Issues Addressed [1]
The issue addressed in the paper is the logic of the placement of 5:17-20 within the speech.

Further questions:
1. Why does Jesus mention the law at this stage of the speech?
2. Why does he lay so much stress on its irrefragability?
3. What is the meaning of ‘till heaven and earth pass away’, and what are the ‘all things’ which are to be accomplished and when will this be done?
4. What is the relation between 5:13-16 and 5:17-20?

Connections [1-4]
5:13-16 and 5:17-20 are not isolated but linked logically with the argument of 5:1-20 [1-2]. 5:13-16 connects with the personalised address of 5:1-10 and 5:11-12; 5:11 is linked to 5:10 which is linked to 5:1 and 5:3 [2-4]. The persecution in 5:10 follows after that of the Old Testament prophets [4, also 10].

The wider context [4-6]
This fits the wider context, where Jesus ‘has begun a prophetic type succession after the imprisonment of John the Baptist’ [4]. Jesus then gathers before him, on ‘the mount of further revelation, representative Israel’ [5].

The setting may evoke a covenant renewal or recall situation, or Sinai, but more important is the connection with the mountain of 28:16-20:

Perhaps more germane to the interpretation of the mountain scenario is, however, the world mountain setting of Matthew 28:16-20 set again in Galilee where disciples are commissioned to go into the κόσμος apparently in terms which envisage the application to the world as a whole of the Abrahamic covenantal structure with which the gospel has begun. [6]
The Beatitudes [6-10]

In this setting the beatitudes and what follows are delivered. Jesus consciously puts distance between himself and the disciples on the one hand and the crowds on the other and the address which is then apparently to the disciples programmatically and magisterially begins with ‘Blessed are the poor in Spirit’ (Mt. 5:3). [6]

On the meaning of 5:3, Robert Guelich points to the source in Isaiah 61, which appears to be behind all of the first four beatitudes, concluding that ‘the note of righteousness which dominates the sequence of eight is neither ethical or eschatological but rather includes both notions’ [...] ‘The precise meaning of Matthew 5:3 as deriving from the eschatological matrix of Isaiah 61 remains, however, undecided.’ [7]

On the function of μακάριος:

...the function of μακάριος in Mt. 5:3 is not designed to call a new state into being but rather to describe a state which exists and to describe it from the standpoint of recommendation. [8]

That is, there exists a group, ‘the poor in Spirit’, to whom is given the kingdom of heaven [8].

It also needs to be remembered that the material in Isaiah 61-62 is dependent on the earlier Servant passages, and reflect community expectations whereby the community waits to enter into the blessings promised beforehand. In Isaiah 60, the redeemed gather to await the arrival of God in their midst and the chapter ends with an expectation of return to Abrahamic blessing. In Isaiah 61, this blessing is about to dawn, as a royal personage, commissioned by God, endowed with divine power (Spirit) comes to the depressed community to proclaim the Lord’s favour. [8-9]

The connection between the πτωχοί and the onset of the rule of God is thus in the context of Isaiah 61-62 clearly established. The general connection of this material with Mt. 5:3 and following seems also clear. To the existent community of God’s people, the consolation of Israel has now come. The disciples who in Galilee had been drawn to the messianic light have now become, and are designated in Mt. 5:3 as such, the nucleus of the kingdom. Theirs is now the kingdom for in the person of Jesus the kingdom stands as present. Unlike the crowds between whom and them distance has been set (betokening the theological reality of the popular rejection of Jesus with which Matthew will deal), the disciples are the true poor in whom the precise nature of the kingdom expectation as being that of the acceptance of the arrived light, can plainly be seen. The beatitudes thus become an exhortatory recommendation of kingdom relationships, and, in the first four members the nature of the kingdom relationship is identified, while in the second group the conduct which displays the relationship is referred to. [9-10]
Salt and light (5:13-16) [11-16]

On the relationship between the salt and light sayings:

Salt suggests the durability of and fidelity to the covenant [12]. Lev 2:13; Ex 30:35; Num 18:19; 2 Chron 8:5; cf. 2 Sam 7.

The salt and light images are in synthetic parallelism: salt links to nature and B1-4; light links to function and B5-8 [12].

That is:

Indeed if analogies between the groups which Jesus is addressing and the community of Isaiah 60-62 may be drawn, perhaps the disciples are to function as the Servant community of the Old Testament did, that is, they are by their very constitution to be a guarantee of Israel's final purpose, to be a 'light to lighten the Gentiles'. [13]

Moreover:

As to the intent of the light saying there is hardly any ground for misconception, for by the addition of the reference to a city which has been set upon a hill, Jesus has provided us with a clear point of reference. The mind of Jesus seems here to be moving in terms of eschatological replacement whereby the small community to whom he addresses himself has already assumed the function of the Old Testament world centre of Zion. The eschatological significance of Zion is first definitively set forth in Isaiah 2:2-4 where the tiny hillock of Zion will in fact become in the new age the point of cosmic contact, the world mountain, the venue to which the nations of the world will proceed in pilgrimage. [14]

NB. The image in Isaiah 2:2-4 is universal and global [14]. Then in Isaiah 60-62, this idea is developed. Zion is the world light (Isa 60:1 cf. Mt. 4) [15].

In this general eschatological presentation, the redeemed community will reflect the nature of the true Israel, all of whose people are to be characterized by righteousness (cf. Isaiah 60:21). [15]

Summary

The course of the discussion so far may be summed up as follows. As salt the disciples are by their very constitution as an established group the guarantee of the continuation of Israel's vocation. It will be next, theirs to implement Israel's mission to be a world light, to move from the scene of their call, the Galilean area where a messianic encounter has been experienced, with Jesus through his ministry until finally, after his resurrection, they will move out from their Jewish base into the gentile world. [16]
Verses 17-20 in the flow of thought [16-20]

Recall first question:

1. Why does Jesus mention the law at this stage of the speech?

Also: why the elaborate statement of Jesus’ relation to the law?

Μὴ νομίσητε (aorist impv) simply strengthens what follows... [17]

Law is associated with prophets:

[... in the phrase 'law or prophets' Jesus is referring to law interpreted on its widest levels, i.e. his ministry will sustain the law not only as it was given in its essence but as it was prophetically interpreted [...] [17]

Given that salt = covenant fidelity; light = covenant function [18], the eschatological logic / timetable proceeds:

[...] with Israel reconstituted under covenant by Jesus and the blessing of the divine presence having been realised in these last days, and with the nations programmatically foreshadowed here as drawn to her light, then under these circumstances the fidelity of the new community to, and its dissemination of torah would be a major item of consideration. One would submit, then, that it is the basic eschatological direction that the sermon had assumed which has led Jesus progressively to move from his re-identification of the true Israel with an explanation of their nature and function (Mt. 5:3-22), to the corporate significance of the true Israel for both Jews and Gentiles (5:13-16) to a restatement of the eschatological validity of the role of law (5:17-20). [18]

On πληρόω:

It will be with the place of torah in his own teaching to which reference will be being made here, for that is what the immediate context will now concern itself with. Of course in the new age the torah would be expected to operate. But in what sense? How has the coming of Jesus affected the basic divine demand? That is, the discussion centring on πληρόω will not be as to whether torah will operate in the new age for that it will is an eschatological axiom which Jesus here reasserts. What will be more to the point will be the connection to be drawn between divine direction given to Israel and the continued refraction of this in the life of the new community. It would seem then that πληρόω must take here the meaning which it has predominantly in Matthew, namely that of bringing to fulfilment a prior scriptural pronouncement or body of teaching, by giving to it full validity. That is to say the law finds its prophetic centre in Jesus but not necessarily its end. [19]

On ἐως ἂν πάντα γένηται:
The most widely held view is that the phrase of 5:18d refers to the sequence of eschatological events at the end of the age. Here again however, opinions differ as to whether the actual ministry of Jesus signifies the end, whether the fall of Jerusalem denotes it, whether the death and resurrection introduces it or whether it is the eschatological events of the final era of human history which are being referred to. Decisive for the latter interpretation has been the run of the context so far, moving as it has done within the strict guide-lines of prophetic eschatological expectation, within the sequence of the ingathering firstly of the new people of God, their exaltation and then influence, and the subsequent inflow of gentiles into the newly created community which has been generally described by the old Zion imagery. [20]

On the antitheses:

Jesus is talking about the eschatological fulfillment of the law, and therefore goes beyond both Moses as prophetically interpreted and Moses as interpreted by scribes and Pharisees. ‘This latter assumption would even account for the fact that at least three of the six anti-theses appear to revoke the specifics of Mosaic law.’[20]

Conclusion [21]
5:17-20 cannot be divorced from its context but must be read in the flow of argument.

Why does Jesus mention the law here and proceed to talk about its interiorization?

In the ministry of the New Covenant to which Jesus is committed, demand will continue to be linked with grace, the law will be put into the minds of the new community and written on their hearts, just as it had always lain on the national heart of Old Testament Israel (Deut. 30:11-14). It will be a ministry in continuity with the past and its design will be to establish the new people of God. Having established them it will commit to them a ministry universalized by the death of Jesus and in the passage from Jew first to the Gentile, the interiorization which Jesus had demanded of them and which he will make available by gift will be demanded in its turn from those who come to the brightness of their rising.[21]

What Jesus is saying is a fulfillment of prophetic eschatology:

By heraldic proclamation, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is serving notice on a new community that prophetic eschatology which sees Jerusalem as the world centre from which truth in the shape of torah will emanate, has found expression in his person in which the rule of God has entered the sphere of human relationships and it must now have its free course, until the programme conceived by prophecy of the eighth century B.C. (Isaiah 2:2-4) has finally been brought to pass. [21]
Brief assessment and a few comments
This is an important and excellent paper and, for the large part, persuasive. What Jesus is saying is indeed in fulfilment of prophetic eschatology. This is the moment in history when *these people* will take on the Servant mandate and, in covenantal fidelity (as ‘salt’), will act as ‘light’ to the nations, demonstrating in the last days the kind of behaviour torah pointed to.

(However, for a paper arguing for the logic of argument in Matthew 5:1-20, it is sadly lacking its own flow of argument, is extremely hard to follow and takes several readings for poor folk like me to grasp!)

Dumbrell doesn’t explicitly answer some of his own questions. He never quite answers question 2 above: Why does Jesus lay so much stress on the irrefragability of the law?

I am not persuaded that Isa 61 is quite as important as Dumbrell suggests. While it is surely right that Matthew wants to allude to the Isaianic program as a whole, there is a danger in picking out details from this and giving them an emphasis which Matthew does not. Matthew could easily have made the connections more explicit, but chose not to.

Does Jesus revoke some specifics of Mosaic law? [20] It is not clear that he does. He does rebuke misuse of some specifics: i.e. laws concerning divorce used to sanction divorce; laws concerning oaths to sanction dishonesty; laws concerning love to sanction hate. However, we might say that to an extent he marginalises those laws concerned with the aftermath of lawlessness (divorce; oaths), by refocussing on the heart of what the law demands.