Mt 7:21), thereby confirming – not abolishing – the Torah (Mt 5:17; 7:12). In this way, by 'obeying everything' he has commanded his disciples, and by teaching these things, he himself is 'with them' as the source of their life (Mt 28:20).

This offers an entirely different illumination, yet it does not negate the meaning of the reflections on the yoke of the Kingdom, found in Jewish tradition. On the contrary, these reflections can open the eyes of Christians to spiritual dimensions that are deeply relevant for a Christian life with the Torah as God's Word as well.

Finally, a meaningful *midrash* may be brought forward. The question is asked: Why does Deuteronomy firstly state, 'Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God; you shall love the LORD your God' (Dt 6:4), and only later say, 'If you faithfully obey the commandments that I am commanding you today, to love the LORD your God […]' (Dt 11:13)? The answer given in the Mishnah is this: to make clear that one must firstly take upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven – expressed in the recitation of the *Shema*, where Israel confesses that it lives solely by the voice of God – and only then can one take on the yoke of the commandments (Berakhot II, 2).

This perspective on the proper order – affirmed in Jewish tradition – can form the basis for a fruitful dialogue between Jews and Christians about reading Scripture and living with God and the Torah. The notion that Jesus's words in Matthew 11 would preclude such a conversation arises from a reductive caricature that merits correction on two fronts: both the negative depiction of Jewish engagement with the Torah and the interpretation of Jesus's yoke metaphor as a repudiation of the 'yoke of the Torah' warrant reconsideration. It has been this author's experience that, where Christians are open to such a re-evaluation, a meaningful and constructive dialogue not only becomes possible, but proves mutually enriching. Indeed, it may be precisely Jesus's use of the yoke metaphor in Matthew 11 that offers a valuable point of connection for such a conversation.

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The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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