

# EXEGETING GALATIANS

A Messianic Jewish  
Commentary



A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)

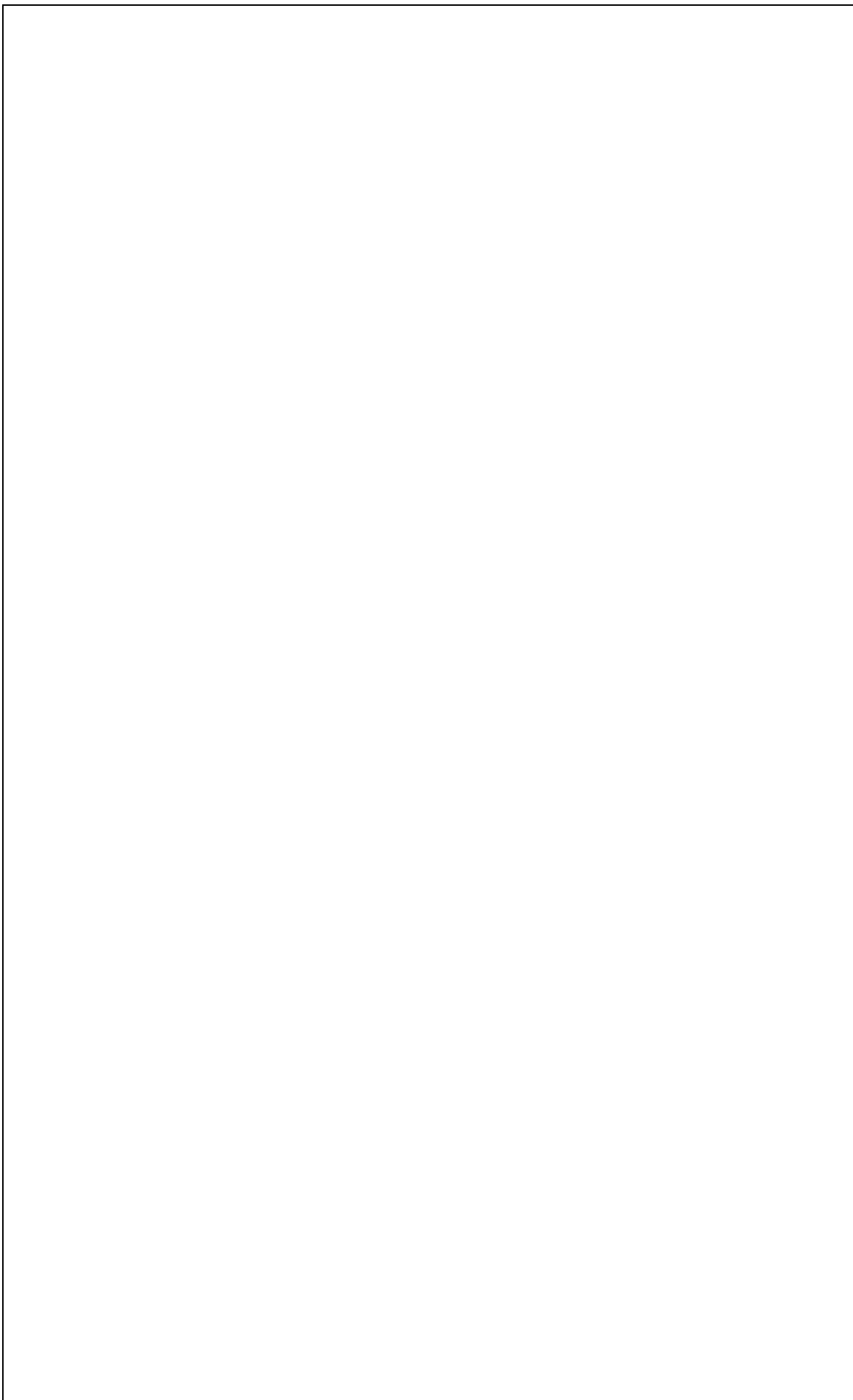
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## **Preface: Ten Common Questions Regarding Torah Observance for Gentile Christians**

Why did Paul write the book of Galatians? Was it to warn Gentile Christians away from getting sucked into the dead religion known as Judaism? Was it to expose the uselessness of the Law of Moses in the life of a believer in Jesus? Was it to show fellow Jewish believers that to fall back to a life of ceremony, ritual, circumcision, Sabbath, Feast Days, kosher, etc., was to fall back into slavery and bondage, and that they should instead keep pressing forward to the freedom found only in a relationship with Yeshua? Or perhaps there was a different reason the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) superintended the writing of this letter.

Let's imagine for a moment that you, a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian, have just finished reading the letter to Galatians, and then you pick up this commentary and go through it in one sitting. What thoughts do I, the author of this commentary, hope that you might have concerning what you just read here? I write my commentaries with the hopes that they will stimulate real-life dialogue about Jewish and Christian relations. I am keenly aware that the mainstream Christian movement does not embrace Torah obedience as a way of religious life, and that they quite often separate the Law into moral, ceremonial, and civil components—with Jesus doing away with the ceremonial and civil.<sup>1</sup> This commentary is designed to challenge the mainstream Christian notion that as believers in Yeshua we are no longer bound to ceremonies of the Law the likes of Sabbath, Feast Days, kosher, and of course that painful commandment, circumcision. To be sure, I affirm the ongoing validity and application of those commandments just listed—to include a host of others not listed here. Put another way, I don't believe Jesus came to set us free from keeping Torah; he came to empower us to keep it properly.

In an effort to begin to develop a working context for the social settings that many believers might face after reading this book study to Galatians, I have decided to entertain ten common questions (or Christian objections) to the notion of Torah observance for Gentile Christians. Indeed, in my experience of speaking at various Christian churches and Bible studies as a Messianic Jew, I have been asked these exact questions or variations of these questions by genuine and well-meaning Christians no doubt, but questions which often times stop Gentile Christians from embracing the notion of Torah observance in their lives. The objections and the subsequent answers are not exhaustive. They are only meant to serve as the beginning of a dialogue between those believers who embrace Torah as a lifestyle and those believers who do not, and as a primer to this study on Galatians and Paul. For ease of understanding, this preface was actually

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief explanation of this concept, see the article from GotQuestions.org here: <http://www.gotquestions.org/ceremonial-law.html>.

designed to stand alone as its own mini-study on Torah observance. These ten questions were originally presented as a live Bible study to a Christian men's group in Boulder Colorado in 2013 a few days before I moved to South Korea.

**1. Question: What is Torah?**

**Answer:** Torah is “God’s Teaching” but Torah is also “Law.” Using this comprehensive historical definition, the whole bible is Torah because all of it is God's thoughts that have been breathed out by him. Recall Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17: *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..."* However, the word Torah most often simply refers to the first 5 books of the Bible.

**2. Question: To whom was Torah given and who is required/allowed to follow it?**

**Answer:** Recall that the Torah was historically given to Isra'el nearly 3500 years ago, but realize that Isra'el's post-Egypt beginnings included both native-born sons of Jacob, as well as those mixed racial multitudes that God delivered out of Egypt during the Passover. These two groups came to the foot of Mount Sinai, received the Words of God, and were collectively called “Isra'el” by the text (read the Exodus narratives carefully again). Paul later reveals that the “mystery of the Gospel” is that according to Rom. 11 and Eph. chapters 2 and 3 and specifically 6:19, Gentiles are “grafted into the commonwealth of Isra'el via Messiah, and become fellow heirs sharing in the richness of the root of the Olive Tree and inheriting the blessings spelled out in the Torah for all of obedient Isra'el.” Therefore, since Isra'el is actually a multi-ethnic entity, Torah actually applies to all who name the name of the LORD as their one and Only God. This naturally includes Gentile believers in Yeshua.

**3. Question: Didn't Yeshua fulfill the Law and nail the Law to the cross?**

**Answer:** This is a central teaching of the Bible and thus, this answer is going to be longer than normal. Yeshua did indeed bring the Law to its fullest intended meaning and expression. The root Greek word *pleroo* (fulfill in Matt. 5:17) simply means to fill to the top, to make full, to bring to realization. Contrary to popular Christian teaching, God's Torah never commanded or expected sinless perfection else the sacrifices for sin would be meaningless. However, in Messiah, we are in fact supposed to strive towards perfection in this life until we one day we finally put it on for eternity. Therefore, in this life, and while the Temple stood in Jerusalem, true obedience to Torah included bringing sacrifices when one sinned—thus, the Torah actually anticipated our failure to keep it from time to time by making provision for our shortcomings (read Gal. 3:19). Without expecting sinless perfection, the Torah nevertheless does consider even a single breach to be guilty of violating the whole, thus, to break one commandment was to be guilty of breaking them all (read James [Jacob] 2:10). And since the final payment for sin would have demanded the final death of the sinner (Ezek. 18:20), Yeshua paid this price by dying in our place—thus fulfilling the payment required by the Torah. But Yeshua's words here in Matthew carry an additional

meaning, as evidenced by his own explanation in verses 18 through 20 (and indeed the rest of his sermon on the Mount). In the following verses, the Master plainly reveals that all of Torah must eventually be fulfilled, and even implies that true followers of God will carry out this fulfillment by doing and teaching others to do even the least of the commandments. After all, just because Yeshua obeyed the Torah perfectly, this doesn't excuse believers from remaining obedient to its commandments. On the contrary, now that we have a perfect example of Torah obedience to emulate, we too—by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh—can and should pursue Torah obedience, and teach others to do so, if we wish to be obedient to the Master's words here in Matthew. So what exactly got nailed to the cross if it was NOT the Torah? Paul explains in Col. 2:14 that it was the certificate of our debt—our ultimate failure to pay for our sins—that was nailed to cross; it was not the Torah that was nailed to the cross. We owed God a debt we could not pay because the payment demanded a sinless sacrifice—a payment we could never make on our own. This accords with the Torah, which actually adjudicates penalties for unrepentant sinners. By Yeshua's blood, those penalties (debts) have been paid in full and have satisfied God's courtroom ledger—they have been nailed to the cross. Elsewhere in Romans, Paul teaches that because believers have died to sin in Yeshua, the ultimate penalty for sin—death—no longer applies to us. Jesus nailed those penalties of the Torah that were reserved for unrepentant sinners to his cross. For a fuller treatment on the sacrifices of the Torah, read or listen to my commentary *Towards Understanding Sacrifices and Atonement* available at my site [www.GraftedIn.com](http://www.GraftedIn.com).

**4. Question: Doesn't Paul teach in many locations that we are free from the Law?**

**Answer:** Biblical freedom does not mean free from Law. Again, knowing that Yeshua set us free from sin, its proclivities, its bondage, and its ultimate penalty, helps us to understand Paul's teachings on this subject. The paradigm set by the Exodus narrative teaches us that sin (bondage) prevents us from truly worshiping God the way he deserves to be worshipped. Moses said, "Let my people go so that they may serve me!" Once Yeshua makes us alive in him and sets us free indeed, we are then free to worship God properly without the fear of condemnation or bondage to sin. This means we are free to walk into Torah the way God intended it to be walked out: by the Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Read Romans 8:1-7 as well as Answer 10 below.

**5. Question: Paul says in Rom 6:14 that we are not under Law but under grace.**

**Answer:** The difficulty in correctly interpreting Paul is in understanding that his uses of the word Law in many of his letters applies the definition from the context, which means the root Greek word used (nomos=law) can apply to a variety of definitions. Paul's "not under Law" phrase is preceded by "For sin shall not have dominion over you..." In this verse, Law does not mean we are not under obligation to Torah commands. Rather, it most naturally functions in this verse as shorthand for "not under the bondage of sin and therefore under the

condemnation of the Law,” a just condemnation reserved for unrepentant sinners. The reason we are not under [the] condemnation [of the Law] is because we are not under bondage, and the reason we are not under bondage is because we have been set free and are under [the] grace [of Yeshua’s blood].

**6. Question: Paul says, “We are not saved by “works of the Law.” Explain.**

**Answer:** This will easily be the longest answer of the set because it will develop one of the core hermeneutic keys to historically understanding Paul’s letters. “Works of the Law” (greek=ergon nomou) is one of the most challenging statements of Paul when read outside of the context of Paul’s 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish worldview. On the one hand, mere mechanical Law-keeping will NEVER save anyone, nor will sincere Law-keeping for that matter. The Torah was not given of God to provide salvation of the soul. However, it is a wonderful sanctification tool when used by the Holy Spirit. And it is a tool used to highlight and convict both regenerate and unregenerate men of sin. So on the theological level, it is true that keeping the Law does NOT save us. In fact, keeping the Torah has never saved anyone. However, the standard Christian theological discussions on “Law vs. Grace” often fail to grasp Paul’s 2000 year-old historical and sociological discussions about group membership and what this meant to many 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews. In Paul’s day, Isra’el sincerely, albeit incorrectly, believed that group affiliation is what mattered most in terms of corporate salvation—both in this life and in the life to come after one died. Belonging to (getting into and staying in) the family clan of Isra’el was the most important detail an individual person could focus on. Jews both then and now refer to the social policies that govern Jewish life as “halakhah,” a Hebrew word referring to “the way in which to individually or corporately walk out Torah in a practical manner.” The Torah has built-in God-given halakhah, but most often, it was the additional responsibility of Jewish leaders to determine specific group policy, etc., where the Torah was silent in some matters. In their segregated way of thinking, all of covenant Isra’el was comprised of Jewish people only, viz, every one in Isra’el was a Jew. If a non-Jew wanted to attain corporate salvation (both now and after they died), that person needed to legally convert to become a Jew first and thus join “Jewish Israel.” Once they were legally recognized as Jewish, their place in the physical covenant was ostensibly maintained by keeping the Torah. This “group membership-imposed Torah observance” concept is termed “Covenantal Nomism.” Thus Paul’s term “works of the Law” is actually a sociological and technical phrase used to describe the historic Jewish-only policy that forbade Gentiles from joining Isra’el without going through a man-made conversion policy to become a Jew. In short, this policy suggests that the Torah was and is for Jews only. “Works of the Law” was an ancient way of referring to “Jewish identity leading to covenant faithfulness.” For Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, God was offering a simple package deal equation: Jewish-Isra’el+Torah-keeping=corporate salvation both in this life and in the life to come. Obviously by now most Christians understand that this historic, theological, Jewish-only policy is at odds with the genuine gospel of God through his chosen Messiah Yeshua, a gospel taught



from Genesis to Revelation. Using this more historically accurate way of interpreting Paul's writings in the NT, we understand Paul to be opposing this 1<sup>st</sup> century inaccurate theological policy by saying to both Jews and Gentiles, "No one gets into Isra'el (is saved) merely by being or becoming Jewish and then stays in Isra'el by keeping Torah..." How do we know this to be the proper interpretation of Paul's writings? If we study the NT as an historical document alongside the other extant writings that have survived from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism (the rabbinic commentaries, Talmud, etc.), as well as corroborate the theology of the Old Testament in proper context, then we begin to get a more accurate picture of the pattern of theology of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish people and what we discover is that the Jewish concept of individual/group salvation cannot be easily caricatured by simplistic "merit theology" the way historic Christianity has traditionally characterized Jewish devotion to Torah.

**7. Question: Doesn't Romans 14 teach that Sabbath-keeping is optional?**

**Answer:** Space does not permit me to develop the complete context of this familiar passage. But suffice to say Paul could NOT have been suggesting that Sabbath-keeping is optional because the Torah does not present Sabbath-keeping as optional for Isra'el (read Exodus 31:16). On the contrary: Sabbath is the very sign of the Mosaic covenant. It is the very wedding ring between God and his bride Isra'el. The passage is most likely comparing fast days with non-fast days, and the fact that those who fast consider that day as special, whereas those who are not fasting on that same day do not consider that fast day special. Moreover, the larger context even goes on to teach that God accepts each person's devotional behavior since it is done in service to the very same God as each man's counterpart. This means that even if Paul were referring to Sabbath, at the very least, no one can judge one's brother based on keeping or not keeping. There is much more to this passage but I will leave off here for now.

**8. Question: Explain Colossians 2:16.**

**Answer:** The verse reads, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (ESV). The traditional interpretation of this passage suggests a scenario where a 1<sup>st</sup> –Century Torah-observant believer is passing judgment on a non-Torah observant believer for NOT keeping the Torah. However, this doesn't accord with the historical context in light of what we learned in Answer 6 above. It is more likely that Paul understood that gentile believers would be joining existing Jewish communities in his day, and that these Jewish communities would feel uncomfortable with Gentiles keeping Torah as Gentiles, while at the same time claiming the promises of God through Yeshua. It is more likely then that the judgment being passed was not from Torah-observant believers down to non-Torah observant believers, but was in fact the opposite: it was likely judgment was being passed from the unbelieving Jewish community to Torah-observant gentile Christians for keeping Torah without going through the ritual of conversion first. In a word, it is historically tenable that unbelieving Isra'el

became jealous and outraged at Paul's teachings at the newly fledged gentile inclusion into Isra'el via association with a slain Jewish martyr sans circumcision.

**9. Question: Doesn't Paul explicitly say in Galatians 5 that the Law is bondage?**

**Answer:** Read Answer 6 above and then read Galatians again. Context shows that Paul is combatting ethnic-driven corporate righteousness and ostensible covenant membership based on the social expectation and maintenance of Law-keeping. The bondage of chapter 5 verse 1 is spiritual bondage spelled out for any believer who might wish to return to a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish worldview of corporate/individual salvation and sanctification based on group membership and maintenance of Torah commands. Recall that in Covenantal Nomism, one "gets in" by belonging to the group (being legally born with or married into Jewish identity, or conversion to the legal status of Jewish), and one "stays in" by keeping Torah. Remind yourself that neither of these two "gets in—stays in" facts are true in God's courtroom. Thus, Paul is warning the genuine Galatian believers that to "get in" one places his trust in Yeshua, and that to "stay in" one waits for the hope of righteousness by faith. The debt to the "whole Law" of verse 3 is a debt to whatever ethnocentric Jewish conversion policy the hapless gentile converts would submit themselves to should they venture down that bondage-laden path—a debt that surely excluded group membership and Torah observance for non-Jews. Justification by Law in verse 4 means ostensible justification by the policy that teaches a "Jewish-only Isra'el."

**10. Question: Isn't the Law written on our hearts now? Why try to keep it externally?**

**Answer:** Having the Law written on the heart is indeed a NT feature (read Hebrews chapter 8 and chapter 10), but wasn't having the Law on the heart already an Old Testament feature from the beginning? Let's keep reading to find out. Speaking of the Torah, Moses taught in Deut. 30:14, "The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." The psalmist stated, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:11). Surely Psalm 19:7-13, as well as the entire chapter of 119, is speaking favorably of the Torah of Moshe—the Law of God. Paul coined the phrases "Law of the Spirit of life," and "law of sin" in Romans. He also coined the phrase "Law of Christ" in 1 Cor. 9:21, and again in Gal. 6:2. In Yeshua, Paul calls the Torah holy, righteous, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14) and considered himself to be in agreement with and a servant of the Law of God with his mind (Rom. 7:22, 25). Moreover, Paul also speaks of love being the "fulfillment of the Law" in Rom. 13:10, and James (Jacob) speaks of the "Perfect Law of Liberty" in 1:25 of his letter to believers. With these data in mind, where then should the Law of Moses fit within the NT theology for the believer in Messiah? Firstly, we must affirm that according to the Bible, only the circumcised heart can have the Law of God written upon it. Also, recall that when the NT was being written, the ONLY righteous Law given of God that Isra'el knew of was the Law of Moses—the very same Law that Yeshua stated in Matt. 5 would not pass away—even down to the

smallest jot or tittle—until all is fulfilled (read Answer 3 above). Therefore, the NT writers could not have been speaking of anything other than the Law of God that would be written in our hearts as believers. The proof that the Law written on our heart is the very Law of Moses is made evident when we go back and continue to read about this “internal” heart law from the pages of the Old Testament itself:

**Deut. 6:6, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.”**

**Deut. 10: 16, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”**

**Deut. 30:6, “And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”**

**Ps. 40:8, “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”**

**Jer. 31:33, “But this [shall be] the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”**

**Ezek. 11:19-20, “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”**

**Ezek. 36:26-27, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do [them].**

It is clear from these “Old Testament” verses that the Law of the heart is the Law of God—the Law of Moshe. It is also clear that the Spirit of God—the Ruach HaKodesh—writes this Law on the heart of those who genuinely know and love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, a love only possible when one surrenders to the Messiah Yeshua. With this in mind, we can now appreciate Paul’s statement in Rom. 8 (hinted at in Answer 4 above, but presented in its entirety here):

**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit**

**set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:1-8, ESV).**

We see then that the Torah is the universal document for both peoples and it outlines God's plan for all mankind, both Jews and Gentiles. God's eternal promises are intended for all those with circumcised hearts and only the Spirit of God can write the Word of God on the heart of an individual. Thus, the Torah is not just for Jews only! A person does not need to take on legally recognized Jewish status in order to be grafted into the people group of Israel. This will become a central theme of Paul's letters and it will particularly be helpful for us as we study the historical, social, and religious context of the book of Galatians.

## Introduction

In my opinion as one who embraces both Yeshua as Messiah as well as the Torah of Moshe as a practical guidebook for everyday living, I believe historically, the book of Galatians has misled Christian commentators due largely to the technical discussions of biblical topics ranging from circumcision, to the Torah, to freedom in Christ. Sha'ul (a.k.a. Paul or Saul) uses quite a number of technical phrases and words in this letter and these terms, when removed from their original 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaic context, will have the tendency to form the impetus for many and varied Christian interpretations that end up teaching concepts nearly quite the opposite of their original purpose. I am not so bold as to imagine as one author that I have uncovered total truth on the matter. Rather, what I am attempting to do is challenge us as students of God's Word to take a very scientific approach, if you will, to understanding how Paul's original readers would have interacted with this letter, and exactly what course of action the author Paul was expecting them to take as a result of reading and implementing his letter. This means putting aside our preconceived Jewish and Christian biases and letting Galatians—indeed the entire Word of God—speak for itself. We all see through glasses tainted by bias, and I am no different. But how different would the text become if we could borrow the glasses of the Apostle Paul for a few weeks while we poured through his letter concept by concept? By God's grace, this study is going to attempt to do just that.

This study is going to be a bit different in its approach to the letter of Galatians. I am not going to simply conduct a verse-by-verse exposition of every pasuk (verse) that Paul wrote. Instead, the first twelve lessons will treat the context of the letter of Galatians as a whole topical study, examining concepts found in the letter one by one first—viz, circumcision, works of the Law, under the Law, etc. Once we have laid the contextual foundation for the social setting of this letter, I believe we will be in a better position to exegete individual passages (tough phrases) one by one, which we will actually do in the second, more lengthy excursus portion of this commentary (see the Table of Contents for more details).

It is my hope that this contextual study along with its limited excursus of selected tough phrasing from the book of Galatians will help to unravel the letter for both Christians and Jews. To be sure, without a proper background to the book we will forever misread Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. For this particular portion of the contextual study, allow me to start in B'resheet (Genesis) with Avraham and circumcision. If we begin to peel back the mysteries surrounding this simple biblical command we stand a better chance at understanding Sha'ul and his enigmatic instructions.

## 1. B'rit Milah

The book of Galatians contains an important rebuke and admonition to 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra'el and to the Gentiles living among her in the region known as Galatia. Among its central topics mentioned, circumcision surely occupies a good deal of the apostle's foundational hermeneutic principles. He who unlocks the meaning behind Paul's use of the term circumcision (Hebrew=b'rit milah) unlocks the meaning to the rest of the letter itself. In order to properly see circumcision the way Paul saw it, we must take our cue, not from the rabbis of today, or even from the pastors of today, but from the Torah first—the very same way Paul did. And in the end, if the views of the rabbis and pastors of today line up with what the Torah teaches, then all is well and good.

Paul took a survey of 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra'el's current social understanding of circumcision and he immediately spotted a problem in her historic approach and application to covenant status. Paul knew that circumcision was first given to Papa Abraham way back in Genesis 17, and that its location in the narrative was key to properly understanding and applying its covenantal meaning. Paul then set out to allow the Holy Spirit to masterfully utilize this wonderful covenant sign as a didactic teaching for his readers in Galatia. Given the fact that his immediate readers lived in the exact same social setting as him, we can only assume they better understood his use of this term when it shows up in his letter to them. Unfortunately, since successive generations of Bible readers are understandably removed from that 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish social context, arguably, we stand a greater chance of misunderstanding this term without help from the Genesis narrative. To be sure, if we want to see what Paul saw, we have to start with Abraham also.

The implied meaning of the term “b'rit milah” is “covenant [of] circumcision.” Why does Judaism refer to circumcision as a covenant? I believe that this act reveals the Torah's intensions to speak to the circumcised male about his responsibilities in helping to bring about the truth that HaShem and HaShem alone can bring the previously mentioned promises of Avraham to come to pass. Let us examine the details.

The Torah says in Genesis chapter 12, verses 1-3,

**Now ADONAI said to Avram, “Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

The opening monologue from HaShem (God), containing both directives and promises, is packed with some very important facts that affect every man,

woman, and child who will be born from here on out! To be sure, it still affects everyone today!

Later on in Genesis chapter 17 we find God instructing Avraham (Abraham) concerning circumcision. Amazing that God would select that part of the body to demonstrate a most wonderful spiritual truth to both Avraham and the entire world! Equally amazing to me is that even at such an old age, Avraham did not question God's reasons behind this somewhat strange covenantal sign! However, important by way of theology and chronology is the fact that Avraham was pronounced as being "righteous" in B'resheet chapter 15. Sha'ul makes no small mention of the Genesis 15 incident in his letters,

**For what does the Tanakh say? "Avraham put his trust in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness (Romans 4:3).**

Given its location within Paul's arguments, both from Romans and Galatians, it is clear that the phrase is referring to imputed righteousness, that is, positional (forensic) right standing with HaShem. For Paul, it is axiomatic that Moshe describes this quality chronologically before Avraham receives the covenant of circumcision in B'resheet chapter 17. This bespeaks of the correct order in which to appropriate the covenant responsibilities of God. On the micro, saving faith in God, symbolized by God accrediting his account as righteous (Hebrew צִדְקָה tz'dakah), precedes the patriarch's obedience to the sign of circumcision. On the macro, the covenant of Avraham precedes the covenant with Moshe.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking from a 21<sup>st</sup> century Western mindset, one might presume that since God declared him righteous already, any added covenantal sign might prove to be superfluous. Avraham—and apparently God—thought otherwise.

**To neglect circumcision (b'rit milah) is to neglect the chosen sign of the covenant, and consequently, it is rejection of the covenant itself.**

Avraham did not hesitate to circumcise both himself as well as the males of his household. Looking forward at its effect in the biblical narratives, we learn that it was to become a unique marker, outwardly identifying those males of the offspring of Avraham, as inheritors of the magnificent promises that HaShem was making with this man. It did not, nor does it now serve to secure those promises through personal effort.

What is more, the sign of circumcision was to be an indicator that all subsequent male covenant participants were adopting the same faith that Avraham possessed! Obviously it was incumbent upon the faithful father to pass this sign onto his son; 8-day old baby boys do not circumcise themselves. The promises were of faith (read Romans chapter 4 carefully). To be 100% sure, the Torah says that the promises were given to him before he was circumcised (Ibid. 10,

<sup>2</sup> Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Excursus - Genesis 15: Credited to Him as Righteousness* (Tetze Torah Ministries, 2006), p. 1.

11)! This is why, after HaShem promised that his seed would be as numerous as the stars (15:5, 6), Avraham was credited with being righteous—because he believed the unbelievable!

With this foundational Genesis teaching in our arsenal, we are now poised to turn our attention directly to Paul's continuing application of circumcision in the life of a 1<sup>st</sup> century covenant member—be he Jewish or Gentile. Paul does not indicate in Galatians that circumcision was being relaxed now that the prophesied Messiah has come and gone. What Paul does teach is that circumcision must be properly understood and applied on a community level if each Torah-true covenant member was to remain in right standing with God. Put another way, to misunderstand the meaning of circumcision as a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew or Gentile was to risk "falling from grace," a warning Paul will reiterate directly in chapter five of his letter to this community.

We know as 21<sup>st</sup> century Bible students studying the scriptures that circumcision was given by God to Avraham as an important covenant sign for him and the generations to come after him, but have you ever stopped to ask the obvious "\$64, 000" question: "Why did God ask Avraham to cut away *that* particular part of his body?" Since I believe it bears relevance for our correct understanding of Paul and the book of Galatians, it is to this topic that we will turn our attention next in this study.



## 2. Ouch Factor: “Why the Male Reproductive Organ?”

Why did God have Avraham circumcised (remove the foreskin of his penis) in the first place? Have you ever stopped to ponder this enigmatic question? After all, God is not capricious. He could have easily had our father remove skin from his ear, or his finger, or other part of his body. Why the male sex organ?

Covenants usually involved at least two parties. Likewise, there was usually a sign of the covenant being established. This sign, according to ancient Middle Eastern writings, was usually something that either party could carry on their person, such as a stone or other object. This sign, when viewed by either individual, served as a reminder that the person was under obligation to fulfill his part of the covenant. It also assured him that the other party was under the same obligations. Removal of the foreskin of the male sex organ, was not exclusively Hebrew. The ancient Egyptians had been doing it for some time as well.

But when HaShem asked Avraham to participate in this rather “lopsided” covenant (remember Avraham did not earn his position before God, it was graciously granted unto him; read Romans 11:6), our father Avraham did not hesitate to become obedient to the command.

Tim Hegg of FFOZ notoriety has been, in my opinion, spearheading the movement to bring about a more accurate view of Paul and the Judaisms that he had to confront in the 1st century by publishing essential books and papers for Christians to carefully examine. I wish to quote from one of his works to show the messianic implications of God asking him to circumcise himself exactly where he eventually ended up circumcising himself.

As of 11-15-05 Hegg’s entire online article was available at his web site here (<http://www.torahresource.com/English%20Articles/CircumcisionETS.pdf>).

Referring to our Genesis text Tim Hegg writes:

Chapter sixteen opens with an exposition and complication: Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. If the former narrative settled the question of God's full intention to give offspring, this unit questions the method by which the promise would be fulfilled. Abram follows the advice of his wife and takes Hagar as a second wife. The reader is aware immediately, however, that rather than solving the problem, the action of Abram and Sarai has introduced complication into the story...

The story continues with the appearance of YHWH to Abram (signaling resolution) reassuring him of the continuation and maintenance of the covenant. The issue of the promised offspring, the main subject of chapters fifteen and sixteen, continues in this section. Regardless of the etymological meaning of the change from Abram to Abraham, the narrative is clear that YHWH has installed Abraham as a father of the nations. Thus, chapter seventeen gives the Divine solution to the problem addressed in chapter sixteen, namely, the realization of

the promise regarding the seed. The Divine speech to Abraham in 17:1-5 is taken up exclusively with the promise of offspring.

The introduction of circumcision continues this theme. The promise of offspring has been established, but the method or manner by which the offspring would be realized is now made clear. In the same way that the complications surrounding the promise of land and blessing were resolved by direct, Divine intervention, so too the promised offspring would come by Divine fiat. Human enterprise and strength would not be the means by which God would fulfill His promise to Abraham regarding the seed. Circumcision, the cutting away of the foreskin, revealed this explicitly. Coming on the heels of God's renewed promise to Abraham regarding his progeny and his installation as a father of a multitude of nations, the sign of circumcision upon the organ of procreation must be interpreted within the narrative flow as relating to the method by which the complication (absence of children and age of both Abraham and Sarah) would be resolved. The promise would come, not by the strength of the flesh (which the "Hagar plan" represented) but rather by above-human means.

If circumcision were a sign given to Abraham which pointed specifically to the need for faith in regard to the coming Seed, it is valid to ask whether or not the other OT authors also attached this meaning to the ritual.

Interestingly, the two times circumcision is used in a metaphorical sense in the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6), the immediate context is that of the Abrahamic covenant. In Deuteronomy 10:12, the unit begins by an exhortation to "revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths" which is very close to Genesis 17:1, "Walk before me and be blameless." Further, in Deuteronomy 10:15 the covenant love of YHWH for "the fathers" becomes the basis for the exhortation to "cut away the thickening about your hearts." That is, if the promises made to the fathers should be realized, it will be so only as each Israelite relates to YHWH on the basis of faith. The heart which relies on the flesh (foreign powers, self strength, etc.) will fail. Rather, the fleshly heart must be cut away and discarded.

In reference to the circumcision in the Apostolic Scriptures, Hegg makes these pertinent remarks:

What brings Paul to use Abraham in his exposition here is the central promise of the covenant that "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." Paul's argument is that this promise was given to Abraham before circumcision and that therefore Abraham may rightly be considered the father of all who participate in the same faith, whether circumcised or not. In fact, the promise that Abraham would be "a father of nations" is applied more precisely by the Apostle in the phrase "father of all who believe."

Paul's argument, while given to prove another point, still confirms what I have previously maintained about circumcision. The ritual did not bring something new to the covenant, but rather reinforced righteousness on the basis of faith, the very hallmark of the covenant from the beginning. Circumcision required Abraham to continue in the faith that had brought him from Ur and to direct this faith toward the God Who had promised to bring a son by Divine intervention. It is on this basis that Paul, in Galatians 4:23, refers to Ishmael as "according to flesh" [...] and Isaac as "through promise" [...].

Paul has shown that a primary function of the law was to point to Christ (Gal. 3:24) and it therefore stands to reason that circumcision has fulfilled its function, for Christ, the promised Seed, has come. Israel, worshiping the sign rather than the Seed to which it pointed, had attributed to circumcision what only God's Son could accomplish. This Paul plainly asserts in his statement that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love."

Now that we understand—as Paul understood—that circumcision was to be an eternal marker of covenant participation, pointing to the One who would be born, not by human effort, but by God's supernatural power, we can begin to appreciate the importance this topic played in the formulation of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Surely the Galatian Jews and Gentiles were entertaining notions of implementing community circumcision based on their [mis]understanding of the social benefits it provided as a people group of God. However, given the views we have just examined, we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian communities have no reason now to continue misunderstanding and misapplying this important covenant sign as well.

As we begin to unlock the meanings behind Paul's technical words and phrases in this Messianic commentary to Galatians, and then begin to carefully apply their true meanings, it is my aim that the believing Jewish and Gentile body of Christ might be knitted one to another even more tightly as we both find our true and lasting identity rooted in the Person and work of Yeshua HaMashiach. In order to deepen our appreciation for Paul's important 1<sup>st</sup> century work, we will turn systematically to the concepts "works of the Law," "Covenantal Nomism," and "under the Law." To be sure, familiarity with the 1<sup>st</sup> century sociological Jewish aspects of these terms will pave the way towards a better, more accurate understanding and application of the book of Galatians.

This first term, "works of the Law," will whet our appetite for digging into the background of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism...

### 3. Proselyte Conversion: “Works of Law” - Part One (Understanding the Background)

The book of Galatians contains a few technical terms and phrases that make it a bit more difficult for the average Bible student to understand from a casual reading perspective. To be sure, a “best practices” hermeneutic will seek to uncover the historical, grammatical, social, and linguistic contexts of the texts in question before attempting to apply a practical application. It is no secret that God commanded Isra'el to circumcise their male children way back in the book of Genesis, and that 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra'el operating under the false security that their covenant status was secured by their ethnic status abused this fundamental commandment. This is tragic. However, even more unfortunate is the emerging Christian Church's wholesale rejection of this covenantal sign as a relevant obedience marker in the communities of HaShem.

The Church knows that Isra'el—both then and now—is preoccupied with Torah observance. The Church assumes this is because Isra'el hopes to gain right standing with HaShem through her devoted obedience to even the Law's smallest of details. The Church labels this devotion to Torah “Works of the Law,” taken from the phrase found six times in Paul's writings.<sup>3</sup> Based on the context of Paul's negative comments about this term, the Church chooses to interpret this phrase as “mere commandment-keeping done for the sake of ostensibly gaining favor in God's eyes.” Given this simply caricature, it is easy to understand why historic Christianity has equated this phrase with legalism. What is more, with this premise firmly in view, it is a short step for the historic Church to then reject the covenant sign of circumcision, since it is naturally assumed by the Church that Isra'el also hopes to be accepted by God based on being the “Chosen People.”

So, as I see it, we have historic Isra'el abusing their covenant status based on her blindness to Yeshua, and we have the Church misunderstanding Torah obedience and circumcision based on her negative reaction to anything that makes Gentiles look “Jewish,” rooted in part by Isra'el's abuse and misunderstanding of the very same Torah that prophesied that Jesus was the true Messiah! What a mess! Put another way, historic Isra'el of then and now obviously misunderstands her own Scriptures. Along comes the Church taking her cue from [unbelieving] Isra'el concerning the meaning of Torah observance and works of the Law, and we end up with the blind leading the blind. Oy vey!

Because of the compounding of these historic misunderstandings, today (as well as 2000 years ago), Christianity has developed an unnecessary amount of paranoia surrounding circumcision. In some ways I cannot blame them for taking

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<sup>3</sup> Works of the Law (Greek= ἔργων νόμου *ergon nomou*) is found in Rom. 3:23, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5; and 3:10.

this stance. The rabbinic literature is replete with the significance of this ostensibly simple act. Observe the comments made by Wikipedia:

During the Babylonian exile the Sabbath and circumcision became the characteristic symbols of Judaism. This seems to be the underlying idea of Isa. lvi. 4: "The eunuchs that keep my Sabbath" still "hold fast by my covenant," though not having "the sign of the covenant" (Gen. xvii. 11.) upon their flesh.

Contact with Greek polytheistic culture, especially at the games of the arena, made this distinction obnoxious to Jewish-Hellenists seeking to assimilate into Greek culture. The consequence was their attempt to appear like the Greeks by epispasm ("making themselves foreskins"; I Macc. i. 15; Josephus, "Ant." xii. 5, § 1; Assumptio Mosis, viii.; I Cor. vii. 18; Tosef.; Talmud tractes Shabbat xv. 9; Yevamot 72a, b; Yerushalmi Peah i. 16b; Yevamot viii. 9a). Also, some Jews at this time stopped circumcising their children. Maccabees 2:46 records that the Maccabean zealots forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys they found within the borders of Israel.

The Rabbis also took action to ensure that the practice of circumcision did not die out. In order to prevent the obliteration of the "seal of the covenant" on the flesh, as circumcision was henceforth called, the Rabbis, probably after Bar Kokhba's revolt, instituted the "peri'ah" (the laying bare of the glans), without which circumcision was declared to be of no value (Shab. xxx. 6).

To be born circumcised was regarded as the privilege of the most saintly of people, from Adam, "who was made in the image of God," and Moses to Zerubbabel (see Midrash Ab. R. N., ed. Schechter, p. 153; and Talmud, Sotah 12a).

Uncircumcision being considered a blemish, circumcision was to remove it, and to render Abraham and his descendants "perfect" (Talmud Ned. 31b; Midrash Genesis Rabbah xlv.)

Rabbinic literature holds that one who removes his circumcision has no portion in the world to come (Mishnah Ab. iii. 17; Midrash Sifre, Num. xv. 31; Talmud Sanhedrin 99).

According to the Midrash Pirke R. El. xxix., it was Shem who circumcised Abraham and Ishmael on the Day of Atonement; and the blood of the covenant then shed is ever before God on that day to serve as an atoning power. According to the same midrash, Pharaoh prevented the Hebrew slaves from performing the rite, but when the Passover time came and brought them deliverance, they underwent circumcision, and mingled the blood of the paschal lamb with that of the Abrahamic covenant, wherefore (Ezek. xvi. 6) God repeats the words: "In thy blood live!"<sup>4</sup>

Mark Nanos has demonstrated most creditably that the Judaisms of the 1<sup>st</sup> century functioned with a serious theological flaw in regards to their view of circumcision. Let us pick up his discussion from a paper he wrote entitled "*The*

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumcision\\_in\\_the\\_Bible#In\\_rabbinic\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumcision_in_the_Bible#In_rabbinic_literature)

*Local Contexts of the Galatians: Toward Resolving a Catch-22,*” which, at the time I downloaded it on 5-15-05, was available for reading at his site here (<http://mywebpages.comcast.net/nanosmd/index.html>)

Paul was an outsider to Galatia (4:12-20); in fact, he is the only one from elsewhere of whom we can be certain. And Paul’s message—to the degree that it offered inclusion of Gentiles as full and equal members while opposing their participation in proselyte conversion—ran counter to prevailing Jewish communal norms for the re-identification of pagans seeking full-membership, at least according to all the evidence now available to us. Pursuit of this nonproselyte approach to the inclusion of pagans confessing belief in the message of Christ resulted in painful disciplinary measures against Paul from the hands of Jewish communal agents to whom he remained subordinate, but in ways that he considers mistaken, for he refers to this as “persecution” (5:11; cf. 2 Cor. 11:24). It is not difficult to imagine that pagans convinced by Paul’s gospel that they were entitled to understand themselves as righteous and full members of Jewish communities apart from proselyte conversion, but rather on the basis of faith in a Judean martyr of the Roman regime, would also, in due time, meet with resistance from Jewish communal social control agents. Might not the resultant identity crises of those non-proselyte associates develop along the lines of the situation implied for the addressees of Paul’s letter?

I suggest that Paul’s gospel—or, more accurately in this case, the resultant expectations of the non-Jewish addressees who believed in it—provoked the initial conflict, not the good news of the influencers that Paul’s converts can eliminate their present disputable standing as merely “pagans,” however welcome as guests, by embarking on the path that will offer them inclusion as proselytes. That offer, on the part of the influencers in Galatia, rather represents the redressing of a social disruption of the traditional communal norms resulting from the claims of “pagans” who have come under Paul’s influence. Thus the ostensible singularity of the exigence arises not because of a new element introduced by the influencers, and does not suggest that they represent a single group moving among the addressees’ several congregations. Instead, the influencers may be understood to be similarly appealing to a long-standing norm, however independent of each other’s communities they may be acting, when faced with the same disruptive claim on the part of the new Christbelieving subgroups within their communities. The conflict arises because of the claim that their Gentile members are to be regarded as full-members of these Jewish groups apart from proselyte conversion.

With this background in mind, we are now better poised to uncover the true meaning of phrases such as “works of the Law” and “under the Law.” I maintain that the phrase “works of the Law” cannot simply mean “deeds done in accordance with Torah commands” if we are to give the surviving Jewish documents of the 1<sup>st</sup> century their proper place among scholarly research. But even more important is the fact that if we interpret works of the Law as Torah observance, then we end up with Paul discouraging Gentiles (and by inclusion Messianic Jews as well) from keeping the commandments of God—a position I

believe is untenable given Paul's positive views of Torah observance spelled out elsewhere in his letters.<sup>5</sup>

Surely, it will become necessary to flesh out the details of the implications of this chapter's premise later on, a task we shall undertake in Chapter 5: Works of the Law Part Two. For now, it is enough to understand the basic truth that 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel's view of Law-keeping was tantamount to what the Church defines as legalism, but is it important to understand the unique kind of blindness that keeps Israel from recognizing this as legalism. To get at the heart of the matter requires the diligent Bible student to learn a valuable lesson from history, a lesson rooted in a technical term called "Covenantal Nomism."

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance 1 Cor. 7:19, "Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised means nothing; what does mean something is keeping God's commandments."

## 4. Covenantal Nomism

If, as I maintain, 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra'el did not define "works of the Law" (i.e., Torah observance) as legalism, how then exactly did she conceptualize and define her Law-keeping? What Nanos and other recent scholars (E.P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, et al) are describing, as pertaining to Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and how it reportedly defined itself, has been carefully labeled as Covenantal Nomism.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a "new perspective on Paul" (NPP) is on the rise.<sup>7</sup> What is Covenantal Nomism? Theopedia.com provides a brief description for us to examine:

Covenantal Nomism is the belief that first century Palestinian Jews did not believe in works righteousness. Essentially, it is the belief that one is brought into the Abrahamic covenant through birth and one stays in the covenant through

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<sup>6</sup> E.P. Sanders is known for coining the term "covenantal nomism." This term is essential to the NPP view, as Sanders argues that this is the "pattern of religion" found in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism. The term is used as "shorthand," that is, a shortened term used to describe a larger idea. Sanders defines this idea as such: "Briefly put, covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression." (E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 75) This is important because it has huge implications for one's understanding of first-century Judaism and thus for one's interpretation of how Paul interacted with it. If covenantal nomism is true, then when Jews spoke of obeying commandments, or when they required strict obedience of themselves and fellow Jews, it was because they were "keeping the covenant" - it was not out of legalism. Sanders says that, "one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant." Therefore, as long as a Jew kept their covenant with God, he remained part of God's people. How does one keep the covenant? Sander's tells us "the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments." All of Judaism's talk about "obedience" is thus in the context of "covenantal nomism" and not legalism. As a result, Judaism is then not concerned with "how to have a right relationship with God" but with "how to remain his covenant people." This has sometimes been compared to the issue of "keeping" or "losing one's salvation."

<sup>7</sup> The New Perspective on Paul, also called New Perspectivism (hereafter NPP) is a system of thought in New Testament scholarship that seeks to reinterpret the Apostle Paul and his letters. In brief, the NPP is a reaction to the Lutheran Paul (i.e. the traditional interpretation of him). Proponents of the "Lutheran Paul" understand him to be arguing against a legalistic Jewish culture that seeks to earn their salvation through works. However, supporters of the NPP argue that Paul has been misread. He was actually combating Jews who were boasting because they were God's people, the "elect" or the "chosen ones." Their "works," so to speak, were done to show they were God's covenant people and not to earn their salvation. The result is a Judaism that supposedly affirmed *sola gratia* (grace alone). Presently, its effects are seen in the academic world of New Testament scholars, particularly those who focus their attention on Pauline studies and the study of first century Judaism.



works. Suggests that the Jewish view of relationship with God is that keeping the law is based only on a prior understanding of relationship with God.<sup>8</sup>

Quoting from Sanders and Wright in the same article they go on to include a brief discussion about the problems with the traditional "Lutheran" view of Paul and suggest that the new perspective on Paul (NPP) actually exonerates 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism from the centuries-long charge of being a works-based religion:

A fundamental premise in the NPP is that Judaism was actually a religion of grace. Sander's puts it clearly:

"On the point at which many have found the decisive contrast between Paul and Judaism - grace and works - Paul is in agreement with Palestinian Judaism... Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works'...God saves by grace, but... within the framework established by grace he rewards good deeds and punishes transgression." (Paul and Palestinian Judaism, p. 543)

N.T. Wright adds that, "we have misjudged early Judaism, especially Pharisaism, if we have thought of it as an early version of Pelagianism," (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 32). However, Stephen Westerholm adds caution to such a quickly drawn conclusion:

"While one may enthusiastically endorse the 'new perspective' dictum that first-century Judaism was a religion of grace and acknowledge that it represents an important corrective of earlier caricatures, it is hardly pedantic to point out that more precision is needed before such a statement can illuminate a discussion of the 'Lutheran' Paul. Pelagius and Augustine - to take but the most obvious examples - both believed in human dependence on divine grace, but they construed that dependence very differently" (Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, pp. 261-262).

Thus, as Westerholm points out, although first century Judaism may have believed in grace, it becomes even more important to establish why they believed in grace and how this effected [sic] their view of salvation. Those from the NPP seem quick to jump to the conclusion that first-century Judaism was in agreement with the same understanding of grace found within the NT and Paul's theology. Again, as Westerholm notes above, this "grace" can be understood very differently.<sup>9</sup>

I understand that the prevailing Judaisms that existed in the first century initially upset the biblical balance by teaching that circumcision was the vehicle by which a non-Jew could and must enter the covenant made with Isra'el. Shame on them! To be sure, a whole theological council was formulated to deal with the problem in the first century. Both in Acts 15:1-35, as well as 21:17-26, the

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.theopedia.com/New\\_Perspective\\_on\\_Paul](http://www.theopedia.com/New_Perspective_on_Paul).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Yerushalayim Council had to address the issue of “returning to the works of the Law” as opposed to “living in the freedom of Messiah.” And what is the meaning of “works of the Law”? Surely it does NOT refer to “correct and true faith-driven observance of written Torah commands”! No, what this technical phrase is referring to is a set of halakhic rules that an individual must ally himself with in order to be received into a specific and exclusive community. More on “works of law” below.

## 5. “Works of Law” - Part Two

I believe it is necessary to interpret Paul’s phrase “works of the Law” not merely as mechanical obedience to the Law, but as a technical term referring to a specific 1<sup>st</sup> century concept, but it takes digging into the historic cultural and sociological context of Covenantal Nomism to see this technicality more clearly. Yes, any approach to HaShem that circumvents the work of the Cross is tantamount to legalism, but 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra’el did not see themselves “working” their way towards God’s grace. To be sure, they believed God singled them out from among the nations as act of pure grace! In their eyes, the Torah is not a burden! It is a gift of grace from a loving Father! What I am trying to say is that I believe it is not entirely accurate to identify 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra’el’s “works of the Law” as 21<sup>st</sup> century “merit theology.”

At this turn, I want to use, most extensively, some material from a Messianic Jewish commentary on the book of Galatians, written by David Stern, translator of the Complete Jewish Bible. I will launch from his comments—at times within his comments—into my own bracketed wording [ ].

I want to launch from chapter 2 verse 15 to explain the crucial verse 16. “We to nature Judeans and not out of nations sinners,” This is a literal rendering of verse 15 from the Greek. It is simply an identifying opening for what is to follow. Sha’ul is not degrading Gentiles in any way; he is simply using the same language and identifiers that the Legalizers/Judaizers/Influencers (the villains of the book) use in order to speak of the Gentiles. Also the Torah itself recognized that before the giving of the Messiah and the revelation of the Torah, Gentiles were sinners (Gal. 2:11-12; compare Luke 18:31-33 with Luke 24:7). However, it should be noted that he also went out his way to emphasize the equality of Jews and Gentiles before HaShem.

*“Having known but that not is being justified man out of works of Law if ever not through faith of Messiah Yeshua, also we into Messiah Yeshua we believed, in order that we might be justified out of faith of Messiah and not out of works of Law, because out of works of Law not will be justified every flesh.”* [This is a literal rendering of verse 16 from the Greek. Being declared righteous by HaShem is the goal of all men who seek HaShem. Righteousness can be defined in two ways:] “behavioral righteousness,” actually doing what is right, and “forensic righteousness,” being regarded as righteous in the sense (a) that God has cleared him of guilt for past sins, and (b) that God has given him a new human nature inclined to obey HaShem rather than rebel against him as before.

Yeshua has made forensic righteousness available to everyone by paying on everyone’s behalf the penalty for sins which HaShem’s justice demands, death. Forensic righteousness is appropriated by an individual for himself the moment he unreservedly puts his trust in HaShem, which at this point in history, entails also trusting in Yeshua the Messiah upon learning of him and understanding what he has done. The task of becoming behaviorally righteous begins with appropriating forensic righteousness (through Yeshua); it occupies the rest of a

believer's life, being completed only at the moment of his own death, when he goes to be with Yeshua. What is important to keep in mind here is the difference between these two kinds of righteousness. Each time the Greek word "dikaioo" ("righteousness") or a cognate is encountered, it must be decided which of these two meanings of the word is meant. In the present verse and the next, all four instances of "dikaioo" refer to forensic righteousness. But in verse 21, the related word "dikaiosisune" refers to behavioral righteousness.<sup>10</sup>

"Works of law," translates the Greek phrase "ergon nomos" ἔργον νόμος. Since the word "nomos" means "law"<sup>11</sup>, and is usually referring (from the Septuagint) to the Mosaic Law, i.e. Torah, most Christians usually understand "works of law" to mean "actions done in obedience to the Torah." But this is wrong. One of the best-kept secrets about the New Testament is that when Sha'ul writes "nomos" he frequently does not mean "divine law" but "a man-made system of law." This phrase ("ergon nomos"), Scripturally found ONLY in Sha'ul's writings, occurs eight times, and always in technical discussion of the Torah: Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Rom. 3:20, 28. Two other uses of "ergon" ("works") are closely associated with the word "nomos" ("law") in Rom. 3:27; 9:32. Even when he uses "ergon" by itself, the implied meaning is frequently "a man-made system of law-related works," see Gal. 5:19; Rom. 4:2, 6; 9:11; 11:6; Eph. 2:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5. There are 17 other instances when it is neutral. In order to interpret Sha'ul correctly one needs to understand that the phrase "ergon nomos" does not mean deeds done in virtue of following the Torah the way HaShem intended, but deeds done in consequence of perverting the Torah into a set of rules which, it is presumed, can be obeyed mechanically, automatically, legalistically, without having faith, without having trust in HaShem, without having love for HaShem or man, and without being empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit).<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, in the case of the Galatian congregation, the specific perversion that was taking place sought to transform Gentiles into Jews via a man-made ceremony of conversion, performed under the guise of "covenant inclusion." To appreciate the consternation that this halakhah caused Sha'ul, one has to understand that within the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaisms, the prevailing view was that all Isra'el shared a place in the World to Come.

What is more, since Isra'el and Isra'el alone were granted this gift from HaShem it was necessary in the minds of the proto-rabbis to convert Gentiles into Jews before they could enjoy the status of "full-fledged covenant member." In order to accomplish this task, a ceremony had been invented—a ceremony not found in the Torah itself. The ceremony included circumcision for the males. Because of this feature, the entire sociological situation was subsumed under the label "circumcision." Thus, "works of law" becomes a sort of "short-hand" way for Sha'ul to describe this phenomenon. And given these unique insights into the minds of the early Judaisms, we see why it is necessary to avoid simply labeling

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 535.

<sup>11</sup> Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary (TSBD), νόμος.

<sup>12</sup> David H. Stern, *The Jewish New Testament Commentary-Galatians* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 525.

any form of Torah obedience—whether from the 1<sup>st</sup> century or from the 21<sup>st</sup> century—as legalism, viz, merit theology.

The negative impact that this has for today's emerging Torah Communities is devastating. To wit, we Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles indeed seek to become more obedient to God's Holy Scriptures as we continue to grow and consequently answer the Holy Spirit's tug on our heart to return to covenant faithfulness. Imagine our shock and confusion when our Christian friends and family members who don't embrace a Torah-based lifestyle label our Torah-obedience as mere legalism! "You guys are going back under the Law!" "You guys are returning to legalism!" "You guys are trying to earn your position in God's eyes!" These are some of the sentiments we Torah-keeping Jews and Gentiles hear from our mainstream Christian counterparts. In my experience as a Torah-keeping Jewish man that embraces Yeshua, part of the Christian confusion can be cleared up by understanding that Sha'ul's "works of the Law" doesn't describe mere legalistic commandment keeping, but instead captures the sociological notion of Torah-keeping for the sake of maintaining covenant membership—a sort of "social responsibility to uphold Torah because we are in a partnership with HaShem" perspective. But in the eyes of the early Judaisms, this partnership started with legally-recognized ethnic Jewish identity, a view the current Torah Movement—and the mainstream Christian Church—should rightly repudiate.

So, as we continue to examine the Apostolic Writings more closely, we will see that it was not just Sha'ul who had his hands full with Isra'el's covenantal blindness. A careful examination of a familiar story in the book of Acts reveals some surprising details concerning "works of the Law" as well. Allow me to elaborate on Acts Chapter 10 in a way in which, perhaps, the average Christian has never considered.

## 6. Lesson From Acts 10

The poison of Ethnocentric Jewish Exclusivism permeated the first century Jewish society. A careful reading of the Greek of Acts chapter 10 and Kefa's conversation with HaShem will show that this simple fisherman was also blinded by the prevailing halakhah that sought to avoid Gentiles at all costs. Firstly, allow me to define the important Greek words we will encounter during this section:

- 5399-Phobeo φοβέω (V)+2316-theon θεόν (N, M)=feared+God (i.e., God-fearer).
- 2840-Koinoo κοινόω (V)=to make common, to make (Levitically) unclean, render unhallowed, defile, profane.
- 2839-Koinos κοινός (A)=common, i.e., ordinary, belonging to generality, by the Jews, unhallowed, profane.
- 2511-Katharizo καθαρίζω (V)=to make clean, cleanse, consecrate, dedicate, purify (morally or ritually).
- 111-Athemitos ἀθέμιτος (A)=contrary to law and justice, illicit, (i.e., taboo).
- 169-Akathartos ἀκάθαρτος (A)=unclean, ceremonially, that which must be abstained from according to Levitical Law, foul.

Having made us aware of the language of Luke's narrative, let us pick up the study from my previous commentary to Acts 10:

Q: While the vision of the food is clearly in view, when HaShem responds to Kefa's refusal, he only instructs Kefa not to call common (koinoo κοινόω) that which he (God) has cleansed katharizo καθαρίζω. Why doesn't HaShem also teach Kefa not to call unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) that which God has ostensibly cleansed katharizo καθαρίζω?

A: Obviously God has not cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) those animals that he created to be intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος!) If I, Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, the author of this commentary, could convey this single, important point to your average Christian pastor, then we would not be having this conversation at all! The vision is just that—a vision! The proof that God is not truly altering Kefa's paradigm in regards to food but rather to non-Jews is born out by the careful attention to not mention akathartos ἀκάθαρτος in verse 15, yet by his Ruach HaKodesh impress Kefa to utilize the word akathartos ἀκάθαρτος in regards to non-Jews in verse 28. The Levitical definition of permitted and forbidden animals, as outlined in chapter 11, cannot change! God remains the same both yesterday, today, and forever! Why would he need to change the rules governing the definition of food with the arrival of his Son? It makes nonsense to suppose such a reading of Acts chapter 10! To be sure, if

God were supposedly changing the rules, giving the information to a “country bumpkin” like Kefa—and in a vision no less—is the wrong way to go about doing it, wouldn’t you agree? We should not suppose that this is a mystery hidden from the Jewish people only now to be revealed after his Son has gone to the execution stake (on the same level as the mystery of the gospel that the Gentiles are now to be welcomed into Isra’el as full-fledged covenant members if they place their trust in Yeshua).

Q: If HaShem is not cleansing (katharizo καθαρίζω) unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) animals then what is he cleansing? How are we to understand the vision?

A: I personally believe that Kefa's interpretation of his own vision is the best and most important interpretation offered. Namely this: what HaShem has designated as *kosher* (fit for consumption) and *treif* (not fit for consumption) in the Torah of Moshe, concerning food, still remains clean (tahor טָהוֹר) and unclean (tamei טָמֵא) respectively. Although the sheet contained all manner of animals, I believe what HaShem is trying to get Kefa to understand is that the animals represent all manner of peoples, not the literal animals themselves. This interpretation is in accord with the unchangeable nature of HaShem. To be sure, is this not how Kefa interprets the vision himself in verses 28, 34 and 35?

**28 He said to them, "You are well aware that for a man who is a Jew to have close association with someone who belongs to another people, or to come and visit him, is something that just isn't done. But God has shown me not to call any person common or unclean.**

**34 Then Kefa addressed them: "I now understand that God does not play favorites, 35 but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what people he belongs to (Emphasis, mine).**

Q: But I thought that the Torah forbade Jews from having contact with Gentiles. Isn't that what Kefa explicitly tells his Gentile associates in verse 28, which you quoted above?

A: Observe Acts 10:28 in 10 various, yet common English translations (the original Greek word athemitos ἄθεμιτος has been identified and underlined in each version):

**NASB (New American Standard Bible): And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.**

**GWT (God's Word Translation):** He said to them, "You understand how wrong it is for a Jewish man to associate or visit with anyone of another race. But God has shown me that I should no longer call anyone impure or unclean.

**KJV (King James Version):** And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

**ASV (American Standard Version):** and he said unto them, Ye yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to join himself or come unto one of another nation; and yet unto me hath God showed that I should not call any man common or unclean:

**BBE (Bible in Basic English):** And he said to them, You yourselves have knowledge that it is against the law for a man who is a Jew to be in the company of one who is of another nation; but God has made it clear to me that no man may be named common or unclean:

**DBY (Darby Bible Translation):** And he said to them, Ye know how it is unlawful for a Jew to be joined or come to one of a strange race, and to me God has shewn to call no man common or unclean.

**WEY (Weymouth New Testament):** He said to them, "You know better than most that a Jew is strictly forbidden to associate with a Gentile or visit him; but God has taught me to call no one unholy or unclean.

**WBS (Webster Bible Translation):** And he said to them, Ye know that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come to one of another nation; but God hath shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

**WEB (World English Bible):** He said to them, "You yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to join himself or come to one of another nation, but God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man unholy or unclean.

**YLT (Young's Literal Translation):** And he said unto them, 'Ye know how it is unlawful for a man, a Jew, to keep company with, or to come unto, one of another race, but to me God did shew to call no man common or unclean.

Isn't it interesting that from 10 English translations all but 3 render our Greek word as "unlawful?" The GWT, the BBE, and the WEY, however, attempt to supply a slightly different nuance than unlawful to this word, an attempt I call commendable. Even The Scriptures, a version popular



among Messianics, leaves room for questioning the real intent of the translators:

**And he said to them, “You know that a Yehudite man is not allowed to associate with, or go to one of another race. But Elohim has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.**

The Greek word *athemitos* ἀθέμιτος, found in only two places in the Apostolic Scriptures,<sup>13</sup> is a composite of two Greek words: the word *tithemi* τίθημι meaning “to set, put, place, set forth, establish,” and again, the article “a” rendering the word *tithemi* τίθημι into its negative value.<sup>14</sup> Thus *athemitos* ἀθέμιτος does convey the notion of “unlawful,” but we should carefully note that if Kefa were wanting us to understand that such a prohibition were rooted in the written word of God, the Torah, then he would have used a conjugation of the Greek word *nomos* νόμος which normally refers to God’s Torah. To be sure, our writer Luke uses *anomos* ἄνομος at Acts 2:28 (rendered “wicked” in KJV and “godless” in the NASB) when referring to those men who crucified Yeshua. The TSBD defines the adjective *anomos* ἄνομος as “destitute of the Mosaic law, departing from the law, a violator of the law, lawless, wicked.”<sup>15</sup> By comparison, the adjective *athemitos* ἀθέμιτος refers to that which, although not written down, is simply socially unacceptable, viz, taboo, but certainly not proscribed by Mosaic Law. David Stern’s CJB is a better translation of this pasuk:

**He said to them, “You are well aware that for a man who is a Jew to have close association with someone who belongs to another people, or to come and visit him, is something that just isn’t done. But God has shown me not to call any person common or unclean (Emphasis, mine).<sup>16</sup>**

The Torah of Moshe never prohibits Jews from “keeping company” or “coming unto one of another nation.” This statement of Kefa’s reflects the “ethnocentric Jewish exclusivism” baggage that the Torah communities of his day had engineered, baggage not uncommon among people groups who are marginalized. In other words, Kefa was just regurgitating the standard mantra of his day. This did not excuse his error, which is why HaShem went through all the trouble to send him the vision in the first place.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 10:28; 1 Peter 4:3

<sup>14</sup> TSBD, ἀκάθαρτος.

<sup>15</sup> TSBD, ἄνομος.

<sup>16</sup> For a thorough treatment of Stern’s reasoning behind his translation of this verse see his Jewish New Testament Commentary, pp. 258-259.

In the end, the message of the Acts 10 vision is crystal clear: Gentiles in Yeshua are not intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος), as the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism was professing. They, like all men, have been created in God's image, and as such, can be viewed as defiled (koinos κοινός) by the stain of sin, in need of cleansing (katharizo καθαρίζω). Man, created clean (katharos καθαρός), fell to a state of unclean (koinos κοινός), later to be declared cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) by the blood of the Sacrificial Lamb of God if he accepted such an offer. To use the language of the vision: Jews are not lambs while Gentiles are pigs. Rather, Jews and Gentiles are both lambs! Both have become unclean (koinos κοινός), by sin; both have been cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) by Yeshua! No one is intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος)! No one was created sinful! Born into sin, yes; created sinners, no!<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Acts 10* (Tetze Torah Ministries, 2007), pp. 4-7.

## 7. “Under the Law”

Traditional Christianity would have us believe that the phrase “under the Law” (Greek=ὑπὸ νόμον) refers to mere obligation to keep the Commandments, a sort of shorthand for “under obligation to keep the whole law.” Therefore, when Paul states in Romans 6:14 and 15, for example, that we are “not under the Law but under grace,” the average Bible reader hears Paul saying that, in Messiah, we are not under obligation to keep the Law of Moses since we are now “under the Grace of Christ.” In this way, the Church interprets Paul’s words as setting up a dichotomy of Law vs. Grace, with Grace being the obvious and preferred victor. After all, it is correctly assumed that Paul’s use of the term “Law” in this verse is pejorative—that is—something that is negative and to be avoided by a true follower of Yeshua. What is more, even without knowing fully what the term means at first, we must still agree with Paul’s negative use of the term “Law” here, for indeed, he is describing something we should indeed avoid at all costs. But is he referring to mere Commandment keeping? Is Torah-keeping something a believer in Yeshua should avoid? Surely legalistically following after Torah is something we should never engage in (more on this view below), but is Paul even talking about a legalistic view of Torah observance in his use of “under the Law” in Galatians?

We are not in Romans at this moment. We are in Galatians, and context demands that any given word or phrase must be given its proper surrounding consideration in order for it to have its proper meaning and application. Paul uses the phrase “under the Law” a total of five times in this letter to Galatia and each use has its own contextual meaning. For instance, in Galatians 4:21, ‘those who desire to be under the Law’ must mean ‘those Gentiles who desire to take on legally-recognized Jewish social status via the man-made ceremony of conversion,’ in order for the verse to fit the overall context of Paul’s rebuke in that chapter. Used in this way, ‘under the Law’ and ‘circumcision’ function as synonyms, both describing Jewish identity—whether natural or achieved. We simply cannot assume that standard Christian commentaries on this phrase are accurate if we are to be noble Bereans in this matter, especially since most of those same commentaries unknowingly or unwittingly carry around a fair amount of anti-Jewish or anti-Torah bias. What is more, a well-known Messianic Jewish source also unfortunately falls into the trap of applying the context of Romans’ use of this phrase to the book of Galatians.

I will single out David Stern’s commentary to Galatians:

Likewise, the term "*upo nomon*" ("under the Law"), which appears five times in this letter, never means simply "under the *Torah*," in the sense of "subjection to its provisions," "living within its framework." Rather, with one easily explainable variation, it is Sha'ul's shorthand for "living under the oppression cause by being

enslaved to the social system or the mindset that results when Torah is perverted into legalism.”<sup>18</sup>

Turning again to our example from Romans 6:14 and 15 above, “under the Law” used there indeed refers to being found to be “under the condemnation of the Torah; condemnation caused by being enslaved to one’s personal sin as opposed to being set free by Yeshua the Messiah.” To be under the Law (in these two verses from Romans) is to be under the condemnation of the wrath of God, condemnation reserved for those who have not surrendered their lives to his Saving Power.

And to be fair to context, Paul does in fact apply the “condemnation” aspect and application of “under the Law” from Romans 6:14, 15 specifically to Galatians 5:18,

**KJV (King James Version) But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the Law.**

John K. McKee of TNN Online correctly agrees with this Galatians “condemnation” definition. Addressing Galatians 5:18 in his article *What Does Under the Law Really Mean* (<http://www.tnnonline.net/two-housenews/torah/under-the-law/index.html>) he writes:

Knowing that “under the Law” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties allows this verse to make much more sense to us as Messianics. If you are truly led by God’s Holy Spirit, then you are not subject to the Torah’s penalties. If you are truly led by the Spirit, then you will not be led to disobey the Lord and be cursed. Rather, if you are truly led by the Spirit, you will naturally obey our Heavenly Father and obey the commandments of Torah and be blessed—just as the Torah tells us.

In conclusion to this section, whenever we encounter the phrase “under the Law,” we must be careful to examine the context of the passage in question if we are to properly interpret and apply its usage. Thus far, we have examined two of Paul’s more well-known examples of this phrase “under the Law.” The Romans usage teaches us that “under the Law” is equated with “under condemnation.” To be sure, every genuine follower of Yeshua has been redeemed from the ultimate curse pronounced in the Torah! Such a curse is reserved for those who are “under the law.” If you are in Messiah then you are not under condemnation (read Romans 8:1). You are in fact the righteousness of God in Messiah! What is more, the real change that takes place in a person’s life is effected by the Ruach HaKodesh when, because of Yeshua’s bloody, sacrificial death, the sinner takes on the status of righteous! Legalistically following after Torah does not change your status before God. Man cannot add to that which God perfects.

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<sup>18</sup> David H. Stern, *The Jewish New Testament Commentary-Galatians* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 537.

Moreover, in accordance with Sha'ul's use of "under the Law" in Galatians 4:21, where he speaks against Gentile proselyte conversion to Judaism, in his mind, an unnecessary and supposed legal change in social status added nothing to those wishing to be counted as true Israelites in the Torah Community. Gentiles in Jesus were as complete as they needed to be and to seek to ostensibly become Jewish only insulted the genuine gospel of grace by which they were so marvelously called. To Sha'ul, their genuine faith in the Promised Word of HaShem, as evidenced by the genuine working of the Spirit among them, was all the "identity" they would ever need! Once counted as righteous by the Righteous One Himself, all the new [Gentile] believer needed to do was begin to walk in that righteousness, a walk already described in the pages of the Written Torah, a walk formerly impossible due to the deadness of flesh and bondage to sin.

**We are not under the Law, we are truly under grace. We are not under condemnation. We have been wonderfully forgiven in Messiah! We truly are under freedom!**

Biblical "freedom," however, is not a license to walk away from Torah! Biblical "freedom" is liberation to walk into Torah and into the righteous that HaShem envisioned for us all along! Thus, positional righteousness always results in behavioral righteousness. Put plainly, Torah submissiveness is the natural result of being set free from sin and condemnation and set free unto Yeshua! Stern notes, with my inserted comments in accent,

Christian scholars have discoursed at length about Sha'ul's supposedly ambivalent view of the Torah. Their burden has been to show that somehow he could abrogate the Torah and still respect it. Non-Messianic Jewish scholars, building on the supposedly reliable conclusion, gratuitously supplied by their Christian colleagues, that Sha'ul did in fact abrogate the Torah, have made it their burden to show that the logical implication of Sha'ul's abrogating the Torah is that he did not respect it either and thereby removed himself and all future Jewish believers in Yeshua from the camp of Judaism (the so-called "parting of the ways"). In this fashion liberally oriented non-Messianic Jews in the modern era have been able to have their cake and eat it too, to claim Jesus for themselves as a wonderful Jewish teacher while making Paul the villain of the piece.

But Sha'ul had no such ambivalence. For him the Torah of Moshe was unequivocally "holy" and its commands "holy, just and good" (Romans 7:12). And so were works done in true obedience to the Torah. But in order to be regarded by HaShem as good, works done in obedience to the Torah had to be grounded in trust, [never in one's submission to a man-made ceremony, viz, in one's Jewish status (Romans 9:30-10:10).] If one keeps in mind that Sha'ul had nothing but bad to say for the sin of perverting [circumcision (read here as conversion)] into ethnic-driven righteousness] and nothing but good to say for the Torah itself, then the supposed contradictions in his view of the Torah vanish. Instead of being the villain who destroyed the backbone of Judaism and led Jews astray, he

is the most authentic expositor of the Torah that the Jewish people have ever had, apart from the Messiah Yeshua himself.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 537, 538.

## 8. Galatians 3:19 - Prevailing Christian and Messianic Jewish Perspectives

By this point in my commentary, it should not be difficult to comprehend the massive differences between the prevailing Christian opinions and the prevailing Messianic Jewish perspectives, particularly in regards to the Law of God. In a word, historic Christianity does not embrace the Torah of Moshe as an everyday lifestyle the way historic Messianic Judaism and the current Torah Movement of today does. This is what we call an in-house debate. Both groups of people profess belief in Yeshua as Messiah. In my experience, much of the differences between these two “saved people” organizations lean towards one or two key verses, rather than carefully reasoned examinations of a whole book the likes of Galatians. Put another way, your average Bible reader—on either side of the debate—tends to formulate their strongly held opinions based on a single passage or two, rather than on whole chapters, etc.

With that in mind, I have decided to lift a key passage out of my Excursus and include it in the main body of topics for discussion here. For this exercise, I shall start with the prevailing Christian view, then move to the views of a well-known Messianic Jewish author, before providing my own contrasted opinions at the end. The section here provides a nice sort of teaser into Section Ten below, entitled “**Conclusions - Torah: Negative, Neutral, or Positive?**” with our Summary discussion sandwiched in between the two.

Here is Galatians 3:19 in six random, yet well-known, Bible versions:

**Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. (King James Version, KJV)**

**What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made; and it was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator. (Authorized Standard Version, ASV)**

**Why, then, the law? on account of the transgressions it was added, till the seed might come to which the promise hath been made, having been set in order through messengers in the hand of a mediator. (Young’s Literal Translation, YLT)**

**Why then was the Law given? It was imposed later on for the sake of defining sin, until the seed should come to whom God had made the promise; and its details were laid down by a mediator with the help of angels. (Weymouth New Testament, WEY)**

**Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put**

**in place through angels by an intermediary. (English Standard Version, ESV)**

**So then, why the legal part of the Torah? It was added in order to create transgressions, until the coming of the seed about whom the promise had been made. Moreover, it was handed down through angels and a mediator. (Complete Jewish Bible, CJB)**

The first commentary I would like to quote represents the historic Christian interpretation and application of this chair passage. The comments have been lifted from a well-known and well-respected online Bible-reading website:

1. According to Paul, the law has a negative purpose: It was added because of transgressions (v. 19). Paul has already demonstrated what the law does not do: it does not make anyone righteous before God (v. 11); it is not based on faith (v. 12); it is not the basis of inheritance (v. 18). So if the law is divorced from righteousness, faith and inheritance of the blessing, to what is law related? Paul says that the law is related to transgressions. A transgression is the violation of a standard. The law provides the objective standard by which the violations are measured. In order for sinners to know how sinful they really are, how far they deviate from God's standards, God gave the law. Before the law was given, there was sin (see Rom 5:13). But after the law was given, sin could be clearly specified and measured (see Rom 3:20; 4:15; 7:7). Each act or attitude could then be labeled as a transgression of this or that commandment of the law.

Imagine a state in which there are many traffic accidents but no traffic laws. Although people are driving in dangerous, harmful ways, it is difficult to designate which acts are harmful until the legislature issues a book of traffic laws. Then it is possible for the police to cite drivers for transgressions of the traffic laws. The laws define harmful ways of driving as violations of standards set by the legislature. The function of traffic laws is to allow bad drivers to be identified and prosecuted.

2. The temporal framework for the law is clearly established by the words added . . . until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (v. 19). Paul has already emphasized that the Mosaic law was given 430 years after the Abrahamic promise (v. 17). The word added implies that the law was not a central theme in God's redemptive plan; it was supplementary and secondary to the enduring covenant made with Abraham. As the word added marks the beginning point for the Mosaic law, the word until marks its end point. The Mosaic law came into effect at a certain point in history and was in effect only until the promised Seed, Christ, appeared. There is a contrast here between the permanent validity of the promise and the temporary nature of the law. On the one hand, the promise was made long before the law and will be in effect long after the period of the law; on the other hand, the law was in effect for a relatively short period of time limited in both directions by the words added and until.

As we shall see in our study of the next few sections of the letter (see 3:23-25; 4:1-4), Paul's presentation of the temporal framework for the law is a major theme of his argument for the superiority of the promise fulfilled in Christ over the



law. This theme differs radically from the common Jewish perspective of his day, which emphasized the eternal, immutable nature of the law. But Paul's Christocentric perspective led him to see that Christ (the promised Seed), not the law, was the eternal one.<sup>20</sup>

The comments on the verse are so straightforward and easy to understand that I didn't need to add additional thoughts to them at all. Instead, let's compare this Christian view with a well-known Messianic Jewish author for now before providing my own contrasting views.

Concerning this verse (3:19) Complete Jewish Bible author David H. Stern seems, in some ways, to take the popular Christian view as noted above just a step further. While not casting the Torah in a negative light, he nonetheless seems to not fully capture the intended meaning of Paul's point there in verse 19. Because of his widespread acceptance among many messianic believers, his view is worth critiquing. Moreover, his popularity in the Messianic Community has far-reaching influence in the way the Movement forms their view of the Torah. Writing in his Jewish New Testament Commentary we read (all emphasis, his):

**So then, why the legal part of the Torah** (see v. 17N)? Why was it needed at all, if the promise (v. 18) is independent of it? **It was added** to the promise—and to the environment of Jewish history in particular and human history in general—in **order to create transgressions**, literally, “because of transgressions.” The latter could mean, “in order to contain and limit transgressions,” in order to keep the Jewish people from becoming so intolerably sinful that they would become irredeemable. But instead of this, I think it means, as Sha'ul explains in Romans 7, that a key purpose of the commandments was to make Jewish people ever aware of their sin—not that Jews were more sinful than Gentiles, but that, like Gentiles, Jews too “fall short of earning God's praise” (Ro 3:23). The *Torah* “creates” transgressions by containing commandments which people break, indeed, which rebellious human nature perversely wants to break (Ro 7:7-12&NN). But at least in some cases the guilt they feel causes them to despair of ever earning God's praise by their own works, so that they come to God in all humility to repent, seek his forgiveness, and trust in him (see Ro 3:19-20&NN, 4:13-15&NN, 5:12-21&N, 7:5-25&NN).

**Until the coming of the “seed,”** Yeshua (verse 16), **about whom the promise had been made.** From the time of Moshe until the coming of Yeshua, the Torah had a “conscious-raising” role towards sin. The Torah still exists, is still in this force (see Gal. 6:2), and for those who have not yet come to trust in Yeshua it still has this function. But for those who do trust in Yeshua and are faithful to him, the Torah need no longer serve in this capacity. Sha'ul explains why in verses 21-25.

**It, the Torah, was handed down** to Moshe on Mount Sinai **through angels**, a point made three times in the New Testament (see Acts 7:53) **and through a human mediator**, Moshe. An often-heard Jewish objection to the New

<sup>20</sup><http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/index.php?action=getCommentaryText&cid=7&source=1&seq=i.55.3.6>.

Testament's teaching is that Jews don't need Yeshua because they don't need a mediator between themselves and God. This verse refutes the claim with its reminder that Moshe himself served as such a mediator—as, for that matter, did the cohanim and the prophets. See Hebrews 8:6, 10:19-21; 1 Tim. 2:5; Exodus 20:19; Deut. 5:2, 5; and this citation form a Pseudepigraphic work dating from the first or second century B.C.E:

“Draw near to God and to the angel that intercedes for you, for he is a mediator between God and man...” (Testament of Dan 6:2)<sup>21</sup>

I believe that as important a contribution as Stern has made to the Messianic Movement (I currently endorse his Bible translation), with regards to his commentary on this particular verse, this “neutral” view—as opposed to the blatant “negative” one that Christianity holds—that the Torah was given to Israel to make her ever aware of her transgressions misses the point of Paul's argument at this point in his letter.

In a sort of combination of both BibleGateway and Stern, David Guzik, Christian commentator, adds his contribution to the Galatian dilemma:

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions: Part of the reason the law was given was to restrain the transgression of men through clearly revealing God's holy standard. God had to give us His standard so we would not destroy ourselves before the Messiah came. But the law is also added because of transgressions in another way; the law also excites man's innate rebellion through revealing a standard, showing us more clearly our need for salvation in Jesus (Romans 7:5-8).<sup>22</sup>

True, the Torah does possess a sort of “conscious-raising” role with regard to sin, as correctly stated by Guzik and as correctly noted by Stern in Romans chapter 7, but, given the immediate context of the following complimentary verses<sup>23</sup>, it seems more likely that this is not the Apostle's intended meaning here. Instead, Tim Hegg seems to uncover Sha'ul's true, “positive” intentions with his well-written explanation from his Galatians study, quoted at length here. His comments will draw this section to a close:

The language of our present verse would indicate that we should read it positively, not negatively. “Why the Torah? It was given (added to the revelation already given in the Abrahamic covenant) to reveal the divine method of dealing

<sup>21</sup> David H. Stern, *The Jewish New Testament Commentary-Galatians* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 550.

<sup>22</sup> David Guzik, *Galatians 3-The Christian, Law, and Living by Faith* (David Guzik, 2001) <http://enduringword.com/commentaries/4803.htm>

<sup>23</sup> The presence of angels and a mediator are not pejorative marks against the Torah, as many Christian teachers presume. Rather, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish worldview, these elements are signs that God regarded his Torah as high and lofty enough to warrant accompaniment by angels, and to be safeguarded by the great Moshe, the one who delivered our people from Egypt.

with transgressions,” i.e., “for the sake of transgressions.” Already prejudiced against the Torah, the typical Christian exegesis misses the fact that a great deal of the Torah centers upon the Tabernacle/Temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. How were the covenant members to deal with the inevitable presence of sin in their personal and corporate lives? The Torah gives the answer: by repentance and acceptance of God’s gracious gift of forgiveness through the payment of a just penalty exemplified in the sacrifice. It was the Torah that revealed in clear detail the method which God had provided for transgression, and it was this method—the sacrificial system and priesthood that pointed to Messiah, the ultimate sacrifice and means of eternal forgiveness.

Thus Paul adds: “until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.” In the Greek, this clause follows second, immediately after “it was added because of transgressions.” The ESV has the order correct: “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.” The Torah was given in order to reveal God’s gracious manner of dealing with transgressions, i.e., through the death of an innocent substitute. Paul therefore immediately makes this point by adding, “until the seed would come....” Here, as often, the word “until” (ἄχρι, *achri*; Hebrew אֲד, *’ad*) has the primary meaning of “marker of continuous extent of time up to a point, until.”<sup>24</sup> The point is that the revelation of the Torah regarding how God provides redemption in the face of transgressions has its focal point in Yeshua. Once Yeshua had come and offered Himself as God’s eternal sacrifice, the ultimate revelation to which the sacrifices pointed had been given. This is Paul’s consistent perspective: the Torah leads to Yeshua (cf. Ro 10:4 and the continuing context of Gal 3).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> BDAG, ἄχρι.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (torahresource.com, 2002), p. 121.

## 9. Summary

In my historical research into this book by Sha'ul (Apostle Paul), I have discovered that much of the social fabric of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism that we read about suffered from a sickness I like to call Ethnocentric Jewish Exclusivism. I have written about this concept in another paper that dealt with studies on group prejudice. I believe the paper nicely summarizes our study on Galatians and helps to form the necessary social background required to properly understand the book in its original historical and religious context, and therefore have decided to include a quote from that work here:

The New Testament writer Paul of Tarsus (a.k.a. Apostle Paul) had much to say about the Judaism of his day and the ethnocentric cultural requirements they were imposing on the non-Jews. To be sure, Paul is traditionally misunderstood by the Christianities of today as teaching an abrogation to Torah, circumcision, and Jewish culture as a whole—in a word—ethnic genocide. A proper understanding of 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism will uncover many of the true motives driving the ethnic competition between Jews and non-Jews.

Group-level stereotyping of Gentiles by Jews as pejorative pagans, with no viable and positive contribution possible for the Jewish community, can clearly be seen in this research. Negative attitudes by the Jewish community turned into prejudice against non-Jews, which lead to discrimination against non-Jews as an ethnicity, and eventually provided the Jewish leaders with a mechanism for installing anti-Gentile group policies that were racially driven. Indeed, the power to enforce group prejudice and discrimination is what gives racism its social advantage over subjugated minorities.<sup>26</sup>

The book of Galatians obviously includes an ongoing drama involving two social groups (Jews and Gentiles) not so much over the identity of Jesus the Christ, but perhaps more over who has the right to join Isra'el (who is a Jew?) and subsequently follow after the Torah of Moshe. Recall that the Torah was historically given to Isra'el nearly 3500 years ago, but realize that Isra'el's post-Egypt beginnings included both native-born sons of Jacob, as well as those mixed racial multitudes that God delivered out of Egypt during the Passover. These two groups came to the foot of Mount Sinai, received the Words of God, and were collectively called "Isra'el" by the text (read the Exodus narratives carefully again). Paul later reveals that the "mystery of the Gospel" is that according to Rom. 11 and Eph. chapters 2 and 3 and specifically 6:19, Gentiles are "grafted into the commonwealth of Isra'el via Messiah, and become fellow heirs sharing in the richness of the root of the Olive Tree and inheriting the blessings spelled out in the Torah for all of obedient Isra'el." Therefore, since Isra'el is actually a multi-ethnic entity, Torah actually applies to all who name the

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<sup>26</sup> Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Towards Understanding 1st Century and 21st Century Jewish Attitudes: Studies in Group Prejudice* (Tetze Torah Ministries, 2011), pp. 10-12.

name of the LORD as their one and Only God. This naturally includes Gentile believers in Yeshua.

So, those of us who claim membership in an existing Torah community, the One Law Movement (a.k.a., the Messianic Jewish Movement) confidently affirm and teach obligation to Torah commands for both Jews and Gentiles in Messiah. And yet Paul says in Rom 6:14 that we are not under Law but under grace. The difficulty in correctly interpreting Paul is in understanding that his uses of the word Law in many of his letters applies the definition from the context, which means the root Greek word used (nomos=law) can apply to a variety of definitions. Paul's "not under Law" phrase is preceded by "For sin shall not have dominion over you..." In this verse, Law does not mean we are not under obligation to Torah commands. Rather, it most naturally functions in this verse as shorthand for "not under the bondage of sin and therefore under the condemnation of the Law," a just condemnation reserved for unrepentant sinners. The reason we are not under [the] condemnation [of the Law] is because we are not under bondage, and the reason we are not under bondage is because we have been set free and are under [the] grace [of Yeshua's blood].

In my estimation, Galatians and Romans share some similarities worth noting, especially in regards to the technical phrasing we find in both books. Allow me to single out the phrase "works of the Law" for our summary here.

Dovetailing what he composed in Galatians in his letter to Rome, Sha'ul wrote in Romans 3:28 that God considers a person righteous on the grounds of trusting, which has nothing to do with the "works of the Torah" (or as in KJV "deeds of Law"). On the surface this seems problematic for my own teachings that consider Torah observance to be of great significance. Yet, the problem here is really more a matter of translation than of theology. What Sha'ul is really talking about when he employs the Greek phrase "ergon nomou," translated here as "works of Law" is in actuality a technical phrase that the Judaism of Sha'ul's day employed to speak of the halakhah, that is, the proper way in which a Jew is to walk out Torah. Indeed, the prevailing view of the sages of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century held to the common belief that Isra'el and Isra'el alone shared a place in the world to come. Thus, if a non-Jew wished to enter into HaShem's blessings and promises, such a person had to convert to Judaism first. To be sure, this is one of the primary arguments delineated in the letter to the Galatians.

But for Sha'ul no such 'man-made' conversion policy existed in Scripture!

By contrast, Sha'ul taught most assuredly that Gentiles were grafted into Isra'el the same way that Avraham was counted as righteous by God in B'resheet (Genesis) chapter 15: faith in the promised Word of the LORD. Thus, the phrase "works of Law" has a Hebrew counterpart: ma'asei haTorah. What meaneth ma'asei haTorah? The Dead Sea Scrolls used this phrase as well, and since the discovery of those manuscripts we have now come to know that it refers to

“some of the precepts of the Torah,” as adjudicated by the halakhah and by the particular community wielding the most influence. To be sure, the halakhah that teaches Gentile inclusion only by way of conversion (read most often as “circumcision” in Galatians) was naturally at odds with the True Gospel of Gentile inclusion by faith in Yeshua plus nothing! If we understand that quite often Sha’ul’s use of the term circumcision in Galatians is actually shorthand for “the man-made ritual that seeks to turn Gentiles into Jews” then the letter begins to make more sense Hebraically and contextually.

In essence, “works of the Law” refer to those “group requirements” as outlined and delegated by each individual group functioning under the prevailing Judaism of Paul’s day. Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, had to defend the correct Torah viewpoint in his letters addressed to the Churches at Galatia (specifically chapter 5), as well as to the one in Ephesus. Circumcision, a shorthand way for Paul to say “conversion to Judaism/becoming a Jew,” was historically misused, but there is no reason for us to continue in such a misunderstanding. Nor is there any reason for the emerging Torah communities to shrink back from that which God has clearly given, provided we maintain our primary identity as that of one firmly grounded in Mashiach.

Earlier on in the book of Galatians, most often we found that the technical term “under the Law” was used as another way to speak of Jewish identity. For Gentiles wishing to be included into Isra’el, the man-made ritual known as conversion could ostensibly secure this legal identity. By the time we get to the latter half of chapter five of Galatians, however, Paul had changed his polemical tone and was now assuring those truly in Christ that if they are led by the Spirit they are no longer slaves to the old nature—viz—“under the Law.” Having the mind controlled by the old nature is death. Conversely, having the mind controlled by the indwelling Ruach HaKodesh is life and true shalom. Those who are controlled by the flesh cannot please God and are destined to suffer the ultimate punishment the Torah spells out for unrepentant sinners, that is, condemnation. This “under the Law” condemnation is what Paul meant by its usage in 5:18, and his theology is taken squarely from the Torah proper. Specifically, to be “under the Law” is a pejorative position originally hinted at all the way back in Deuteronomy 29:19-21,

**“If there is such a person, when he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself secretly, saying to himself, ‘I will be all right, even though I will stubbornly keep doing whatever I feel like doing; so that I, although “dry,” [sinful,] will be added to the “watered” [righteous].’**

**“But ADONAI will not forgive him. Rather, the anger and jealousy of ADONAI will blaze up against that person. Every curse written in this book will be upon him. ADONAI will blot out his name from under heaven.**

**“ADONAI will single him out from all the tribes of Isra'el to experience what is bad in all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the Torah.”**  
(Emphasis, mine)

The passage clearly teaches us that to have “every curse written in this book upon you” is to be in a state of “not forgiven by ADONAI,” viz, “under condemnation,” viz, “under the Law.”

Only the Spirit of the Holy One, writing the Torah on the heart and mind, can bring the participant to the intended goal of surrendering to the Mashiach and out from under the curse pronounced in the law. With our natural mind, we read, “do this...” and “don’t do that...” and we have a tendency to misunderstand the grace behind the words. Yeshua came to explain the gracious intent of every command, by explaining the primary thrust of the Torah in the first place: leading its reader to a genuine trusting faith in the Messiah found therein—namely himself!

Doesn’t Paul explicitly say in Galatians 5 that the Law is bondage? Context shows that Paul is combatting ethnic-driven corporate righteousness and ostensible covenant membership based on the social expectation and maintenance of Law-keeping. The bondage of chapter 5 verse 1 is spiritual bondage spelled out for any believer who might wish to return to a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish worldview of corporate/individual salvation and sanctification based on group membership and maintenance of Torah commands. Recall that in Covenantal Nomism, one “gets in” by belonging to the group (being legally born with or married into Jewish identity, or conversion to the legal status of Jewish), and one “stays in” by keeping Torah. Remind yourself that neither of these two “gets in—stays in” facts are true in God’s courtroom. Thus, Paul is warning the genuine Galatian believers that to “get in” one places his trust in Yeshua, and that to “stay in” one waits for the hope of righteousness by faith. The debt to the “whole Law” of verse 3 is a debt to whatever ethnocentric Jewish conversion policy the hapless Gentile converts would submit themselves to should they venture down that bondage-laden path—a debt that surely excluded group membership and Torah observance for non-Jews. Justification by Law in verse 4 means ostensible justification by the policy that teaches a “Jewish-only Isra'el.”

Grace is indeed needed when sin blinds our eyes to believe that covenant status is granted on the basis of ethnicity, whether natural or achieved. Historic Isra'el of the 1<sup>st</sup> century genuinely believed that by virtue of being born Jewish they were automatically guaranteed covenant status. What is more, from their point of view, if someone from non-Jewish stock wished to join the covenant people all he or she needed to do was convert to Judaism, hence my use of the terms “natural” and “achieved” respectively. Natural Isra'elites—those native-born—held to the prevailing theology that Torah was given to maintain the covenant status already acquired at birth. The “ger” (Hebrew for stranger, alien, etc.) was deemed as someone in the process of becoming a Jew via the vehicle of proselyte conversion.

Sha'ul went to great lengths to refute such teaching in his letters both to the Romans and to the Galatians. To be sure, if we apply this hermeneutic to those letters, instead of adopting a “grace versus law” hermeneutic, the Apostle begins to make more sense theologically and historically. I am convinced more now than ever that a foundational understanding of Paul’s writings must take into account the historical fact that 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra’el reckoned herself as right-standing before HaShem on the basis of ethnicity (read as “being Jewish”) alone! She did not feel that keeping the Torah equaled positional (forensic) righteousness; she concluded—albeit incorrectly—that keeping Torah was the vehicle that one used to maintain covenant status already achieved either at birth or by conversion.



## 10. Conclusions - Torah: Negative, Neutral, or Positive?

Our opinions of Paul and his letters should first and foremost be influenced by the raw data found within the Scriptures themselves, since it only stands to reason that historically when his letters were penned, the TaNaKH was the only inspired corpus of literature available to him. Thus, it is reasonable to presume that Paul would also expect his readers, particularly his Jewish ones, to hold similar views of the TaNaKH. “And just what view would that be?” Should it be:

- 1) **Negative**, as in the prevailing Christian view, that Torah was given merely to contain and limit transgressions so that man did not become excessively sinful?
- 2) **Neutral**, as in the Messianic Jewish view, that Torah was given to expose sin for what it really was, namely the transgression of God’s perfect standard of holiness?
- 3) **Positive**, as in recent Pauline authorship, that Torah was given to provide the means by which an existing covenant member might have his sins covered, with an ultimate view towards the coming eternal Sacrifice, Yeshua the prophesied Messiah?

With these options in mind let us draw our conclusion of Galatians by examining what the Torah has to say for itself, followed by a few quotations from Paul. Drawing from the biblical principle of presenting two or three witnesses to strengthen an argument, I will cite two from the 5 Books of Moshe, two from the Prophets, and two from the Writings. We will then allow these TaNaKH witnesses to either buttress Paul’s statement about the Law, or to pale in comparison to his conclusion in Galatians. So that no “foul play” accusations may be leveled, in my choice of verses from the Chumash, I selected only verses that refer to the written Torah, as it pertains to its historical revelation, viz, “Sinai” (post Avraham, post Egyptian Exodus):

Torah:

**Look, I have taught you laws and rulings, just as ADONAI my God ordered me, so that you can behave accordingly in the land where you are going in order to take possession of it. Therefore, observe them; and follow them; for then all peoples will see you as having wisdom and understanding. When they hear of all these laws, they will say, 'This great nation is surely a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has God as close to them as ADONAI our God is, whenever we call on him? What great nation is there that has laws and rulings as just as this entire Torah which I am setting before you today? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)**

And,

**"However, all this will happen only if you pay attention to what ADONAI your God says, so that you obey his mitzvot and regulations which are written in this book of the Torah, if you turn to ADONAI your God with all your heart and all your being. For this mitzvah which I am giving you today is not too hard for you, it is not beyond your reach. It isn't in the sky, so that you need to ask, 'Who will go up into the sky for us, bring it to us and make us hear it, so that we can obey it?' Likewise, it isn't beyond the sea, so that you need to ask, 'Who will cross the sea for us, bring it to us and make us hear it, so that we can obey it?' On the contrary, the word is very close to you - in your mouth, even in your heart; therefore, you can do it! (Deuteronomy 30:10-14)**

Nevi'im (Prophets):

**Only be strong and very bold in taking care to follow all the Torah which Moshe my servant ordered you to follow; do not turn from it either to the right or to the left; then you will succeed wherever you go. Yes, keep this book of the Torah on your lips, and meditate on it day and night, so that you will take care to act according to everything written in it. Then your undertakings will prosper, and you will succeed. (Joshua 1:7, 8)**

And,

**"Blessed be ADONAI, who has given rest to his people Isra'el, in accordance with everything he promised. Not one word has failed of his good promise, which he made through Moshe his servant. May ADONAI our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors. May he never leave us or abandon us. In this way he will incline our hearts toward him, so that we will live according to his ways and observe his mitzvot, laws and rulings which he ordered our fathers to obey. May these words of mine, which I have used in my plea before ADONAI, be present with ADONAI our God day and night, so that he will uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Isra'el day by day. Then all the peoples of the earth will know that ADONAI is God; there is no other. So be wholehearted with ADONAI our God, living by his laws and observing his mitzvot, as you are doing today." (M'lakhim Alef [1 Kings] 8:56-61)**

K'tuvim (Writings):

**The Torah of ADONAI is perfect, restoring the inner person. The instruction of ADONAI is sure, making wise the thoughtless. The precepts of ADONAI are right, rejoicing the heart. The mitzvah of ADONAI is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of ADONAI is clean, enduring forever. The rulings of ADONAI are true, they are righteous altogether, more desirable than gold, than much fine gold, also sweeter than honey or drippings from the honeycomb. Through them your servant is warned; in obeying them there is great reward. (Tehillim [Psalms] 19:8[7]-12[11])**

And,

**For the mitzvah is a lamp, Torah is light, and reproofs that discipline are the way to life. (Proverbs 6:23)**

Finally, the witness of the Apostle Paul himself in books other than Galatians:

**So the torah is holy; that is, the commandment is holy, just and good. (Romans 7:12)**

And,

**But you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, recalling the people from whom you learned it; and recalling too how from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which can give you the wisdom that leads to deliverance through trusting in Yeshua the Messiah. All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living; thus anyone who belongs to God may be fully equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)**

Nu?<sup>27</sup> Within the context of Galatians 3:19, have you the reader decided which view of the Torah you think Sha'ul held to? Negative, neutral, or, positive?

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<sup>27</sup> A general-purpose Yiddish word meaning variously, "Well?" "So?" "Indeed!" "I challenge you," or "If not that, then what?," with many possible inflections and overtones.

## 11. The Promise

A “Christian” attempt at disproving the validity of the important covenantal sign of circumcision has caused much strife and division among the body of believing Jews and Gentiles. The matter is made clear when we understand that HaShem never meant for this sign to secure the promises for the believer! This was to be the sign that he was connected via covenant to a larger family. Is it valid for the Jews today? Yes! In this way, we forever identify physically and spiritually with the unending covenant made with our father Avraham. Is it practical for non-Jewish believers? Unfortunately at this juncture in history, it is not. Until the Church gets right its view of the Torah and the trappings of legalism, it is somewhat discouraged by Messianic Jewish rabbis. I am not saying that Gentiles cannot undergo this ritual. I am delighted to encounter those few Gentiles who truly understand it’s meaning enough to “go under the knife.” Is it necessary for the salvation of an individual? No! It never was!

What makes Avraham such a great role model of faith is that, not only did he trust in the Word of HaShem, but the LORD saw into his future and predicted that his offspring would also be taught how to trust in the Almighty. Let’s look at Genesis 18:17-19,

**“ADONAI said, “Should I hide from Avraham what I am about to do, inasmuch as Avraham is sure to become a great and strong nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by him? For I have made myself known to him, so that he will give orders to his children and to his household after him to keep the way of ADONAI and to do what is right and just, so that ADONAI may bring about for Avraham what he has promised him.” (Emphasis, mine)**

This is a fantastic statement from the mouth of the One who sees every human possibility! Would that we might have HaShem pronounce this blessing over our families today! What must we do? The divine tandem-like actions spoken of here must not be taken too lightly. Firstly, God promises to be faithful to make himself known to us. We like faithful Avraham are then enabled and subsequently covenant-bound to obey the Teachings of our Heavenly Father. Finally, such Teachings are uniquely designed to bring about a righteous behavior in our lives, aligning our lives to be the object of God’s righteous promises! To be sure, the syntax of the above p’sukim (verses) is hinting at that very reality (note the running continuity suggested by the connecting phrases **“so that”** in the quote above)! Furthermore, we must, like faithful Avraham, trust in the LORD against all unbelievable odds, to perform in our lives, the promise that he has given us through Yeshua our Messiah! What is that promise?

**“Furthermore, we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose; because those whom he knew in advance, he also determined in advance would be conformed to the pattern of his Son, so that he might be**

**the firstborn among many brothers; and those whom he thus determined in advance, he also called; and those whom he called, he also caused to be considered righteous; and those whom he caused to be considered righteous he also glorified!” (Romans 8:28-30)**

We usually stop at the first verse, but reading further informs us of our true identity in Messiah: righteous heirs according to trusting faithfulness, causing us to be called, as faithful Avraham was called, “righteous”!

In closing, we affirm with perfect faith that genuine and lasting covenant status is granted to the individual who eventually exercises genuine faith in the Promised Word of HaShem—namely, the Messiah Yeshua. Such status is offered freely to both Jew and Gentile. Jewish people with natural lineage tracing back to Ya’akov are in fact born with a “corporate covenant status” given freely by God and based on his promises made to Avraham. However, this does not automatically grant them the status of right standing in a positional sense. There is no such thing as “involuntary corporate righteousness” in the Torah of HaShem. For the native-born Jewish person, the proper sequence for the covenants is demonstrated when such an individual “graduates” from [mere] corporate faith and belonging towards personal faith in God. To be sure, it is only when God does his monergistic work of opening the eyes of the blind and drawing the individual into his covenant of faith that the person attains genuine and lasting covenant status—the kind of covenant status that is worthy of a place in the ‘Olam Haba (Age to Come).

What place hath the Torah in the life of such an individual? The Torah comes alongside of the Promise (covenant status) and acts as a guarantor that the individual will also achieve behavioral righteousness, thus placing him or her on a direct collision course with the blessings of HaShem! Far from frustrating the grace of God, Torah compliments the grace of God!

## 12. Excursus: Additional “Tough Phrasing”

*\*This extended excursus focuses primarily on the verses from Galatians that have traditionally divided the Messianic Movement from Historic Christianity or have proved to be difficult interpreting in historical context. It does not examine every single verse of the book of Galatians.*

In this extended excursus to Exegeting Galatians and its famous “tough” verses and phrases, I wish to draw the student’s attention to various verses that have traditionally led Christianity towards a passive or negative view of Judaism, Torah, or both. Such verses, when removed from the larger context of either Paul or the situation facing the new believers in Galatia, will usually make Paul out to be the inventor of a new religion called Christianity, a religion viewed as superior to Judaism and the Torah that upholds it.

However, since we have indeed shared the proper historical and theological background to the Apostle and his circumstances, we are now ready to read these verses—indeed the whole letter—afresh with new understanding. To be sure, the context will reveal that in the end Sha’ul personally championed the cause of biblical Judaism and Torah-true obedience to God and his Messiah. What is more, when properly interpreted along their 1<sup>st</sup> century theological and sociological lines, these p’sukim clearly envision a closely-knit Torah community unified under one Messiah and one Torah for both Jew and Gentile alike.

I will spend only enough time on each verse so as to unlock the meaning for the student. If a verse contains multiple issues and warrants more attention then I will allow more information to be subpoenaed. For this exercise differing versions of the Bible may be utilized, but the New International Version (NIV) will be my primary source. My own comments, and when necessary, paraphrasing, will follow immediately after each passage.

## Galatians Chapter One

*1:6, 7 - I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

**Comments:** By his “astonishment,” taken to be rhetorical, we learn that Sha'ul has invested previous time and effort in these Gentile believers, perhaps having visited them twice before finally penning this letter around A.D. 55 or 56.<sup>28</sup> The villains of the piece, identified variously as “Judaizers,”<sup>29</sup> “Legalizers,” or “Influencers”<sup>30</sup> have succeeded in persuading the new Gentiles that covenant-standing (read in Christian parlance as “saved”) was not granted via faith in Yeshua alone, but rather, conversion to Judaism was needed to finalize the membership. Sha'ul saw this persuasion and its apparent successful campaign as a “deserting of the one who called you,” namely, the Mashiach. Because this new, errant theology (that Gentiles must become Jews before they can achieve full and lasting covenant status by God, viz, be saved) ran counter to the genuine Good News (that in Messiah both Jew and Greek are on equal covenant footing) Sha'ul refers to this as “another Gospel” (Greek εὐαγγέλιον, yoo-angelion=news of good), which is really not good news when compared to the Truth. Pertinent for our study is the historical fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaisms were not teaching salvation by following Torah (as the later emerging Church might assume). The “other gospel” that gave Sha'ul such consternation was the prevailing proto-rabbinic view that only Isra'el alone shared a place in the World to Come, that is, only Jews were granted covenant membership. In this view Gentiles must convert before they were considered full-fledged members. In this view Torah was not the means of salvation; “works of the Torah” (defined elsewhere in this commentary) were the prerequisite to “salvation.” In this view Torah simply helped to maintain membership granted to native born and proselyte alike. I, Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, personally disagree with the central tenets of this view.

*1:13 - For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.*

**Comments:** It is critical to a proper understanding of Sha'ul that we recognize the syntax of the Greek of this verse. The word order shows that “previous” modifies the phrase “way of life” and not “previous Jewish life” as some might presume. The careful observation is made to show a shift within the paradigms of Judaism and not outside of them. Paul did not leave Judaism for a new religion called

<sup>28</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament, Commentary to the Book of Galatians* (AMG Publishers, 1991), p. 613.

<sup>29</sup> Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary (TSBD): Ἰουδαΐζειν, ee-oo-daizein=to adopt Jewish customs and rites, imitate the Jews, Judaize.

<sup>30</sup> “Influencers” is a term coined by Mark Nanos, and popularized by Tim Hegg.

Christianity. What he did do was switch party lines, from a non-believing Jewish Pharisee, to a believing (in Yeshua) Pharisee, all within the confines of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. Tim Hegg states it well,

We should note carefully that that word “former” (ποτέ, *pote*, which, when functioning as a particle means “once, formerly) functions to modify the word “manner of life” (ἀναστροφή, *anastrophe*, “lifestyle”). It does not imply that Paul formerly lived within Judaism but that as of the time he wrote the Galatians, he was no longer living within Judaism. What he is contrasting is his personal “halachah” before and after his faith in Yeshua as Messiah, not his former life in Judaism as opposed to his present life apart from Judaism.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Tim Hegg, A Study of Galatians (torahresource.com, 2002), p. 30.



## Galatians Chapter Two

*2:3 - Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.*

**Comments:** The key to understanding this verse is the “force” of the Greek word translated as “compelled.” (Pun intended) Greek “compel” (ἀναγκάζω, anagkadzo, to necessitate, compel, drive to, by force, threats, etc.)<sup>32</sup>, suggests that Titus, a Gentile believer did not even wish to be circumcised at that time, even though it is a clear command of Torah. And why would he not wish to exercise his right to Torah as a full-fledged member of the community? Perhaps he was a “green” believer. Perhaps he was a seasoned believer with proper motives. Remember, being with Sha'ul, he surely was aware of the prevailing rabbinic halakhah that Gentiles were not considered covenant members until after conversion. Thus, his motives for accepting or refusing circumcision at that time were a reflection of his taking a stand with Paul to send the right signal to the newly formed Gentile faction within Apostolic Judaism. See additional thoughts involving Peter on 2:14 below. I think it is safe to assume that once the heat was off, circumcision would not present any problem for him personally. That Sha'ul had Timothy, also considered a Greek by 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish standards, circumcised in Acts chapter 16 is proof that Sha'ul himself did not consider this mitzvah unimportant for followers of Yeshua. What is more, that Sha'ul did not view circumcision as equal to conversion can be deduced by his comments in Galatians chapter 5 coming up later. In sum, this Greek word shows up a total of nine times in the Apostolic Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> For our immediate interest it is used twice more in this letter from Paul (2:14; 6:12) and once in his second letter to the Corinthians. Interesting by association is how Paul uses this word in Acts 26:11 describing his former zeal to “compel” Followers of the Way to blaspheme!

*2:14 - When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"*

**Comments:** “Acting in line with the truth of the gospel.” The phrase suggests that Sha'ul is contending for defined and exclusive truths (note the definite article in the Greek: *ho alethia*=the truth, and *ho euagellion*=the gospel), of which the subjects of verses 11-13 (to include Peter) are not upholding, a gospel truth central to his effective evangelization among the Gentiles. Compromise has been taking place on a public level so Sha'ul makes his rebuke public as well.

<sup>32</sup> Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary (TSBD), ἀναγκάζω.

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 14:22; Mark 6:45; Luke 14:23; Acts 26:11; 28:19; 2 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 2:3, 14; 6:12.

*"You are a Jew (a Jew by birth and not a convert), yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew."* In what way is Sha'ul accusing Peter of living like a Gentile? From the inner circle perspective of those who apply Torah to their lives on a daily basis, to "live like a Gentile" would mean to invite non-Jews into close quarters where table fellowship is likely to take place. To be sure, verse 11 and 12 show that Peter was in fact eating with Gentile believers prior to the arrival of the "men from James." From a sectarian point of view, like the one obviously held to by those in opposition to Gentile inclusion, to eat with Gentiles was simply taboo—not acceptable if one wished to tow the Jewish party line accurately. To "live like a Gentile" most certainly does not mean that Peter ate food that was clearly proscribed by the Torah (recall Peter's confession to God in Acts 10:14). For a Jew to be labeled by another Jew as "living like a Gentile" was simply to accuse him of having close relations with Gentiles. Because Sha'ul stressed the equality of Jewish and Gentile covenant membership via Messiah Yeshua, for Peter to waffle in his relations with Gentile believers simply because they were Gentiles was to "live as a good Jew should" only from the perspective of the prevailing Jewish thinking of his day. In other words, in the mind of Sha'ul, to live within the boundaries of the halakhah of a normative Judaism who defined herself as exclusively Jewish was unacceptable for a Messianic Jew the likes of Peter. *"To live like a Jew"* (Greek=loudaizo Ἰουδαίζω "Judaize") may even suggest that Peter unknowingly supported the halakhah that favored circumcising Gentiles before they could enjoy unlimited Jewish community access. *"How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"* seems to reinforce the notion that from Sha'ul's point of view, whether knowingly or unknowingly, Peter was guilty of undermining the central truth of the equality of the Gospel for both Jews and Gentiles without either one having to be converted by coercion. The English word rendered "force" is our already familiar Greek word anagkazo ἀναγκάζω "compel," "constrain." The *"Jewish customs"* in question by Sha'ul were the specific group requirements that excluded Gentiles from full covenant membership and thus full Torah participation.

*2:15 - "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."*

Comments: *"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners'..."* The key to understanding this cryptic phrase is in knowing that it is not coming from the mouth of Sha'ul! Rather, he is simply restating the popular views of the Influencers he is arguing against. To call a Gentile a "sinner" was, from a Jewish point of view, derogatory, something Sha'ul would not have endorsed. However, the established Judaic view of Gentiles allowed for them to be labeled by "authentic covenant members" as such. For Paul to insert this quote into his argument (the syntax of the Greek phrasing is crucial here) only makes sense if we understand the rhetoric by which Paul is desperately trying to shake Peter loose from his current, deficient halakhic actions. Peter has indeed confessed faith in Yeshua, so that to hold to the view that Gentiles are "unclean" would be

frustrating to the genuine Gospel that Sha'ul has been commissioned to take to the Gentiles.

Continuing with his sharp rebuke, Sha'ul categorically embraces the notion that true, biblical Judaism holds to the correct view that *a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.* Contrary to the popular belief that one must either be born Jewish or convert to becoming a Jew, Paul's gospel extended lasting covenant membership to all who would freely embrace the message of the Cross Event. The word translated here as "justified" clearly invokes a positional-righteousness as determined by HaShem. Given the current contextual argument, the phrase *"by observing the law"* must mean "by conformity to a man-made ritual" for the Gentile, or *"by being born Jewish"* for the native born. We could translate the whole phrase thusly: *"...a man is not justified by his ethnic-driven identity, whether natural or achieved, but by faith in Jesus Christ."* What follows (*So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified*) may amount to so much tautological repetition.

*2:19 - For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.*

Comments: At first blush this verse seems to spell the end of any Torah relevance for the apostle. But a careful reading will reveal its true meaning. The verse starts out with the word "for" (Greek=γάρ, gar) a conjunction indicating that it is linked to a previous argument. In this case, Paul's "for" represents an answer to the "if" clause introduced in verse 17 (*"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners..."*). The key to understanding verse 19 is in answering exactly how we as individuals in verse 17 come to be made aware that *"we ourselves are sinners"*. Prior to his salvation experience Sha'ul was blinded to his true condition: dead in trespasses and sin. However, now that the Spirit has taken up residence within him, via the sacrificial death of Yeshua, he can look back to how the Torah played a part in bringing him to this newfound revelation about himself. The Torah, working in concert with the Spirit of God, revealed sin for what it was: violation of God's righteous standard. Thus, through the Torah—that is, through its proper function of revealing and condemning sin, the individual is brought to the goal of the Torah, namely the revelation of the Messiah himself. Once faced with the choice to remain in sin or be set free by the power of the Blood, Paul confesses that he "died" to his old self and was consequently made alive in the newness that is accredited to those who choose life!

But Paul says that he died to Torah. What does he mean by such a statement? Are we to assume that in Yeshua Paul is now somehow dead to obedience to the Torah? May it never be! Simply put, he now realizes that his new life in the Spirit is a life to be lived without the fear of being condemned as a sinner by the very Torah he previously thought he was upholding! The Torah has a properly

installed built-in function of sentencing sinners to become the object of HaShem's punishment and ultimate rejection, a rejection that will result in death if the person never choose the Messiah of life. Paul is teaching the Galatians that his choice of Yeshua is to be understood as a death of self and the former life that Torah condemned in favor of a new life of serving God through the Spirit, a choice brought on by the revelation of Messiah found within the very pages of the Torah itself! Such freedom in Messiah does not liberate one from Torah, rather, such freedom liberates one to be able to walk into Torah as properly assisted and seen from God's perspective!

*2:21 - I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"*

Comments: Bringing his arguments of the previous verses, and indeed the chapter as we have it, to a close, Paul again reinforces the truth that the "righteousness of God" is attained for an individual at Christ's expense and not through the rubrics of a man-made conversion ceremony (read here as "*through the law*"). The "law" in question is the Oral Tradition that only Isra'el can inherit blessings in the World to Come, a belief formerly held to by the apostle himself. To be sure, if being declared righteous (understood to be primarily forensic, but including behavioral as well) could be achieved via the flesh (that is, being born Jewish or converting to Judaism) then truly what need would there be for a Messiah to come and provide it later for anyone? Paul would have the reader to understand that such righteousness is altogether outside of human achievement and therefore must be procured by surrendering to the power of the Anointed One of God.

## Galatians Chapter Three

*3:2, 3 - I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*

Comments: No other chapter of the Bible has caused more theological misunderstandings than Chapter Three of Galatians! We would do well to tread cautiously as we seek to unlock its meanings...

Again, Sha'ul returns to his irony with a rhetorical question about the origins of the giving of the Ruach HaKodesh among the Galatian believers. Sha'ul surely knows first hand from whence the Spirit flows from God to an individual. However, in this portion of his letter he is attempting to shock the readers back into some semblance of "biblical reality." Having begun with the truth of Yeshua's atoning death, how could they possibly be considering going back on such a revelation? To the apostle, such a notion was ludicrously untenable! Again, knowing that the Greek word for law (nomos) can refer to the Oral Tradition of proselyte conversion helps us to understand Paul to be challenging its validity among genuine covenant members. Surely lasting covenant membership is not acquired by human effort, but rather by placing one's trust in the Ultimate Son of the Covenant, Yeshua himself. Our opening question might be better phrased as so: *"I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by becoming proselytes, or by believing what you heard?"* Paul immediately provides his answer, a resounding *"Are you so foolish?"* To suppose that human achievement could in some way trump the grace of God as afforded by his Only Son was an exercise in futility! The second question then is merely a clarification of his previous inquisition stated this time using the explicit language of the Influencers, viz, "human effort," referring back to the proselyte ceremony. The historic position held to by the later emerging Christian church that the apostle is pitting true faith in Yeshua against any supposed Torah observance finds no basis from the context of Paul's argument here. Indeed, we must allow the context of the letter to determine what is driving his consternation. Read without the clarity of context, we will forever misconstrue Paul to be teaching Gentile believers that HaShem's Laws hold no valuable place in the practical application of the very Promise inherited through Yeshua the Savior. Read without the clarity of context, we will misunderstand Paul to be denigrating the Torah in favor of being led by the Spirit.

*3:5 - Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?*

Comments: This verse is a restating of the previous round of rhetorical questioning. Obviously by now we know that Paul is not in favor of ethnic-driven righteousness, a position maintained by his detractors. The evidence that the Galatians are already in possession of genuine and lasting covenant status is the fact that the Ruach HaKodesh is indeed working among them! Recall Peter's

surprise when the Ruach HaKodesh fell freely on Cornelius and company in Acts 10: 44-48. Why was Peter surprised? Because the long-standing belief among the Judaisms of the 1<sup>st</sup> century sincerely assumed that God only chose Jews as covenant partners! Paul here is acknowledging the genuine working of the Spirit among his fellow Gentiles as proof positive that they were existing covenant members and not merely “Gentile-to-Jewish converts” in the process of becoming covenant members. The question is meant to raise the issue in the minds of the Galatians as to what exactly attracts the attention of God himself: flesh or faith? The answer is given below using Avraham as the paradigm.

*3:6 - Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Comments: Throughout his letters, the Apostle Paul (Sha'ul) seems to take great interest in Avraham, referring to him no less than 29 times!<sup>34</sup> Ya'akov (James) also makes use of Father Avraham in chapter 2 and verses 21-23 of his letter, going so far as to bring the binding of Isaac into the equation for us. For Ya'akov, Avraham's faith was perfected by his corresponding actions. Germane to our study, however, is the phrase “*credited to him as righteousness*,” penned by Moshe in B'resheet (Genesis) 15:6 and referenced by Sha'ul in Romans 4:3

**For what does the Tanakh say? "Avraham put his trust in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness.**

Given its location within Paul's arguments, both from Romans and Galatians, it is clear that the phrase is referring to imputed righteousness, that is, positional (forensic) right standing with HaShem. For Paul, it is axiomatic that Moshe describes this quality chronologically before Avraham receives the covenant of circumcision in B'resheet chapter 17. This bespeaks of the correct order in which to appropriate the covenant responsibilities of God. On the micro, saving faith in God, symbolized by God accrediting his account as righteous (Hebrew צְדָקָה tz'dakah), precedes the patriarch's obedience to the sign of circumcision. On the macro, the covenant of Avraham precedes the covenant with Moshe.

Thus, we can infer that Sha'ul brings Avraham into the argument to show that forensic righteousness is conferred to those who are not circumcised as well as to those who are—read Gentile and Jew respectively.

**Or is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, he is indeed the God of the Gentiles (Romans 3:29).**

And,

<sup>34</sup> Assuming Paul wrote Hebrews, the count is as follows: Romans 4:1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 13, 16; 9:7; 11:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 3:6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 18, 29; 4:22; Hebrews 2:16; 6:13; 7:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9; 11:8, 17.

Now is this blessing for the circumcised only? Or is it also for the uncircumcised? For we say that Avraham's trust was credited to his account as righteousness; but what state was he in when it was so credited - circumcision or uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision! In fact, he received circumcision as a sign, as a seal of the righteousness he had been credited with on the ground of the trust he had while he was still uncircumcised. This happened so that he could be the father of every uncircumcised person who trusts and thus has righteousness credited to him, and at the same time be the father of every circumcised person who not only has had a b'rit-milah, but also follows in the footsteps of the trust which Avraham avinu had when he was still uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-12).

But what is it about the narrative in Genesis that leads Moshe to finally declare Avram/Avraham as righteous at this juncture? Is there something within the story that would cause any reader to make the same assumption? What was going on in the mind of the Holy One? Perhaps we can draw some conclusions by looking at the passage from a telescopic overview. Allow me elaborate?

The flow of the Genesis narrative has been an interactive look at Avraham and his contending with God ever since God called him away from his native land in chapter 12:1-3. There, in what amounts to a unilateral agreement, we find that HaShem promises to increase his offspring beyond numbering. The corresponding covenant ceremony will later be enacted in p'sukim (verses) 7-20 of chapter 15. But leading up to this point, and trailing afterwards, is a grammatical clue as to what—or whom—Avraham actually placed his trust in!

In B'resheet 12:1 Moshe recalls that ADONAI spoke to Avram.<sup>35</sup> If we trace every occurrence where God and Avram interact we will discover something quite interesting. Continuing with our investigation, HaShem appears to Avram in 12:7,<sup>36</sup> and in chapter 13 verse 14 ADONAI again speaks to Avram.<sup>37</sup> But when we arrive at chapter 15 the narrative appears quite odd. Instead of God appearing or speaking to Avram, the first clause of the first verse records:

אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְּבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם

**After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram...**

Likewise verse 4 confesses,

וַהֲנִיחָה דְּבַר-יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר

**And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying...**

<sup>35</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם

<sup>36</sup> וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם

<sup>37</sup> וַיְהִיחָה אִמְרַת יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם

Verse 6 of chapter 15 reveals Avram's reaction to the Word of the LORD by stating that it was at this moment that he believed the unbelievable and it was credited to him as righteousness. Remember, up until this point, Avram had remained childless, and was beginning to suppose that maybe the heir of his household was to be the recipient of God's promise from Genesis 12:1-3.<sup>38</sup> The narrative of chapter 15 trails off with statements amounting to "ADONAI said to him, 'I am ADONAI,'" (verse 7)<sup>39</sup> and "That day ADONAI made a covenant with Avram." (verse 18)<sup>40</sup>

Who or what was this mysterious "Word of the LORD" that suddenly<sup>41</sup> appeared in the parenthesis of the narrative with Avram?

I will let the Chazal (the Sages of Blessed Memory) add their input to this Hebraic feature of the story:

In Scripture "the word of the Lord" commonly denotes the speech addressed to patriarch or prophet (Gen. xv. 1; Num. xii. 6, xxiii. 5; I Sam. iii. 21; Amos v. 1-8); but frequently it denotes also the creative word: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Ps. xxxiii. 6; comp. "For He spake, and it was done"; "He sendeth his word, and melteth them [the ice]"; "Fire and hail; snow, and vapors; stormy wind fulfilling his word"; Ps. xxxiii. 9, cxlvii. 18, cxlviii. 8). In this sense it is said, "For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps. cxix. 89). "The Word," heard and announced by the prophet, often became, in the conception of the seer, an efficacious power apart from God, as was the angel or messenger of God: "The Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Isra'el" (Isa. ix. 7 [A. V. 8], lv. 11); "He sent his word, and healed them" (Ps. cvii. 20); and comp. "his word runneth very swiftly" (Ps. cxlvii. 15).<sup>42</sup>

The Word of the LORD is in fact the LORD, ADONAI himself! This much is made clear by the objective text and the subsequent notations that we observed in Hebrew via the footnotes. But let us take it one step further to complete the mystery. In Aramaic, the sister language to Hebrew, the translation of "word" becomes מַאֲמַר mah'amar, from which we get "memra." Since the Hebrew "Word" was already identified as possessing personality, the corresponding memra likewise took on identity! Early Jewish theologians defined the Memra, or Word of God, with six different characteristics. In the first portion of his Gospel,

<sup>38</sup> B'resheet 15:2, 3.

<sup>39</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה

<sup>40</sup> בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא קָרַת יְהוָה אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּרִית

<sup>41</sup> The Hebrew word הִנֵּה "hineh" is explained by Jewish authorities as "...untranslatable. It is often rendered as 'here' or 'behold,' but this is an approximation of an expression that has no equivalent in the Indo-European languages. For this reason, it is often left untranslated. In general, it serves to intensify a statement and to provide emphasis. Here, the intensity denotes that it was a sudden or intense experience." (Navigating the Bible, online commentary to Genesis 15:4)

<sup>42</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia, pp. 464-465.



Yochanan (John) associates each of these qualifications with their Messianic fulfillment in Yeshua. These six claims were:

1. Memra is defined as distinct, yet the same as God. This struggle as to the nature of HaShem persists to this day. Messianic Jews point to the use of the term echad as a composite unity to assist in the explanation of this issue. Yochanan in Yochanan 1:1 stated: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (Complete Jewish Bible). Yeshua Himself spoke of the fulfillment of this attribute when He stated, "I and the Father are one." Yochanan 10:30, CJB
2. The second attribute of the Memra, Word of God, was that it was the agent of creation. Yochanan states that Yeshua fulfills this in Yochanan 1:3: "All things came to be through Him and without Him nothing made had being." Sha'ul succinctly stated this in Colossians 1:15b-16, referring to Yeshua: "He is supreme over all creation, because in connection with Him were created all things — in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, lordships, rulers or authorities — they have all been created through Him and for Him."
3. The third attribute stated that the Memra was the agent of salvation. This is claimed in Yochanan 1:12: "But to as many as did receive Him, to those who put their trust in His person and power, He gave the right to become children of God." Yeshua stated His role as agent of salvation several times, most forcefully in Yochanan (John) 14:6b: "I AM the Way — and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me."
4. The fourth Jewish attribute of the Memra was that Memra was the agent of Theophany (the visible presence of God). In Yochanan 1:14 one reads: "The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw His Sh'khinah, The Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." Indeed, one might consider the incarnation reality of God in Messiah Yeshua to be a prolonged Theophany. As Sha'ul forthrightly stated in Colossians 1:15a concerning Yeshua: "He is the visible image of the invisible God."
5. The fifth attribute of Memra was that of being the agent of covenant signing. In Yochanan 1:17 the author writes: "For the Torah was given through Moshe, grace and truth came through Yeshua the Messiah." This was the fulfillment of the prophetic words of Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah), written in the thirty-first chapter of his self-titled book in verses 30 (31) and 32 (33): "Here, the days are coming," says Adonai, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah ... For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says Adonai: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their heart; I will be their God, and they will be my people."
6. The final attribute of Memra was that of being the agent of revelation. Yochanan writes of this in verse 18 of the first chapter of his Gospel: "No one has ever seen God; but the only and unique Son, who is identical with God and is at the Father's side — He has made Him known." When Philip

asked Yeshua to reveal the Father, Yeshua's reply was "Have I been with you so long without your knowing me, Philip? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" Yochanan 14:9.

Indeed as scholars have summarized: "The writings of John confirm that his understanding of Memra was 100 percent Hebraic. He affirms that Yeshua fulfills all six attributes and all Jewish expectations of Memra."

What have we learned thus far? Avram placed his trust in ADONAI. The raw data gathered from the narrative tells us that it was the Word of ADONAI who received the object of such faith. To be sure, Avram's response is unique, employing the moniker "Adonai, God,"<sup>43</sup> instead of merely YHVH like in 14:22.<sup>44</sup> Sarna notes this shift in titles in his commentary to Genesis,

This Hebrew divine title, rarely used in the Torah, appears here for the first time. It is used in a context of complaint, prayer, and request. Here, the word for "Lord" is '*adonai*', "my Lord," not the divine name of YHVH, and its use suggests a master-servant relationship. Abram does not permit his vexation to compromise his attitude of respect and reverence before God.<sup>45</sup>

However, in comparison to Sarna above, we must carefully note that the Hebrew text of ADONAI (אֲדֹנָי) itself is a peculiar rendering. How so? According to 'The Scriptures' translation by the Institute for Scripture Research (ISR) the original Hebrew name of YHVH has been emended by the Scribes in 134 passages!<sup>46</sup> This means that in 134 places in our existing Masoretic text, the Hebrew may read ADONAI (אֲדֹנָי) but the original word was in fact YHVH יְהוָה. Richard Spurlock of *Bereans Online*, a well-balanced messianic web site with a nice collection of podcasts for downloading, makes a similar observation in his notes to the course 'Messiah Unveiled':

A most interesting feature of Genesis 15 is evident only in the Hebrew. In the English of Genesis 15:2, the two words 'Lord God' are used. The English translation is that the English translators have up until this point used the scribal tradition of *kere ketiv* [say/write] with regard to the Tetragrammaton [sic]. If you remember, the ancient scribes used a system of circumlocution to encourage the reader to not say the Holy Name out loud. What was written was the four letters of a *yod*, a *hay*, a *vav*, and a *hay*. Under those consonants, the scribes placed the permanent *kere ketiv* in the form of vowel points. The vowel points were for the word '*Adonai*' [Lord]. Thus the reader, when they came to the Holy Name, would say, '*Adonai*'. The English translators took this tradition to another level.

<sup>43</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבְרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה

<sup>44</sup> "...unto the LORD, the most High God." אֶל-יְהוָה אֵל עֶלְיוֹן

<sup>45</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary to Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> The Scriptures, *Explanatory Notes: Emendations by the Sopherim*, (Institute for Scripture Research), p. 1214.

Instead of writing the four letters, they substituted 'LORD' in all capital letters. This informed the reader that the Hebrew behind the word was in fact the Holy Name.

When we get to Genesis 15:2, the translators have a problem—the actual word 'Adonai' is used next to the Holy Name. The problem is that if they followed their translation consistently, it would say, "Lord LORD," which is difficult rendering. Following the scribal tradition of circumlocution (word substitution), they simply write 'Lord GOD.' The 'GOD' is in fact a substitution for the Holy Name in this case...

What is the significance of this word arrangement? This is the first time this word combination is used in Scripture. This word combination is used in other places in Scriptures, but not very often. We need to investigate to see if there is some connection between these passages, and if it is a Messianic connection.<sup>47</sup>

What are we to make of this exchange of names and how does it relate to Yeshua and the Memra? May I suggest (under the guidance of the Apostolic Scriptures) that the Memra of YHVH appeared to Avram in such a way as to allow Avram to address him as a servant would address his visible, flesh and blood master in face-to-face reverence and respect? Did Avram see a man? Did he see the invisible YHVH? I can't be dogmatic either way since biblical theophanies are often shrouded in mystery, but my gut feeling is that Avram saw the pre-incarnate LORD Yeshua with his natural eyes and yet called him YHVH! One thing is sure: Avram believed the unbelievable, and it was to the Word of the LORD—the Memra—that he addressed his objective faith! Surely HaShem saw into the heart of the patriarch and recognized the appropriation of the choices that lay before him. What is more, only the LORD himself can supernaturally open the eyes of a man to allow him to make a choice between choosing his Messiah or rejecting him. Tim Hegg provides a summary thought to our study,

The response of God is said, once again, to come via His "word"—"the word of the LORD came to him saying...." God assures Abram that he will indeed have a son, and then He takes Abram outside to give him a sign of the promise He has just made. But the sign itself requires faith. For God shows Abram the stars and declares: "So shall your descendants (literally "seed") be." Not only would Abram have a son, but the descendants of Abram would endure from generation to generation, so that in the end, the offspring of Abram would be beyond counting.

But would God's word—His promise of a son—be enough for Abram? After all, it had been some time (perhaps as much as 20 years by the Sages reckoning) since the initial promise had been given, and there was still no son. Sarai was still barren. In fact, God's word was enough for Abram, as the next verse (v. 6) indicates. "And he believed in the LORD." Moses has reserved this clear statement of Abram's faith for the moment when the promised son is specifically the focus of attention. Surely Abram believed from the time that God

<sup>47</sup> Richard Spurlock, *Messiah Unveiled* (available at <http://www.bereansonline.org/default.htm>, 2005), p. 34-35.

first revealed Himself to him. His actions prove his faith: he left Ur, traveled to the place that God had indicated, forsook the idolatry of his fathers, and worshipped the One true God. But Moses intends us to see that Abram's faith was cast upon God in a particular fashion-in connection with the promise of a son. And thus we have the all important verse: "And he believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."<sup>48</sup>

In conclusion to this section, we see clearly that Avraham chose to lay hold of the Promise given in Genesis 12:1-3 by seeing at the heart of such a promise a glimpse of the Messiah who would bring it to pass!

*3:10 - All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

Comments: This verse when misunderstood from its larger context will invariably lead the reader to the incorrect conclusion that Paul is advocating complete and mitzvah-by-mitzvah (commandment-by-commandment) Torah submission for everyone wishing to attain right-standing with the Almighty. That the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism did not advocate a view that required complete Torah obedience before one could be counted as a covenant member is attested to in the later rabbinic compilations that survived the destruction of the Temple. Put simply, no one in Paul's day thought that a person must practically walk out each and every single commandment in order to receive covenant membership into Isra'el (viz, salvation). Nor did anyone in Paul's day believe that God expected such obedience of Isra'el. No, such a notion finds its home among ignorant ideology and theology borne out of ignorance to the Laws of God and the Ways of God. Our verse is a contrast to the previously statement made in verse 6 where Avraham is said to have been considered righteous on the basis of his faith. By comparison, those who do not imitate Avraham, but instead seek to circumvent God's method of declaring a person righteous actually fall into the trap of legalism. When Sha'ul uses a statement like "*all who rely on observing the law,*" ('works of the law' in other versions) he is referring to two positions: primarily and historically, he is speaking to those (Influencers, Judaizers, Circumcision Faction, etc.) who believed that covenant status was extended by God due to ethnic status, whether native-born or convert (for more on this nationalistic view see the quote by James D.G. Dunn in my comments to verse 13-14 below). Such individuals, instead of living within the blessing of HaShem, were in reality found to be the object of God's curse, because instead of submitting to God's way of making a person righteous through objective faith in Yeshua, they were said to be setting up their own way of righteousness through ethnic status/Isra'elite membership, a charge leveled against unbelieving Isra'el by Sha'ul himself in Romans 9:31, 32-10:3. Secondly, he is teaching against any superstition notions that God extends covenant status to the individual who simply avails himself of Torah obedience outside of genuine faith in the giver of

<sup>48</sup> Tim Hegg, *Parashah Twelve* (torahresource.com, 2003), p. 2.

the Torah. This is proven by the conditional clause, “*All who rely on...*” To what would the individual be relying upon for righteousness? It must be either his supposed legal status as a Jew or his Torah observance/maintenance (or a combination of both, viz, Covenantal Nomism). Paul would have argued against either view.

The phrase “*Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law*” is lifted from Deuteronomy 27:26, indicated by the familiar “*for it is written.*” The key to correctly understanding the verse from Deuteronomy, and thus Paul’s use of it here in Galatians, is in understanding that “everything written in the Book” also—and primarily!—includes faith in Yeshua as the Promised Messiah. For indeed, Yeshua is the very conclusion, the very goal that “everything written in the Book” is pointing to! (cf. Romans 10:4) God is not asking his followers to try to keep every commandment in the Law as some sort of simplistic grocery list of do’s and don’t’s in order to avoid being cursed. Paul sees another “gospel” being presented by his detractors (the gospel of Jewish identity and proselyte conversion for Gentiles) and he is out to set the record straight in this section of his letter by using Avraham as an example. Paul is going to prove his argument—that genuine and lasting covenant membership is granted exclusively to those exercising objective faith in the Promised Messiah of the Law—by directly quoting from the Torah itself. The reference here by Sha’ul however is neither a direct quote from the Masoretic Hebrew text, or a direct quote from the Greek Septuagint (LXX). He may be paraphrasing the general meaning of the verse for his readers. The meaning is nevertheless captured by Sha’ul: the genuine and lasting covenant member to be, as well as the existing covenant member, must follow after all that God has spoken to do, which includes “listening to all the words of the Prophet that God raised up among them” (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15)—namely Yeshua!<sup>49</sup> Picking and choosing which commandments are relevant and which ones aren’t is not left to the covenant member. Only God is allowed to determine which commandments might if ever fall into disuse and which ones will not. But even more to the point of Sha’ul’s argument here is the historical reality that each and every covenant member bound himself to pursue the “Righteous One” promised by the Torah, as already mentioned above!<sup>50</sup> The very thing that a covenant member was expected to do was to exercise faith in God and in his Messiah to come, who by Sha’ul’s writing had already arrived! The individual who failed to matriculate to the “Messianic conclusion” ultimately found himself a candidate for being “cut off” (Hebrew=כרת, karat) by God himself due to his lack of faith.<sup>51</sup> In stating that the one who denies genuine faith lives under a curse, Paul opts for the Greek word κατάρα, katara,

<sup>49</sup> A condition agreed upon by corporate Isra’el herself at the inauguration of the Covenant on Mount Sinai, as recorded by Moshe in Exodus 19:7, 8.

<sup>50</sup> See Deuteronomy 18:15-19, which was understood in Yeshua’s day to be referring to “The Prophet,” namely, Prophet Messiah, as evidenced by the people’s reaction in John 7:40-42. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism also inferred and anticipated the coming of a Righteous One from numerous passages lifted from the Major and Minor Prophets.

<sup>51</sup> Romans 11:19-22.

which conveys the notion of a spoken curse,<sup>52</sup> a clear reference to God's words as pronounced in our Torah passage of Deuteronomy, i.e., the Book of the Law.

3:11 - *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."*

Comments: Sha'ul now states emphatically that "*no one is justified before God by the law,*" a statement that can only mean that "*no one is justified before God by Jewish identity or submission to a man-made ceremony as postulated by the prevailing halakhah of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism.*" Alternately, Sha'ul's statement is a theological teaching against any mistaken notions that Torah obedience in and of itself automatically granted covenant status to the individual participant. Again Paul uses a conjunction "*because,*" Greek ὅτι, hotee as a clarifier to further the truth that would-be covenant members do not walk into Torah submission to gain covenant status, rather, submission to God's Torah is proof of a commitment already made on the part of an existing covenant member: "*...because, the righteous will live by faith.*"

3:12 - *The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them."*

Comments: The quote is from Leviticus 18:5, a verse that Sha'ul will eventually go on to use again in Romans 10:5 in a similar discussion about covenant membership. The context of the passage in Leviticus warrants careful study:

**1 The LORD said to Moses, 2 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. 3 You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. 4 You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. 5 Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD. (Emphasis, mine)**

Here the writer, Moshe, describes the lifestyle of an existing covenant member as characterized by obeying the laws spelled out by the Torah. Paul refers to such a position as "clearly" described in the previous verse. In other words, Paul expects his readers and opponents alike to come to the same conclusion as he: genuine Torah submission does not precede genuine faith; genuine Torah submission is the natural, expected result of genuine faith. Stated another way: genuine and lasting obedience flows from the heart that has been circumcised by the Spirit of God himself. The order of procession is vitally important for Paul's argument: faith comes first; obedience follows faith. Such a processional order is also implied in the historical order to which the covenants in question were given: the Avrahamic Covenant, typified by faith, preceded the Mosaic Covenant, typified by obedience. By comparison, the Influencers had the

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<sup>52</sup> TSBD, κατάρα.

sequence reversed, suggesting that faith came as a result of following after the teachings of Torah, as indicated by their preoccupation with the ritual of circumcision.

*3:13, 14 - Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

Comments: There are golden moments when the best interpretation of Scripture is Scripture. This verse seems to find a parallel in Chapter 4. Allow me to quote verses 4-6 from that location:

**“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under Law, to redeem those under Law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.””**

The impact of Christ redeeming those who name his name for salvation from the curse of the law in 3:13 bears a striking similarity to 4:4 and the first part of 4:5 “...to redeem those under the Law.” We shall explore the furthering parallels to 4:4-6 when that passage arrives below. For now, let us focus on 3:13. That we have previously defined the term “under the Law” in some contexts as a position reserved for those whose hearts have not received messianic regeneration is key to understanding Paul’s phrase “the curse of the law.” I understand them to be tandem phrases at times. That is, the person who lives “under the curse of the law” surely lives “under the Law” as well. Both phrases describe a position of ill favor and eventual punishment by God. Under the Law in some passages used by Paul speaks of existing under the condemnation that Torah pronounces against persistent sinners. Thus, in the economy of the Torah community of ancient Isra’el, to live under the curses instead of under the blessings was to be recognized by God as living in sin and disobedience to his mitzvot (commandments). In other places of Paul’s letters, under the Law seems to simply refer to Jewish identity (cf. Gal. 4:21). Surely Moshe instructed the Jewish people that obedience invited God’s blessings, while continual and unremorseful disobedience invited God’s curses.<sup>53</sup> But Messiah did not merely redeem our physical lives from diminishment of blessing if we failed to perform the Words of Torah; Yeshua actually redeemed both body and soul from the ultimate curse pronounced upon the individual who failed to graduate to genuine lasting faith in the Giver of the Torah, a redemption spoken of in legal terms throughout the Apostolic Scriptures. The plain sense of the verse is not confusing: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Torah. He did not redeem us from the Torah itself.

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<sup>53</sup> Deuteronomy Chapters 27, 28.

But in what way did Messiah “become a curse” for us? Quite simply, Yeshua was put forth as the propitiation for our sins when he died on the cross. As the sinless sacrifice, the Father deemed it necessary to place the corporate sin of the world upon his Son so that his Righteousness might be vindicated in the biblical truth that “the wages of sin is death.”<sup>54</sup> The word “cursed” in the quote from Deuteronomy 21:22-23 “*Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree*” only stands to reinforce the Levitical notion that the sacrifice truly bears the weight of the sin imparted to it. To be sure, if there was found no substitute for the party guilty of a capital offence, then he was to be hanged as a sign that God had deemed him cursed. In the mystery of the Godhead, Yeshua, the sinless Lamb of God, became the object of such punishment on behalf of those who name his name for salvation. He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf.<sup>55</sup>

As pertinent a fact as this is for every sinner, there is likely, however, a more contextual and specific 1<sup>st</sup> century use of the phrase “curse of the law” found in 3:13, as explained by James D.G. Dunn, which I will quote at length for my commentary here:

Verses 13-14 ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse on our behalf – as it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut. 21.23 with 27.26) – in order that the blessing of Abraham might come in Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’.

The thought clearly refers back to verse 10, as the formulation of the scriptural passage to align it with the Scripture quoted in verse 10 confirms. Paul must intend the ‘curse of the law’ to be understood in the light of verse 10. That is to say, the curse of the law is not simply the condemnation which falls on any transgression and on all who fall short of the laws requirements. Paul has it in mind that the specific short-fall of his typical Jewish contemporary, the curse which falls on all who restrict the grace and promise of God in nationalistic terms, who treat the law as a boundary to mark the people of God off from the Gentiles, who give a false priority to ritual markers. The curse of the law here has to do primarily with that attitude which confines the covenant promise to Jews as Jews: it falls on those who live within the law in such a way as to exclude the Gentile as Gentile from the promise. This is confirmed by the second half of Paul's formulation in verses 13-14: the purpose of Christ's redemption from the curse of the law is precisely what we would (now) expect – viz. the extension of the covenant blessing to the Gentiles. The curse which was removed by Christ death therefore was the curse which had previously prevented that blessing from reaching the Gentiles, the curse of the wrong understanding of the law. It was a curse which fell primarily on the Jew (3.10; 4.5), but Gentiles were affected by it so long as that misunderstanding of the covenant and the law remained

<sup>54</sup> Romans 6:23.

<sup>55</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21.



dominant. It was that curse which Jesus had brought deliverance from by his death.<sup>56</sup>

Dunn's explanation seems to fit more contextually with the situation facing the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and with Paul's reasons for writing the letter to the Galatian congregations.

*3:17, 18 - What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.*

Comments: The first part of this passage, the mention of the promise, becomes a key element of later Pauline literature. That God would make an unbreakable Promise to Avraham and his offspring and then bring it to pass vindicates both the Father's competence as well as his trustworthiness. For Paul, it is imperative that the existing covenant member understands the proper relationship of the Avrahamic Covenant to the Moshaic Covenant. Allow me to quote Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz,

For those who trust HaShem for the promises, the proper order for faith and obedience is set by the sequence in which the covenants were given. In other words, faith must precede obedience. But the kind of faith accepted by HaShem is one that naturally flows into obedience. True obedience never comes before faith, nor is it an addition to faith. It is always the result of true biblical faith. To rephrase this in terms of the covenants: the covenant of promise (Avraham) must come before the covenant of obedience (Moshe). If we were to put Moshe first, attempting to secure those promises by obedience, we would be going against HaShem's order. (This, by the way, is the key to unlocking the difficult midrash used by Sha'ul in Galatians 4:21-31.) All we could hope for would be a measure of physical protection and a knowledge of spiritual things. But we could not receive justification or a personal relationship with the Holy One through obedience to the Torah; it all had to start with faith. Avraham came before Moshe, but Moshe did not cancel out Avraham! The two complemented each other—as long as they came in the proper order.<sup>57</sup>

Put plainly, far from diminishing or annulling the Abrahamic Promise, the Torah actually comes along 430 years later to support and compliment it! Even if Christian commentators disagree with my conclusion that the Torah compliments the Abrahamic Covenant, surely they must agree with the plain sense of Paul's words, which speak of the impossibility of the Torah doing away with the Promise to Abraham! God did not somehow start with "salvation by faith," move to "salvation by works," and then switch back to salvation by faith!" Sha'ul's disagreement with his detractors then is seen as a difference over which order

<sup>56</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 228-229.

<sup>57</sup> Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (FFOZ, 1996), p. 33.

these two covenants should be placed in. As we have learned, the order in which they appear both in Scripture as well as historically demonstrates the proper order in which their respective lessons should be actualized: Avrahamic precedes Moshaic; genuine and lasting faith in God will always precede genuine and lasting obedience to God.

Quite surely, the Influencers had the sequence backwards, placing the proverbial cart before the horse. In such a situation, the covenant member-to-be mistakenly believed that the Promise—referred to as the “inheritance” in verse 18—sprang forth from obedience to a ritual implied by the Torah, the ritual of the proselyte. In this order, faith results from works and human achievement. In this order, faith in God—the Promise—is rendered non-effectual and unnecessary. Paul would not have his talmidim (students) falling for such blatant errant theology. The inheritance must arrive to humanity by other than human means in order for HaShem to receive his proper acknowledgment. The son of promise (Yitz’chak) was to be born, not of human effort, but by divine fiat. Likewise, the Messiah—the Ultimate Son of Promise—would be born of miraculous circumstances, proving his connection to the antecedent theology that God alone can secure the Promise for his children.

*3:19 - What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.*

Comments: See section 8 on page 22 above.

*3:21 - Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.*

Comments: Again, the plain sense of the first part of this verse is cause to understand that the Avrahamic and Moshaic covenants work hand-in-hand with one another. Torah is not in opposition to Abraham! As for the second part of this verse, Paul simply restates what he previously challenged the Influencers to consider: God’s Promise of covenant membership and ultimately blessings in the World to Come are secured by faith, as opposed to being procured through conformity to a man-made ritual supposedly hinted at in the Torah. The “righteousness” mentioned in this verse is surely equated with positional righteousness. The verse is not meant to sound as if Sha’ul is denigrating the Torah of God; the Torah is not a salvific document. Rhetorically, the Apostle challenges all of Judaism to properly understand the role that the Law of HaShem plays in the life of both an unbeliever and a believer. Torah leads to Mashiach. But once found, Torah continued to instruct the new covenant member in matters of practical righteousness.

*3:23 - Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*

Comments: In the previous verse, the Scripture is personified as “conclud[ing]” all under sin.” Here the term “faith” is playing a similar role. Literally the Greek reads “before of-the yet to-be-coming the faith.” Πρὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν. How are we to understand Paul’s statement? Who or what is “the faith?” Is he suggesting that before the coming of Yeshua that there was no one of faith? Is he advocating a works-based righteousness as ostensibly taught in the Torah before the coming of Yeshua? In order to understand this verse we must weigh it in light of the previous verse where the phrase “the promise by faith of Jesus Christ” is found. Paul is teaching the valuable principle that before an individual comes to faith in Yeshua, he is held prisoner by sin and by the Torah that defines such sinful behavior. To be sure, a person not yet freed from his sinful passions is a prisoner of unrighteousness, a veritable slave of himself if you will. Paul is describing a state of existence walked by every single human since the fall of Adam. He is not speaking of a period on planet earth when no faith was extant, and mankind pined away in darkness and “supposed” slavery to the Law awaiting the coming of the Messiah.

More to the point of Sha’ul’s context, however, is the understanding that when he says “held prisoners by the law,” he really means “in subjection to the condemnation brought on by sin, condemnation rightfully administered by Torah,” the Greek phrase *hupo nomos ὑπὸ νόμον* being rendered as “under the Law” in the KJV.

*3:24 - So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

Comments: The KJV renders our verse thusly, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” The Greek word for schoolmaster is *paidagogos παιδαγωγός*. We gain our English word *pedagogue* from this Greek word. Thayer’s and Smith’s Bible Dictionary (TSBD) defines the word as, “a tutor i.e. a guardian and guide of boys. Among the Greeks and the Romans the name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the better class. The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them before arriving at the age of manhood.”<sup>58</sup> The point of Paul’s argument here is that the Torah is a tool in the “hands” of the Ruach HaKodesh, designed by the Father to lead us to the Teacher of Righteousness. The Torah is not the Teacher in and of itself. The Torah is not the goal; Messiah is the goal. The Torah functions to lead the unregenerate man to faith in the central object of the Torah: Yeshua of Natzeret. Remember that starting in chapter 3 and verse 19 Paul has been giving us a digression on the purposes and function of the Torah. His audience, no doubt made up of Jews and Gentiles alike were equally in need of such tutelage until arriving at the moment of

<sup>58</sup> Thayer’s and Smith’s Bible Dictionary (TSBD), *παιδαγωγός*.

personal salvation. His final statement, “that we might be justified by faith” sends a chilling challenge to his detractors who were opting for justification by ethnic status. I might add, that a similar challenge awaits the conventional Christian who supposes that once he reaches the Goal (Messiah) that the Torah has ceased to function, a position championed by ostensible support from the very next verse in this chapter! However, Paul would not agree to dismissing the Torah so easily once one affirms personal faith in Yeshua. Like a master tool in the hands of the Master Craftsman, the Torah employs many functions, and leading the boy to the schoolmaster is only one of them.

*3:25 - Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.*

Comments: This verse must be understood within the argument that Sha'ul is making, as well as within the overall context of the Bible itself: faith in Yeshua does not nullify the Torah of HaShem, a truth stated explicitly by Paul in Romans 3:31. What then is the verse trying to teach us? Simply that once an unregenerate man (the boy in the example given above) reaches the desired goal (the Teacher of Righteousness) he no longer needs to be led by a paidagogos, for he has reached his destination! The paidagogos, having served its intended function now takes on a new role for the boy, one of instructing the lad in matters of life-long sanctification and servitude to the Teacher of Righteousness. Alternately, the verse may be another way for Paul to be teaching his talmidim that once we have arrived at faith in Yeshua that we are no longer under (a pejorative position in this usage) the schoolmaster, another term for the Law [of condemnation], i.e., “under the Law”=“under a schoolmaster”=shorthand for “under the condemnation of the function of the Law that is reserved for unregenerate sinners.”

*3:28, 29 - There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

Comments: In verse 26 of this chapter Paul states that the Galatians are all the children of God, a preview of his continuing argument for genuine adoption and covenant membership by those placing their unreserved trusting faithfulness in the Goal of the Torah, Yeshua the Messiah. In our present verse he uses universal language equal to the inclusion of every known ethnic, social, and gender-specific set common to the ancient near east: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. The doublets were a common way of identifying the dualistic breakdown of all men in the eyes of a Jewish person, compare Romans 1:16; 2:9-11; 3:29, 1 Corinthians 7:19. The term “Greek” (actual Greek word Hellen Ἕλλην) refers to a non-Jew and is to be understood as synonymous with Gentile. His point is obvious: the Good News is not subject to ethnocentric Jewish exclusivism, much to the consternation of the Judaisms of his day. Rather, the old Christian hymnal says it all: “Whosoever will may come.” In its present syntax the verse is somewhat formulaic: Faith in Messiah→Abraham’s

seed→heirs according to the promise found in the very Torah of Moses!  
Compare this to the Influencer's formula: Ethnic status→Abraham's seed→heirs  
according to the flesh.

## Galatians Chapter Four

*4:1, 2 - What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.*

Comments: Sha'ul now turns his attention to a teaching on the biblical concept of the heir. The Greek word rendered heir in our verse above is *kleironomos* κληρονόμος and as understood from the English refers to one who receives a portion allotted to him by law (as can be inferred by the suffix of the Greek *nomos*=law). The word shows up 14 times in the Apostolic Scriptures but is most concentrated in Sha'ul's letters (3x in Romans and 3x in Galatians alone). What is Paul trying to teach us? Having begun with the *peidagogos* theme in the last chapter he now focuses on the logistics of how the parent, the father of the boy in our previous midrash, has control over how and when the boy is to gain the promised family inheritance. Notice that the verse teaches that the child (a term signifying spiritual immaturity, viz, unregenerate) is both a heir and a slave. He must mature in his faith before he can utilize the family inheritance promised by his father. Once he reaches the "legal age" set by the father he then gains ownership as it were of the family inheritance, but not sooner. Until such a time, he is subject to guardians and trustees.

The whole midrash is a teaching on covenant membership from a primarily 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish perspective: the Jewish people are the child, heirs according to birth, but slaves to sin and death, owners of the promises (the estate) of HaShem as spelled out to the Fathers of the Faith, Avraham, Yitz'chak, and Ya'akov, yet under the supervision of guardians and trustees (the Law and the Prophets) until the moment of spiritual salvation set by the Father in Heaven, the moment of personal trusting faithfulness in the Promised Seed, viz, Yeshua. Once the child (the Jewish people) matured in their faith (placed trust in Yeshua) they gained lasting covenant membership and thus received the promise of the Father. Merely being born Jewish did not secure the promises offered by the Father. Rather, they, being heirs, were considered as slaves being governed as it were by the Torah (the *paidagogos*) until they should meet the Teacher of Righteousness. In this passage Paul reveals that 'Am Israel does enjoy covenant status on a limited basis due to being merely born into Avraham's family. Yet, he does not emphasize this truth unnecessarily as it had a tendency to lead the average Jewish person to an illogical conclusion, one that suggested full and lasting covenant membership based on their position at birth (or conversion for the non-native-born Gentile) without having arrived at the "time set by his father."

*4:3 - So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.*

Comments: Paul now switches to the personal pronoun “we” to intimately identify with his audience. He too was a son of Avraham according to the flesh. He too was an heir, yet was treated like a slave until arriving at personal trust in Yeshua. Jewish ethnicity was found to be lacking of true covenant membership short of embracing faith in the Promised Seed. He stops to explain this slavery lest his audience misunderstand the analogy. Isra'el was, to one extent or another, always in slavery, even though she, at the time of Paul's letter, dwelled in the Land of her forefathers. Now, the Zionists of Paul's day would not easily argue about such slavery, pointing to Rome as her captor, yet Paul wanted his readers to come to an even more personal and pertinent realization that outside of personal trust in Yeshua they were slaves to the stoicheion στοιχείον<sup>59</sup> of the very world around them! In fact, the Stoics were those ancient Greek philosophers that the religious Hebrews were attempting to avoid becoming like! Yet Paul now reveals that outside of the regeneration offered by the Spirit of the Messiah a person was a legal heir (a slave) to the baser principles of human nature, complete with all of its ugliness, something surely shocking to the candidate of righteousness.

*4:4 - But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under Law,*

Comments: The first part of this verse requires little explanation; the meaning is quite obvious: ‘born of a woman’ speaks of Yeshua's humanity. Even though he came from heaven, he had an earthly mother named Miryam (Mary) making him as human as every other person born on planet Earth (Adam and Eve excluded from the mother category since God created them directly), fully able to—as the book of Hebrews describes—sympathize with our weaknesses (4:15). The second part of the verse containing the phrase “born under the Law” is usually understood to mean, “born into a law-keeping environment—viz—as a Jewish man in a Jewish community.” Indeed the Barnes Notes commentary to this verse conveys the prevailing Christian interpretation:

Made under the Law - As one of the human race, partaking of human nature, he was subject to the Law of God. As a man he was bound by its requirements, and subject to its control. He took his place under the Law that he might accomplish an important purpose for those who were under it. He made himself subject to it that he might become one of them, and secure their redemption.<sup>60</sup>

Tim Hegg, however, sees Paul continuing the line of thought began in 3:13-14,

<sup>59</sup> Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary (TSBD) στοιχείον: the elements from which all things have come, the material causes of the universe the heavenly bodies, either as parts of the heavens or (as others think) because in them the elements of man, life and destiny were supposed to reside.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes' Notes, online version, 1843,  
<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/galatians/4.htm>

indeed providing a parallel to that section. In his Galatians commentary he explains that born under Torah likely carries with it the sense that as sinners, mankind finds himself under the curse of Torah, a curse from which only the redemption proffered by Yeshua could bring a remedy.<sup>61</sup> Personally, I tend to think that Paul could be attempting to convey either one or both of these important aspects of Christ's being referred to as "under the Law."

*4:5 - to redeem those under Law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*

Comments: Recall that I stated an opinion that there exists a parallel between these verses (4:4-6) and 3:13, 14 above. You are encouraged to read the commentary to 3:13, 14 from page 51 above. Starting in 4:5, however, as with verse four above, "under the Law" could refer to Jews, or it could refer to all those under God's condemnation as unregenerate sinners prior to coming to a personal decision of the Lordship of his Son, that is, Jews and Gentiles outside of Messiah. After all, Paul does in fact count himself in this group with his use of the first person plural pronoun "we." And since he is writing to a group mixed of Jews and Gentiles, the "we" must apply the statement to all present. In this fashion, he describes Gentiles who most certainly grew up outside of a Torah-keeping community as those who were nevertheless "under the Law" while they were outside of the personal knowledge of Christ as Redeemer.

*4:6, 7 - Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*

Comments: Continuing with the contextual son and heir theme Paul is emphasizing at the moment, he now wishes for his readers—both Jews and Gentiles in Messiah (but perhaps primarily Gentiles)—to understand that to strive to gain (or maintain) a legally recognized Jewish identity in the society of Isra'el is pointless if God has not sent his Spirit into their hearts, causing them to be counted as true sons and thus true heirs. Here once again, we see the true theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians: God determines genuine and lasting identity based on our personal identification with Yeshua, not based on establishing our own way of righteousness.

*4:8, 9 - Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?*

Comments: Paul makes the shocking statement that before his readers came to Messiah, they all—both Jews and Gentiles—were slaves to demons! In 1 Thess. 1:9 Paul says that we turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. So much for our supposed fleshly pedigrees outside of God's saving grace to

<sup>61</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (torahresource.com, 2002), p. 146.



rescue us from our own degenerated state of existence! What pathetic wretches we were before Christ found us and washed us clean! Once we begin to see our true identity before the Blood of Yeshua purchased us, we can start to appreciate the awesome price that God paid to actually redeem us! The passage speaks of some of his readers turning back to those weak and miserable principles, a view supposed by historic Christianity to be a return to Judaism and the Torah of Moses. To be sure, in the eyes of the Church, the enslavement Paul warns against in verse 9 is the bondage to ceremonial commandments such as Sabbath, circumcision, and the dietary restrictions. But can this really be the correct interpretation of weak and miserable principles?

Elsewhere in Paul's letters, he calls the Torah "holy" and the commandment "holy and righteous and good."<sup>62</sup> How can he simultaneously call the Torah weak and miserable? I think if we let the weight of Paul's teachings in Romans and especially Colossians where he teaches against letting ourselves become subjugated to the elemental spirits of the world all over again, influence our interpretation of these passages in Galatians, then we will not fall for the historical trap of supposing Paul to be some kind of schizophrenic who waffles back and forth on his loyalty to Torah. Colossians 2:20-23 is worth quoting at length here:

**20 Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? 22 These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**

Considering verse 10 below, to which we will turn shortly, it is amazing how similar these two passages are! Hegg makes the comment that those wishing to return to the weak and miserable principles were perhaps wishing to straddle the fence between membership in Isra'el—the visible people of God, and pseudo membership with the extant Imperial Cult of Rome.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, growing persecution from Rome for no longer participating in the "required" allegiance to the gods of Rome, coupled with Paul's "pressure" to resist proselyte conversion, may have put these Gentile Christians between a rock and a hard place! Paul would not have them return to Emperor worship, and he would not have them submit to the message of the Influencers either! Oy vey! Talk about being in a pickle!

*4:10 - You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!*

<sup>62</sup> Romans 7:12.

<sup>63</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (torahresource.com, 2002), p. 157.

Comments: Continuing with our comparisons between standard Christian views and Messianic Jewish views of this passage, we again find that many see in this verse, Paul warning his readers away from Sabbaths (special days), Rosh Chodesh (months), and perhaps the Sh'mitah<sup>64</sup> (seasons and years). Luther's commentary to Galatians is representative of the prevailing view of the Church.

The Apostle Paul knew what the false apostles were teaching the Galatians: The observance of days, and months, and times, and years. The Jews had been obliged to keep holy the Sabbath Day, the new moons, the feast of the passover, the feast of tabernacles, and other feasts. The false apostles constrained the Galatians to observe these Jewish feasts under threat of damnation. Paul hastens to tell the Galatians that they were exchanging their Christian liberty for the weak and beggarly elements of the world.<sup>65</sup>

However, as was already noted, knowing that Paul personally confessed that he was a Torah-observant Jew his whole life renders the Christian interpretation untenable.<sup>66</sup> Why would Paul keep Torah his whole life, even after coming to faith in Yeshua as Messiah, and then warn others against wanting to keep Torah also? The logic is faulty.

*4:11 - I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*

Comments: If the Galatian Gentile Christians succumbed to the message of the Influencers and decided to undergo the ritual of circumcision (proselyte conversion), for the sake of the supposed covenant status that it promised, then indeed Paul would have wasted his efforts. For in truth, one can only swear his allegiance to either Yeshua, or he must serve another lord. Man cannot serve two masters. Yeshua himself stated that we are either for him or against him (cf. Matt. 12:20), and Paul himself is going to present these two choices to his readers in 5:2, "*Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.*" It is not as if by converting to legally-recognized Jewish status that somehow they would lose their salvation, if indeed they were genuinely saved in the first place. However, the situation here in Galatians is much more precarious than simply adding Judaism to Jesus. For indeed as we shall see when we get to Chapter Five, the Galatian Gentiles were considering ethnic status as a way to somehow be considered righteous instead of taking on the righteousness that is only supplied by Messiah. The issue at stake is not "genuine salvation + Jewish status," but rather, "genuine salvation vs. Jewish status."

*4:21 - Tell me, you who want to be under the Law, are you not aware of what the law says?*

<sup>64</sup> Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:20-22; Deuteronomy 15:1-6.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians Four*

([http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther\\_martin/Gal/Gal004.cfm?a=1095010](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther_martin/Gal/Gal004.cfm?a=1095010)).

<sup>66</sup> See Acts 21:24; 24:14-16; 25:8; 26:4, 5.

Comments: As we have already discussed elsewhere in this commentary, the phrase “under the Law” can carry with it a variety of meanings, each depending on the specific context in which it is found. Here, the phrase likely refers to Jewish status as desired by those Gentiles wishing to please the huckstering Influencers. *“Tell me, you who want to be under the Law... (viz, you who want to be counted as legally recognized Jews in the community of Isra'el).”* Alternately, since in ancient Isra'el, as with today, to be a good Jew means to also be faithful to the Torah, Paul could be saying, *“Tell me, you who want to be in subjection to the Torah lifestyle as adjudicated by the halakhah of the Influencers.”* This halakhah, as we have discovered from extra biblical sources, was staunchly against allowing Gentiles into close community proximity for fear of the pagan defilement they supposedly transmitted. Thus, to conform to the halakhah of the Influencers would mean to have to eventually reject Gentile Christian fellowship, something Peter succumbed to in Chapter Two, but something Paul would have nothing to do with.

*4:22, 23 - For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.*

Comments: Paul introduces an allegory—a midrash—by way of the biblical narrative about Father Abraham and his offspring. I believe at this point in his letter, that Paul wishes the Influencers themselves to actually hear his teaching. Perhaps as his letter was being read to the communities, Paul envisioned some in the crowd to be the very detractors he so carefully needed to expose as false. Perhaps if he, Paul, appealed further to Scripture directly, perhaps even the Influencers might be shocked back to some semblance of reality and give up trying to persuade those Gentiles from converting to Judaism for the wrong reasons. Whatever the reasons for introducing this allegory into his letter at this point, the interpretation of the allegory is quite to the point: a line of demarcation is being drawn in the sand between who is a genuine covenant member and who is not. In fact, those who are of Messiah are understood by Paul’s midrash here to be legitimate sons, while those of the Circumcision Faction—the Influencers—are understood by Paul to be illegitimate sons—bastards, if you will, and veritable slaves for sure.

The son of Abraham by the slave woman (understood to be Ishmael, even though he is not named directly) is likened to those seeking to be justified by human means, by the works of the Law, by circumcision, by legal Jewish identity. Comparatively, the son of Abraham by the free woman (Isaac) is likened to those seeking to be justified by faith in Yeshua as the promised Messiah, without becoming Jewish first. To strengthen the truth of his illustration, Sha'ul mentions that Ishmael was born when Abraham succumbed to his flesh—the way ordinary human beings procreate, while Isaac was born, not according to human effort, but by divine fiat after Abraham and Sarah were in reality too old to physically

copulate for the sake of creating children. To be sure, Paul reminds the readers of God's sworn oath to Abraham and calls Isaac the promised child.

*4:24 - These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.*

Comments: The Greek word for 'figuratively' in this verse is the root word *allegoreo ἀλληγορέω*, from where we get our English word *allegory*. Sha'ul now reveals the core truth of his midrash by explaining that he is referring to two opposing covenants, illustrated using (unnamed) Sarah, and (named) Hagar. Paul also wants his readers to understand that to expect right standing with HaShem according to the flesh—according to Jewish social status—is to be identified with a covenant of slavery, the covenant with Hagar and her offspring.

*4:25, 26 - Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.*

Comments: This covenant with Hagar and her offspring relates to where the Torah of Moshe was given because that is where the present Judaism of Paul's day all look to for the origins of the Nation of Isra'el as a people. Indeed, the biblical Mount Sinai is still revered by all of world Jewry today—as it rightfully should be, because it is there that God covenantally “married” as it were his bride Isra'el. Even though Paul specifically states that Hagar=Mount Sinai and corresponds to present city Jerusalem, oddly enough, Paul does not mention Sarah by name, nor does he say which mountain and city she stands for (if any). What he does say specifically is that the Jerusalem that is above is free (in opposition to the slave-city earthly Jerusalem), and that this heavenly Jerusalem is our mother (more on these distinctions below).

I'm sure in Paul's mind, it is a sad declaration that his beloved and beautiful earthly Zion, the City of God spoken of in Psalm 87:3, has to be identified in his allegory as a city in slavery with her children, in order for his readers to come to their senses. But this is the length to which Paul will go to shock his readers into reality. To flirt with the prospect of going through conversion for the wrong reasons is to be seen in God's eyes as going back into slavery. As is to be expected with most commentaries that one might find in your average Christian Bible bookstore, the historic Church has seen in these verses proof positive that the Old Covenant stemming from Mount Sinai represents slavery and must be replaced by the New Covenant stemming from the Heavenly Jerusalem that offers freedom.

However, since we now know that Paul is not contrasting the Old Testament Torah with the New Testament Gospel of Christ, but rather, he is contrasting the works of the Law (proselyte conversion coupled with legal Jewish status) with genuine faith in Yeshua, we needn't denigrate the Torah in order to make this

midrash have genuine application for today's Christian. So much more could be said about the wrong way to understand Paul's allegory here, but I think I have made my point adequately so I will leave off for now.

*4:28 - Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.*

Comments: Paul now assures those of his audience who are genuine believers of their position in Christ. They have all the identity they will ever need: children of promise. A conversion to Judaism via the manmade ritual of conversion will add nothing to their existing righteousness via Yeshua in God's eyes. This is not to say that Jewish identity is worthless. Far from it. In fact, as Paul will spell out in his letter to the Romans, there is in fact a great advantage to being born as a Jew (read Romans 3:1-9). But the sad truth is that the prevailing Judaism of Paul's day had wrongly believed that their covenant status as the chosen people of God was what earned them a right to stand before God righteously. They were trusting in the arm of the flesh to get them into the 'Olam Haba instead of placing their trust in the Sent One, declared to be the True Messiah by the power of a resurrected life.

*4:29 - At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.*

Comments: Sha'ul now reveals a most painful scriptural truth: Darkness will always persecute righteousness; error will always strike out at truth; the flesh will always war against the spirit. So it is with those who are or wish to be counted as children of the promise: they will suffer persecution at the hands of those who show themselves to be children of the flesh. Yeshua explained it best:

**18 "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21 But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23 He who hates Me hates My Father also. 24 If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. 25 But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, 'THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.'<sup>67</sup>**

Since the children of the promise (vs. 28) identify intimately with the ultimate Son born by the power of the Spirit (as opposed to merely being identified as legally-recognized Jews with no true saving faith in Yeshua), then they too can expect to be treated unfairly since *"we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against*

<sup>67</sup> John 15:18-25, NASB.

*principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Eph. 6:12, KJV)* We see then from this admission by Paul that the earliest persecution against genuine Christians came not from the Roman establishment but from the Jewish synagogues bent on expelling those from The Way from their midst. One need only read the book of Acts to see this played out in chapter after chapter, and in perfect fulfillment of Yeshua’s prediction in John 16:1-4:

**1 “These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. 2 They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. 3 These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. 4 But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.**

Indeed, the final truth of the matter is that in Paul’s theology, a conversion to Judaism can never change the heart of an individual the way faith in Yeshua can, and those seeking to be “under the Law” (Gal. 4:21) will eventually end up identifying with Hagar of this allegory if they are not careful. Instead of creating community among Jews and Gentiles, they will end up siding with those who destroy community by condoning rejection of Gentiles and persecution of the children of the promise (vs. 28) in a Jewish-only Israel the way the prevailing Judaisms of Paul’s day were presently doing.

*4:30 - But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."*

Comments: Though making a choice to stand and be persecuted along with Yeshua might result in earthly persecution and expulsion from the established synagogues of their day, Paul would, nevertheless, urge his Gentile readers to reject manmade identity markers in favor of being received into the genuine inheritance offered only to those who identify with the free woman. In the Genesis narrative to which Paul is taking his analogy, Hagar was eventually cast out of Abraham’s community, along with her son Ishmael. Thus, even though the son of promise (Isaac) was the object of mocking (according to the text, according to Jewish midrash, and according to the analogy Paul is painting), in the end, God vindicated Isaac’s true status as recipient of Father Abraham’s inheritance by confirming it once again to Abraham. Genesis 21:9-12 is relevant for our study here:

**But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and**

**because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.<sup>68</sup>**

Interestingly enough, Paul's quote in Galatians about getting rid of the slave woman, etc., comes not from God's mouth as one would expect if they only read Paul and did not cross reference Genesis. Instead, Sarah is actually the one who uttered these words, and probably not in kindness! To be sure, Abraham was displeased at the sudden and obviously emotional outburst. Yet, Paul picks up on the prophetic truth of Sarah's spiteful proclamation and turns it into a promise about inheritance for his midrash and uses it as a nice conclusion to this section.

*4:31 - Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

Comments: Bringing his allegory to a close by restating what he said in verse 28 above, that if we choose to identify with Yeshua, the ultimate Son of Promise—the Quintessential Offspring of Avraham—instead of seeking to set up our own way of righteousness by purchasing a manmade Jewish identity via the proselyte conversion ceremony, then we, like Isaac of the Genesis narrative, will be counted as a true child of the free woman (heavenly Jerusalem)—a genuine child of Father Abraham and genuine heirs according to the Spirit.

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<sup>68</sup> Genesis 21:9-12, ESV.

## Galatians Chapter Five

*5:1 - It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

Comments: There is a very nice segue-way from the last verse of Chapter Four and the first verse of Chapter Five in the Greek, which can be easily be seen in the English (both verses NIV):

**4:31 - Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.**

**5:1 - It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**

As can be easily seen and understood by the words underlined above, “free” and “freedom” share the same root Greek word ἐλευθερία eleutheria. This is no mystery and it does not require seminary to notice the link between the two verses. The obvious sense is that Sha’ul is continuing his thoughts from the last chapter as he sets up an intense warning against letting oneself be influenced by a pseudo gospel that promises covenant membership and right standing with God in Isra’el (the message of the Influencers), but in reality will not deliver on the goods. Oh, on the surface, all might appear to be “hunky-dory,” but in point of fact, a conversion to Judaism (or legal Jewish status for those already born Jewish) will do nothing to change the volition of an individual outside of also allowing the Ruach HaKodesh to write the Torah on the heart. Don’t misunderstand what I am stating here. Jewish identity is a good thing to have. What is more, I am not stating that conversion to Judaism is the “unpardonable sin.” Rather, all too often, our outward actions reveal our true inner motives and when it comes to the object of saving faith, we must place our focus exclusively on Yeshua—God’s means of making a person forensically righteous—if we ever hope to be truly saved.

The Galatian Gentiles were at the crossroads of decision. Would they invest their faith in Jewish ethnicity? Or would they invest their faith in Jesus Christ—the one who died and rose again?

To be in Messiah is to be truly free (recall Yeshua’s declaration from John 8:36, “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed*” (KJV). How is then that these Galatian Gentiles wish to return to the slavery that marked their former manner of life? Can’t they see that anything less than a complete commitment to the true Gospel is not good news at all, and will eventually result in slavery?

As is to be expected, historic Christianity interprets the slavery of verse one as a return to Judaism, a return to living in the confines of Torah observance, a return to Sabbaths, keeping kosher, keeping the Feasts, and of course, circumcision. I



shouldn't really need to bring Christian commentaries into this study for you to see that this is true, but since I cannot resist, I will include just one from David Guzik.

Yoke of bondage: This phrase reminds us of what Peter said in Acts 15:10 about those who would bring the Gentiles under the Law: Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? The Jews themselves were not able to justify themselves before God by the law, so they shouldn't put that heavy, burdensome yoke on the Gentiles.

i. Certain Jewish teachers of that day spoke of the Law of Moses as a yoke, but they used the term in a favorable light. Paul saw a legal relationship as a yoke, but as a yoke of bondage. It is related to slavery, not liberty. This yoke of bondage does nothing but entangle us. We try hard to pull God's plow, but the yoke of bondage leaves us tangled, restricted, and frustrated.

ii. It certainly was bondage. Jewish teachers counted up 613 commandments to keep in the Law of Moses. "Even to remember them all was a burden, and to keep them bordered on the impossible. Small wonder that Paul referred to subjecting oneself to them all as entering into slavery." (Morris)<sup>69</sup>

The standard Christian interpretation of this verse does not fit with Paul's view of Torah, and most importantly, it does not follow from the Scriptural view of Torah. The Torah is not bondage. However, if one places their trust in ethnicity and/or Torah obedience, then that person is truly a slave to their old nature—whether they know it or not. The battle lines were being drawn, not between the relevance of Torah vs. the relevance of Yeshua. The lines were being drawn between the necessity of Jewish identity for covenant inclusion vs. the necessity of falling on the mercy and grace of Messiah for genuine covenant membership and forgiveness of sins. Paul doesn't need to denigrate the Torah by calling it a yoke of slavery because that is not the focus of the argument in the first place. As we shall see in the next verse, circumcision is the fulcrum by which membership into 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel was being weighed.

*5:2 - Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.*

**Comments:** This verse sounds strikingly similar to what Sha'ul already stated in 2:21, *"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose"* (ESV). In 2:21, the contest in the mind of the Galatians used the verbiage of Christ vs. the Law. Here in 5:2, the contest uses the verbiage of Christ vs. circumcision. By this point in our study, it should be amply clear that Paul did not mean Torah observance when he used the word "Law" in 2:21. By the same token, it should be amply clear that he does not

<sup>69</sup> David Guzik, *Commentary on Galatians* (Enduring Word Media, 2004-2010), <http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/4805.htm>.

simply mean the physical cutting away of the flesh of the male sex organ when he uses the word “circumcision” in 5:2. In both passages, Paul states that if the Galatians wish to continue down the road constructed by the Influencers—the road described by the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism as “the law,” “under the Law,” “works of the Law,” and “circumcision,”—and reject the free offer of genuine and lasting covenant membership into Isra’el as offered by God and outlined in the TaNaKH, then (using the language of our verse here) the work done by Yeshua on the cross will indeed have no value for them at all, or (to use the language of 2:21) his death will have been purposeless.

Paul’s desperate, personal plea is demonstrated in the phrase, “*Mark my words! I, Paul tell you...*” Our apostle to the Gentiles is pouring out his heart in an effort to yank them back from the dangerous precipice they are standing near. The stakes of the game are quite high indeed! The Galatian Gentiles are in decision mode and Paul would have them make the right decision based on the fact of Yeshua’s historical importance and on the trustable testimony of scripture. But is Paul suggesting that mere circumcision alone could ruin all that Christ accomplished by his death and resurrection? How can a single act of the flesh ostensibly undo the mighty work of Yeshua’s ministry on the cross?!

Herein lies the mystery of free will. God is mighty to save all that come unto him with a genuine broken spirit and broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). Likewise, Jesus himself stated in no uncertain terms that “*no man cometh unto the Father except by me*” (John 14:16, KJV). According to Paul’s gospel, the object of saving faith—and subsequent genuine and lasting covenant membership into the Isra’el of God—can only be the Son of God, Yeshua the Messiah. Any other supposed “way to God,” “way to receive the genuine favor and blessings of God,” would ultimately prove to be a lie from the pit of Hell. The Galatians Gentiles were seeking the right goal, the very same goal the Jews were seeking: to be accepted as the people of God for the sake of receiving the blessing and favor of God. Paul is chastising the Galatians, not for the goal they are pursuing, but for the method in which they hope to secure that goal.<sup>70</sup> Having God’s favor on your life is a good thing! After all, why else would Gentiles seek membership into Isra’el? Paul was trying to get them to understand that they had heard the message of the Gospel correctly and that they had begun as a community under the power of the Ruach HaKodesh, but that if they succumbed to the message of

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<sup>70</sup> Romans 9:31, 32 says, “Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.” The pursuit of this righteousness was not a bad thing in God’s eyes. On the contrary, it was the right thing to do! Paul does not chastise Isra’el for pursuing a law that would lead to righteousness. Instead, as the rest of the verse states, how they pursued it was real problem. If we continue on into Chapter Ten we will see that he chastises them for rejecting the Rock of Offense in 9:33 and sought to set up their own Jewish ethnicity (the “works” of 9:32). 10:3 describes it this way: “For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

the Influencers and took on Jewish identity and Law-keeping at this stage in the game, and for the reasons he suspected they were taking, then, in HaShem's eyes, it would be tantamount to trying to "reach the goal under [their] own power" (3:3, CJB).

*5:3 - Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.*

Comments: This verse is a difficult one to interpret for those who only read the scriptures from a face-value perspective. The verse seems to be implying that once a person becomes circumcised (understandably this must indicate adult circumcision later in life), that person is subsequently obligated to obey every single mitzvah found in the Torah of Moshe. I want to explore two issues brought up by this verse.

- **Issue One:** According to Paul, is there a problem with circumcised people being obligated to keep the whole Torah?
- **Issue Two:** Is Paul even talking about the written Torah of Moses here?

Let us start with number **Issue One:**

According to Paul, is there a problem with circumcised people being obligated to keep the whole Torah? Additional questions might also be posed for our consideration. Does Paul have a problem with Gentiles wanting to keep the whole Torah? Did Paul have a problem with Jews wanting to keep the whole Torah? Didn't Paul believe that God expected total Torah obedience when he gave the Torah in the first place? Doesn't the Torah itself command total allegiance to its precepts and commands? So many questions... Let us begin to find some answers.

If we follow from the prevailing Christian interpretations of this passage, then anyone wishing to follow after Torah beginning with circumcision is going to run into a problem since no one alive can keep all of the Torah perfectly, and thus comes under condemnation for breaking even a single commandment. Such an interpretation is supposedly confirmed by the words in James 2:10 that state, *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it"* (ESV), and Paul's own words in Galatians 3:10, *"For all who rely on works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'"* (ESV). Thus, the standard Christian interpretation has Paul warning anyone wishing to become circumcised that once they start down the path of Torah obedience, they are obligating themselves to keep all of it! 100%! No deviation. No excuses.

This same interpretation also has Paul concerned for anyone banking on the possibility of success in this path because supposedly Paul knows full well that no one alive can keep the Torah 100% perfectly, thus, setting themselves up to be rejected by God for breaking even the least of the commandments in their

attempt at perfection. Stated another way, the standard Christian view of Torah obedience is that God expects perfection if the Torah obedient follower expects to be blessed by God. But since no one but Yeshua kept the Torah perfectly, the proposal is doomed to failure—sending the Torah-obedient follower into a tailspin, and crying out desperately for a Redeemer to rescue them from the bondage of impossible Torah observance that they have gotten themselves into by becoming circumcised. Once this poor soul realizes the error of their ways, they will abandon Torah in favor of the true freedom only offered at the foot of the Cross. They will turn from Torah obedience to a life of grace in Jesus, never to return to those old vestiges of Jewish bondage ever again. Is this what Paul is teaching the Galatian Gentiles who are entertaining the notion of becoming circumcised?

I have the highest respect for many, many Christian scholars and commentators both past and present. But I simply cannot agree with the line of thinking that supposes Paul is warning Christians away from Torah obedience based on the reality that no one can keep it perfectly. John MacArthur's commentary sermon to this passage from Galatians will serve to demonstrate the standard Christian view. Because of its relevance, I have quoted it word for word at length from his website:

You know everybody's been looking for righteousness, Jews and Gentiles. And you know who found it Paul says? Gentiles. And I suppose if we were to compare the two we'd probably say the Jews were looking harder. The Gentiles found it. Why? Israel followed after the law of righteousness has attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they sought it not by faith, but by the works of the Law, do you see? So many Jews wanting righteousness, searching for righteousness, seeking righteousness, never found righteousness because they tried to find self-righteousness. And the Gentiles just kind of wandering around got invited to the banquet didn't they? By faith they came upon righteousness.

So first of all he says false doctrine, the false doctrine of human achievement renders Christ worthless to you. He may as well have never died. You may believe 99% in Christ act in your behalf and 1% in some act of your own and you're disqualified. It might as well be that Christ did nothing, never existed and never lived. He prophesies you nothing. He benefits you nothing. All of His sacrifice on the cross is absolutely empty, absolutely meaningless if you count on work that you've ever done to save you. All of grace, absolutely all. And if you add one work, grace is no more grace. You've destroyed it and you've destroyed the gracious work of Christ. That's a pretty strong statement then isn't it. Now he's saying here, he's continuing to compare and he's showing the absolute dichotomy between grace and law.

All right, let's go to the second thing. The first result of the doctrine of achievement is Christ profits you nothing. The second is this, "your debtor to the whole law," verse 3. And boy this is really a hard one to handle. He says in verse 3, "I testify again to every man that is circumcised." Every man literally, it says every man who lets himself be circumcised that's the Greek rendering. Every man who lets himself be circumcised. "If you are to do this, here's another thing

you've done, you are debtor to do," what, "the whole law." If you want to live by law fellow, you're going to live by the whole thing. One goof and you're finished.

That's pretty strong stuff. He says, "I testify," interesting word *martyromi*, it shouldn't be translated just simply testify. That doesn't really unload nearly the concept. It should be translated, "I protest." Strong statement. I protest, look at this, again to every man. Now it may be that the again means I just said it in verse 2. I'm saying it again in verse 3. It may mean I'm protesting again as I did to you on a previous occasion. So it's either a previous verse or a previous occasion, but whatever he says, "I am protesting that everyone who lets himself be circumcised is debtor to do the whole law."

In other words, if you're going to wipe out grace, there's only one other thing you can live under, what is it? Law. And the only way to be justified by law is to do what? Keep the whole law. Man I don't want any part of it, do you? I don't want a thing to do with it. Man, I just accept the fact that God loved me and redeemed me by pure Grace. I didn't do one single thing to add to it and I'm scared to death to try to do one thing to add to my salvation. Then I'm out of grace and under the whole law and I'm damned because I can't keep it. No thanks. Pretty strong argument isn't it.<sup>71</sup>

Here is the sad reality of Christian exegesis that has its origins in the early Gentile Christian movement that sought to distance itself from its Jewish roots and from anything that resembled Torah observance: the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism—to include the Apostle Paul—did not interpret God's commands to keep Torah as a rulebook that must be kept perfectly. As far as we can tell from reading the Torah itself, corroborated with the rabbinic writings that have survived from the first few centuries around the time of the writing of the Apostolic Writings, no one in Israel would have approached Torah observance with the interpretation that God was expecting 100% obedience. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and it is easily understood if one will remove the anti-Torah bias and let the text speak for itself.

The Torah commands one to love God with one's whole heart, soul and being (Deut. 6:5). But the Torah anticipates our failure to keep its precepts and thus provides a means to restore the relationship with God and with our fellow man. From the perspective of the temporal covenant, the entire priestly cult with its sacrifices was that means. From the perspective of the eternal covenant, the blood of Yeshua is that means. On both levels, both the earthly/temporal/fleshly, as well as the heavenly/eternal/spiritual, we have a mechanism that will restore right standing with our God whenever we trip up and sin. Thus, the Christian notion that God expects 100% obedience is wrong headed in its approach to begin with. God doesn't expect 100% obedience. He knows we are faulty. That

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<sup>71</sup> John MacArthur, Sermon: *Fallen From Grace, Part 1: The Works of False Doctrine* (Grace to You, 1974), <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/1665/fallen-from-grace-part-1-the-works-of-false-doctrine>.

is why he sends his precious Holy Spirit into our lives to enable us to become more like Yeshua, and to actually walk into his Torah with empowerment.

Answers to the questions raised in **Issue One**:

- I asked: According to Paul, is there a problem with circumcised people being obligated to keep the whole Torah?
- Answer: No. Paul expects all genuine followers of HaShem to become submissive to Torah because that is one of the purposes for HaShem giving the Torah. Torah is a document that was meant to be followed under the power of the Ruach HaKodesh. Torah is meant to be kept, not discarded and ignored.
- I asked: Does Paul have a problem with Gentiles wanting to keep the whole Torah?
- Answer: No. As long as we understand that the word Torah here is being used to speak of God's Word as over against the additional legalistic fences that the Jewish sages had added to the written word of God.
- I asked: Did Paul have a problem with Jews wanting to keep the whole Torah?
- Answer: No. Jews, both Messianic and non-Messianic, were naturally spoken of in the Bible as being zealous for Torah (read Acts 21:20).
- I asked: Didn't Paul believe that God expected total Torah obedience when he gave the Torah in the first place?
- Answer: Yes. Paul correctly interpreted God's intended meaning of giving oneself completely to obedience to his Word. But this does not mean perfection; else the entire book of Leviticus with its sacrifices would not make any sense. God expects obedience, but he anticipates our failures. From ancient Isra'el's perspective in the TaNaKH, to follow after Torah meant to also bring the required sacrifices when one violated Torah. Thus, instead of expecting perfection, the logic follows that, from God's perspective, the required Torah obedience of Isra'el also actually anticipated Isra'el's failure to keep it perfectly.
- I asked: Doesn't the Torah itself command total allegiance to its precepts and commands?
- Answer: Yes, but this goal is completely attainable, but only if one surrenders his will to God by allowing God to write the Torah on the heart. Of course, using 20/20 hindsight, we now understand that this implies surrendering to Yeshua, the very goal of the Torah from start to finish.

Conclusions to questions raised in **Issue One**:

Yeshua did indeed bring the Law to its fullest intended meaning and expression. The root Greek word πληρόω pleroo (fulfill in Matt. 5:17) simply means to fill to the top, to make full, to bring to realization. Contrary to popular Christian teaching, God's Torah never commanded or expected sinless perfection else the sacrifices for sin would be meaningless. However, in Messiah, we are in fact supposed to strive towards perfection in this life until we one day we finally put it on for eternity. Therefore, in this life, and while the Temple stood in Jerusalem, true obedience to Torah included bringing sacrifices when one sinned—thus, the Torah actually anticipated our failure to keep it from time to time by making provision for our shortcomings (read Gal. 3:19). Without expecting sinless perfection, the Torah nevertheless does consider even a single breach to be guilty of violating the whole, thus, to break one commandment was to be guilty of breaking them all (read James [Jacob] 2:10). And since the final payment for sin would have demanded the final death of the sinner (Ezek. 18:20), Yeshua paid this price by dying in our place—thus fulfilling the payment required by the Torah. But Yeshua's words here in Matthew carry an additional meaning, as evidenced by his own explanation in verses 18 through 20 (and indeed the rest of his sermon on the Mount). In the following verses, the Master plainly reveals that all of Torah must eventually be fulfilled, and even implies that true followers of God will carry out this fulfillment by doing and teaching others to do even the least of the commandments. After all, just because Yeshua obeyed the Torah perfectly, this doesn't excuse believers from remaining obedient to its commandments.

**Issue Two:** Is Paul even talking about the written Torah of Moses here?

At first blush, it does seem like Sha'ul is talking about the Law of Moses when he warns anyone wishing to receive circumcision that they are under obligation to keep the whole Law. But the careful Berean student of God's Word will discover that the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism did not speak of the Torah in monolithic terms. That is, to the Judaism of Paul's day—as it is also in today's Judaism—there was the Torah Shebichtav (Written Torah) and there was the Torah Sheba'al Peh (Oral Torah). Many of you know the Oral Torah by its other familiar name: Talmud. The problem with this two-Torah idea is that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish societies, more and more the Oral Torah (as unwritten sayings transmitted by the sages) was being received as equal to—or in some cases, more important than—the Written Torah. Yeshua did not have very nice words for those who allowed tradition to nullify his Father's Torah (read Mark 7:13).

Let's take a peek at this two-Torah concept as described by a well-known traditional (non-Messianic) Jewish organization named Chabad.org.

The Torah has two parts: The "Torah Shebichtav" (Written Law), which is composed of the twenty-four books of the Tanach, and the "Torah Sheba'al Peh" (Oral Law).

G-d told Moses that he will give him "the Torah and the commandments." Why did G-d add the word "commandments?" Are there any commandments which

are not included in the Torah? This verse (amongst others) is a clear inference to the existence of the Oral Torah.

Originally the Oral Law was not transcribed. Instead it was transmitted from father to son and from teacher to disciple (thus the name "Oral" Law). Approximately 1800 years ago, Rabbi Judah the Prince concluded that because of all the travails of Exile, the Oral Law would be forgotten if it would not be recorded on paper. He, therefore, assembled the scholars of his generation and compiled the Mishnah, a (shorthanded) collection of all the oral teachings that preceded him. Since then, the Oral Law has ceased to be "oral" and as time passed more and more of the previously oral tradition was recorded.<sup>72</sup>

Now, as a Messianic Jew, I am not saying that I agree with Chabad.org in that there truly exists two authoritative parts to HaShem's Torah. Quite the contrary. I believe and espouse to only ONE authoritative part to God's Torah: the Written Torah. Yes, I acknowledge the existence of an Oral Torah, but I do not believe its teachings are binding on believers—whether Jewish or Gentile.

Additionally, if we continue to research the history of ancient Isra'el's views on Torah, we will find that sectarian halakhah can also be interpreted as "laws binding on all group members." In other words, the term Law in ancient Judaism did not only speak of Written Torah and/or Oral Torah, but quite often, it also designated the specific "by-laws" that separated one sect from another, so that to identify with any particular sect, a follower would naturally come under the jurisdiction of the sect to which he had aligned himself. E.P. Sanders' remarks about sectarian Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century are fitting for our study:

The Pharisaic/Rabbinic concept of 'oral law' shows that they wanted to assert that the law given to Moses was adequate in all respects—even when they were in fact adding to it, deleting from it, and otherwise altering it. Similarly in 1QS a distinction is made between the 'hidden things' in the law, which are known only to the sect, and the rest (1QS 5.IIf.). Entrants to the community pledge to keep 'every commandment of the Law of Moses in accordance with all that has been revealed of it to the sons of Zadok' (1QS 4.8f.). Thus the sect's special rules were formally considered to be in 'the law of Moses', though from our point of view they are additions and modifications.<sup>73</sup>

Relevant to our verse here in Galatians 5:3 is the striking similarity in verbiage between the Apostle Paul and those in the Qumran community of his day! Did you catch it? For those who would seek to be identified by the particular Jewish sect of their choosing, both Paul and the Qumran community spoke of the reality to "keep every commandment of the Law of Moses!"

<sup>72</sup> Naftali Silberberg, *What is the "Oral Torah"?* (www.AskMoses.com, as quoted by Chabad.org), [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/812102/jewish/What-is-the-Oral-Torah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/812102/jewish/What-is-the-Oral-Torah.htm)).

<sup>73</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 248-249.



So, instead of Paul warning his Gentile readers away from total allegiance to the Written Torah of God if they undergo proselyte conversion to Judaism, perhaps it is better to understand the verse as a warning against total allegiance primarily to the Oral Torah and/or the sectarian halakhah of the Influencers—a halakhah that does not include Gentiles in their membership roster—a halakhah that Paul would definitely have problems with.

*5:4 - You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

Comments: Merit Theology would have the phrase “trying to be justified by law” as teaching that anyone wishing to keep the Torah of Moshe perfectly for the purpose of gaining salvation has alienated themselves from Christ. They have fallen from grace. Why the alienation and the fallen state? Because, according to these same theologians, to attempt to keep the Torah for salvific purposes is tantamount to works/legalism, and everyone knows that we are not saved by works, viz, by legalistically following Torah, but by calling on the name of the LORD Jesus Christ. Luther’s famous words on this passage are telling. Allow me to quote them at length:

*Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.*

Paul in this verse discloses that he is not speaking so much of circumcision as the trust which men repose in the outward act. We can hear him say: "I do not condemn the Law in itself; what I condemn is that men seek to be justified by the Law, as if Christ were still to come, or as if He alone were unable to justify sinners. It is this that I condemn, because it makes Christ of no effect. It makes you void of Christ so that Christ is not in you, nor can you be partakers of the knowledge, the spirit, the fellowship, the liberty, the life, or the achievements of Christ. You are completely separated from Him, so much so that He has nothing to do with you any more, or for that matter you with Him." Can anything worse be said against the Law? If you think Christ and the Law can dwell together in your heart, you may be sure that Christ dwells not in your heart. For if Christ is in your heart He neither condemns you, nor does He ever bid you to trust in your own good works. If you know Christ at all, you know that good works do not serve unto righteousness, nor evil works unto condemnation. I do not want to withhold from good works their due praise, nor do I wish to encourage evil works. But when it comes to justification, I say, we must concentrate upon Christ alone, or else we make Him non-effective. You must choose between Christ and the righteousness of the Law. If you choose Christ you are righteous before God. If you stick to the Law, Christ is of no use to you.

*Ye are fallen from grace.*

That means you are no longer in the kingdom or condition of grace. When a person on board ship falls into the sea and is drowned it makes no difference from which end or side of the ship he falls into the water. Those who fall from grace perish no matter how they go about it. Those who seek to be justified by

the Law are fallen from grace and are in grave danger of eternal death. If this holds true in the case of those who seek to be justified by the moral Law, what will become of those, I should like to know, who endeavor to be justified by their own regulations and vows? They will fall to the very bottom of hell. "Oh, no," they say, "we will fly straight into heaven. If you live according to the rules of Saint Francis, Saint Dominick, Saint Benedict, you will obtain the peace and mercy of God. If you perform the vows of chastity, obedience, etc., you will be rewarded with everlasting life." Let these playthings of the devil go to the place where they came from and listen to what Paul has to say in this verse in accordance with Christ's own teaching: "He that believeth in the Son of God, hath everlasting life; but he that believeth not in the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth in him."

The words, "Ye are fallen from grace," must not be taken lightly. They are important. To fall from grace means to lose the atonement, the forgiveness of sins, the righteousness, liberty, and life which Jesus has merited for us by His death and resurrection. To lose the grace of God means to gain the wrath and judgment of God, death, the bondage of the devil, and everlasting condemnation.<sup>74</sup>

As accurate as Luther's theology is in explaining works/legalism vs. grace, unfortunately, it is NOT what the verse is speaking of historically. And we must remember this hermeneutic principle if we are ever to interpret scripture accurately: context is king, and any given passage must be interpreted in light of what it meant to the original audience before making practical application for us today. Using this principle, we cannot have Sha'ul warning his readers against misusing the Torah observance for the purpose of justification (viz, salvation, membership into Isra'el, etc.). The term "law" here must be understood to indicate "legal Jewish status" or some other term similar to proselyte conversion for Gentiles. Paul is not warning them about a misuse of Torah. Paul is warning them about a misuse in identity and social status.

But how could Paul say that they have been "alienated from Christ," and that they have "fallen from grace"? Does Paul now imagine that his genuine Gentile Christian readers have somehow lost their salvation? Is that what alienation from Christ and falling from grace means? I think it hardly possible that Paul would speak of conversion to Judaism for a true Gentile believer as something that would undo a person's position of salvation in Christ. Rather, within the mystery of God's spiritual attraction on and calling of a person or a community, there seems to exist circles of graduated mercy and grace—revelation, if you will—so that the closer you get to surrendering your life completely into the loving arms of Yeshua HaMashiach the more light and revelation you are shown until the moment of salvation is finally "birthed" within you and you call upon the name of the LORD for personal deliverance. To join oneself to a believing community and then intellectually confess faith in Yeshua and then to shrink back, reject Jesus,

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<sup>74</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians Five*  
([http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther\\_martin/Gal/Gal005.cfm?a=1096004](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther_martin/Gal/Gal005.cfm?a=1096004)).

and pursue another intellectual interest is indeed to alienate yourself from Christ and to fall from grace. It is not as if you had genuine salvation and then lost it. It is that by leaving Christ so cavalierly, you prove that you were never truly genuinely saved to begin with! Truly a dangerous game to play with God considering the sober warnings in Heb. 6:4-8, *“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned”* (ESV).

The Torah teaches that if we continue on in the grace that God has shown us—even as unbelievers—that he himself will grant grace upon grace to help us understand the work the Messiah has done on our behalf:

**“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you...” (James [Jacob] 4:8, ESV)**

I believe this verse works just as well for the unbeliever as it does for the believer. For example, would you not agree that those unbelievers who nevertheless attend church on a regular basis are “closer to accepting Yeshua” than possibly those unbelievers who don’t attend church and get a chance to hear the gospel at all? In my limited understanding of God’s grace, he positively utilizes the social settings that we associate with for his advantage and purposes in his efforts to reveal his Son to us. Children born of Christian parents in a Christian nation, surrounded by Christian friends would naturally exist in a more graduated state of “grace” than someone without all of these “advantages,” right? God rescued the People of Isra’el out of the clutches of the Egyptians so that he could bring them to the foot of Har Sinai (Mount Sinai), give them his Torah, and then bring them into the Land of Promise. Living in the Land of Promise, with the very words of the Living God of the universe in your community is definitely a position of grace—even if every single Israelite did not eventually go on to foster a personal relationship with their God. From God’s perspective, their position of grace (as the chosen people) did not change. Only when Isra’el continued to play the harlot by engaging in idolatry did they “fall from grace” so to say, and suffer exile from the Land.

*5:5, 6 - But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

Comments: I only wish to comment on the latter part of the verse that reads, *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”* Paul repeats this

statement, with a slight variation, later on in 6:15, *"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation."* Is Paul now saying that Jewish identity is worthless after the cross? For that matter, is he also saying that Gentile identity is likewise useless? If indeed we interpret his words this way, then how can we reconcile them with what he states in Romans?

**Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:1, 2, NASB).**

In a seeming reversal of opinion, Paul states in Romans that Jewish identity is "great in every respect." This doesn't sound like he consistently thought Jewish identity to be worthless. Perhaps he changed his mind from the time he wrote Galatians to the time he wrote Romans? To make matters even more confusing, he ends up repeating his original Galatians comments in his letter to the Corinthians:

**"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters* is the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19, NASB).**

Is Paul schizophrenic? Why does he seemingly keep going back and forth on his opinions about Jewish identity? Is it "valueless," or is it "great in every respect"? Of course I am being a bit facetious here just to prove my point. Context must determine the meaning of any given word or phrase we find in the Bible. The context of Paul's whole warning in this chapter—indeed in the book as a whole—is the equality of Jewish and Gentile ethnicity in the Kingdom of God. Or to put it the way an old Baptist preacher once told me: "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." This is the exact opposite of the message the Influencers were teaching, for in their theology, there was no place in Israel for the Gentile wishing to be counted as equal among his legally Jewish counterparts.

Paul is not denigrating one ethnicity in favor of another. He values all ethnicities, and Paul would be the first to teach that a person should value his ethnicity and praise God in whatever station of life they find themselves in without investing unnecessary time trying to change things (read 1 Cor. 7:20). So, even though Jewish and Gentile identities are important in God's scheme of things, he also realized once he came to believe in Yeshua that being born Jewish did not grant a person automatic corporate right-standing in God's sight. Nor did conversion to Judaism guarantee a person a place in the 'Olam Haba. That same Baptist preacher used to say that when we get to heaven and St. Peter meets us at the pearly gates and asks why he should let us in that he is not going to ask us if we are Jewish or not. Instead, he is going to ask us if we are in Christ or not.

*5:7 - You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?*

Comments: That Paul describes his readers as “running a good race” means that he regarded them as beginning with the Truth of the Gospel and only after considering the ethnocentric message of the Influencers did they veer off the straight and true path so to say. In fact, Paul even goes so far as to indicate that if it were not for the sway of this other “gospel” that the Galatians would likely still be in pursuit of the pure Truth. In other words, Paul doesn't seem to indicate that once his readers acquired Truth that they then went looking for “more truth” in the marketplace of religions, but rather, they were already on the good path of genuine Truth and running for the finish line when the Influencers cut in and upset their momentum in so many wrong ways (to use the running metaphor that Paul chose).

*5:11 - Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.*

Comments: As can be expected, prevailing Christian interpretations of this verse have Paul emphatically stating that he no longer believed circumcision to be of any value. They take Paul's words to naturally include the Torah as a whole, and therefore, would opine the apostle to be confessing his conversion from traditional Judaism to early Christianity of sorts. They gain support for their view from Paul's self confession earlier in this book at 1:13, interpreted to mean that Judaism was his former lifestyle but that Christianity is his present lifestyle: *“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it”* (ESV).

But how can this view be tenable if Paul went on to circumcise Timothy in Acts chapter sixteen? What is more, if Paul was indeed confessing that he no longer felt Torah and circumcision were relevant for the life of a follower of Yeshua, why does he go through with the sacrifice decision from James made in Acts 21:17-26?

**“Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law” (verse 24, ESV).**

One view is that Paul was being accused of hypocritically switching back and forth to fit whatever situation he was in—sort of a “situation ethics” if you will. There will be more on this view below, when we take a look at Tim Hegg's remarks.

I don't really believe that Paul abandoned Judaism and circumcision and I don't think you the reader do either or else you probably wouldn't have made it this far into my commentary. Instead, that Paul still upholds Torah, but that he is merely conveying that he used to actually agree with the theology of a Jewish-only Isra'el is likely from his statement in this verse. To “preach circumcision” meant to tow the standard party line that “All Isra'el shares a place in the world to come,” one of the primary motivating maxims of Paul's day, one based on Isaiah

60:21, “*Thy people also shall be all righteous; they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified*” (ASV). Recall that the Influencers, like many of the Judaisms of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, believed sincerely—albeit incorrectly—that genuine and lasting covenant membership was granted to Isra'el based on her ethnicity, and that if a citizen of another nation wished to join Isra'el's lot, that person had to undergo the manmade ceremony of the proselyte—complete with mandatory circumcision for males.

To be sure, if Paul were still preaching a Jewish-only Isra'el, then why would so many Jews in the book of Acts be out to kill him?<sup>75</sup> Why would he have gotten arrested for supposedly bringing Greeks into the Temple and defiling it?<sup>76</sup> Why would he still be persecuted if he actually agreed that Gentiles needed to undergo the ritual of proselytism? Of course we already know the answer to his question. The true reason he receives persecution from the traditional Jewish authorities is because, in point of fact, he does NOT agree that Gentiles needed to become legally-recognized Jews before being received into the community of Torah-keeping Isra'el.

Consider once again the words of Mark Nanos here:

One of the critical questions in Christian theology is the relationship of its members to Jewish identity and behavior, an identity concern, which, for the original audiences, supports the claim that they understood themselves to be participants in Judaism, albeit not Jews. In Paul's time, although no longer, for Christ-believers who were not Jews, the first question was whether they could or should become members of Israel, Jews, which is accomplished by completion of the rite of proselyte conversion. For males, this includes circumcision at the conclusion of the conversion process. Circumcision thus functions in Paul's time as a metonym for the rite of proselyte conversion. It is a rite or work or deed prescribed by Torah to become a member of Israel, and thereafter, a person obliged to observe Torah, that is, responsible to practice Jewish behavior.<sup>77</sup>

In my estimation, we must consistently return to this central hermeneutic principle if we wish to properly understand the book of Galatians from an historic religious perspective.

But, as mentioned above, there may be another way to interpret Paul's saying about “still preaching circumcision.” Tim Hegg is of the opinion that “Paul was being accused of being inconsistent. He was preaching a “circumcision-free” gospel to the Galatians, but when among a primarily Jewish audience, he was holding the “party line” and teaching that Gentiles needed to become proselytes,

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<sup>75</sup> Acts 23:12.

<sup>76</sup> Acts 21:27-29.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Nanos, *Paul and the Jewish Tradition: The Ideology of the Shema* (<http://www.marknanos.com/Paul-Shema-10-27-08.pdf>, 2008), p. 7.

in order to avoid being ostracized from his own community.”<sup>78</sup> If Hegg is correct, then this would fit best with the overall context of Galatians.

The second half of the verse states, *“In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.”* To what “case” is he referring when he says *“in that case...”*? Naturally, he is referring to his previous statement. If he is still preaching that Jews and Gentiles are not equal before God, then the offense of the cross has been abolished. Why? Because, Yeshua’s death opened the way for both Jew and Gentile to enter into the genuine presence of God without the perquisite of pedigrees and the like. Ephesians 2:14-18 says it best:

**“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (NIV).**

Couple the truth of this verse with what Paul teaches elsewhere:

**But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23, NIV).**

Yes, the cross of Christ is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles—truly offensive to both groups when one considers the absurd reality that God is willing to completely forgive a person on the basis of faith alone! “Surely,” the world says to itself, “there must be more to it than that!” What a wonderful truth that God does NOT require more than that. Our sufficiency is in Yeshua alone!

*5:13 - You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*

Comments: The place of Torah in the life of ancient Isra'el functioned to set the people apart from the world in service to the One, True God of the universe. As the people engaged in the righteous activities of the Torah lifestyle, the surrounding people groups would have an opportunity to see and understand that God was close to his people as they called upon him, that they were wise, and that his statutes and ordinances were righteous!

**Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the midst of the land whither ye go in to possess it. Observe therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, that, when they**

<sup>78</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (www.torahresource.com, 2002), p. 188.

**hear all these statutes, shall say: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there, that hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is whensoever we call upon Him? And what great nation is there, that hath statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day" (Deut. 4:5-8, JPS 1917).**

What does this have to do with Paul explaining to his readers that they were called to be free? If Paul believed that his Gentile audience was genuinely grafted into Isra'el via faith in Messiah Yeshua, then Isra'el's grand call became their grand call as well. 1<sup>st</sup> century Isra'el viewed the Torah as a community privilege, a God-given responsibility meant to be carried out by every "good Jew" since he bore the humble task of representing the image of the Divine "in the sight of all the other peoples" of the earth (recall Moshe's words from Deuteronomy above). What the average modern Christian often overlooks as they read about the Law in their Sunday school textbooks is that the central tenet of the God's Torah was "Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." Too often, all the modern church Bible student sees in the Law is "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not!" They forget that the TaNaKH commanded Isra'el to have circumcised hearts so that they could in fact love and obey God with a genuine heart of faith, and subsequently love their neighbors the way they should.<sup>79</sup> Genuine freedom in Christ is freedom from the bondage of flesh and freedom to walk into Torah obedience—empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh. This is the point I am trying to make by reminding us about Isra'el's responsibilities to love God, love their neighbors, and be a light to the surrounding nations. The point I am stressing is that like Isra'el of old, Paul did not expect his readers to be able to embrace freedom and resist indulging the sinful nature under their own power! He urged them to serve one another in love, which brings us to the next verse and to my next comment:

*5:14 - The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Comments: If Paul thought that Torah was done away with in Yeshua, as the prevailing Christian interpretation would have us to believe, then how in the world is it also summed up in a single command to love our neighbor as ourselves? Firstly, in stating that the entire Torah is summed up in a single command, Paul follows in a tradition not uncommon among Jews of his day—to include Yeshua. Recall that when questioned about the greatest commandment, Yeshua stated that to love God was the greatest and that a second was like unto it: love they neighbor as thyself. He went on to explain that on these two hang the entire Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:36-40). Tim Hegg, as well as David H. Stern both remind us that the Babylonian Talmud contains a well-known passage about

<sup>79</sup> Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4.



Micah, Isaiah, Amos, and Habakuk summarizing the Torah commandments, distilling them down to a few and eventually one command.<sup>80</sup>

But is Paul saying that the rest of Torah is irrelevant and that we need only focus on this single command to love our neighbors? This can hardly be the correct interpretation, for indeed this would mean that Paul himself has just overthrown the greatest commandment, stated by Yeshua above to be love for God, with our neighbor coming in as a close second!

I think it fair to say that if we were to corner your average church pastor and ask them to state outright that they believe Paul to be uprooting all of Torah save this one commandment that they would not hold to that opinion. Therefore, since we know Paul is not uprooting Torah here, we must confess that he is simply helping his readers to understand the Law's priorities about genuine, spirit-led love for God that works itself out in maintaining control over our own sinful propensities, all the while nurturing within us an unselfish love for those around us. Indeed as Paul is going to state forthrightly in the very next verse, serving one another in love is tantamount to fulfilling the true intentions of the Torah, and this type of love can only be done as we live by the Spirit of God.

*5:16 - So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

Comments: This verse is such a wonderful promise for us as believers in Yeshua! What is more, it is so practical and easy to understand that it is incomprehensible why more Christians are not following its rich, spiritual truth. If we are to be obedient to God's ways and love our neighbor, as we ought, then we have to live by the Spirit so that we can allow God to empower us to subjugate our stubborn flesh. Paul has stated this very same principle elsewhere in his writings:

**“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:12-14, ESV).**

To live by the Spirit means to walk by the Spirit, to be empowered by the Spirit, to be filled by the Spirit (more on Spirit-filling below).

*5:17 - For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*

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<sup>80</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (www.torahresource.com, 2002), p. 193, and David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary, Galatians 5:14* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1996), p. 565.

Comments: Like verse 16, this verse too finds parallels in Paul's other writings:

**“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Romans 7:15-23, ESV).**

Like the Romans passage quoted above, Paul would have us understand here in Galatians that once a person surrenders to Yeshua, a war between his old nature and new nature begins, with the flesh battling the Spirit and the Spirit battling the flesh. Such a contest might lead one to despair and wonder if there will ever be victory for the child of God in Christ this side of heaven if this is the way it is going to be from now on. But Paul already gave us the answer to the dilemma of dealing with our stubborn flesh: *“Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”* As believers, we need not despair as long as we remain firmly rooted in Christ! To be sure, in Galatians 5:14, Paul conveys the concept of summing up the Torah by commending us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and in Romans, Paul conveys the concept of fulfilling Torah with walking according to the Spirit:

**“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3, 4, ESV).**

Isn't it fantastic how the Word of God fits perfectly together in all of its parts!

*5:18 - But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under Law.*

Comments: Nearly every Christian commentary I consulted on this verse interpreted it in such a way as to teach that being Spirit-led meant that one was no longer bound by Torah ceremonies and the like, taking the phrase “not under Law” (Greek=ὕπὸ νόμον *hupo nomon*) to indicate “not under obligation to carry out the letter of the Law.” To be sure, most of those same commentaries looked ahead in Galatians to 6:2 contrasting the law (νόμος *nomos*) in this verse (presumed to be the Law of Moses) with the Law of Christ in 6:2 (more on “Law of Christ” in my comments to that verse below). As was to be expected, those same Christian commentaries cross-referenced Paul's words in Romans 6:14,

particularly because the entire phrase “not under the Law” was used there as well.

David H. Stern’s Complete Jewish Bible translates this Galatians verse as “But if you are led by the Spirit, then you are not in subjection to the system that results from perverting the Torah into legalism.” I’m going to have to disagree with all of the standard Christian commentaries on this verse, and I’m going to have to disagree with Stern’s translation on this pasuk as well. Paul is not pitting Torah observance against being led by the Spirit. Nor is he contrasting the life of the Spirit with a life of legalism—as theologically true a statement as that may sound.

As was discussed in Section Seven as well as the Summary above, when Paul uses the phrase “under the Law” in his letters, it is usually utilized in a technical fashion, referring either to Jewish identity, or to the condemnation that the Torah spells out for sinners, brought on by a penchant lust for repeated and unremorseful sin. Context must determine which use is in view, and since Paul is in the middle of a dialogue about the old nature vs. the new nature that is controlled by the Spirit’s infilling, we can safely interpret “under the Law” in this verse as shorthand for “under the condemnation of the Law.”

But this verse not only emphasizes our freedom from condemnation, but our need to be “led by the Spirit.” I interpret the term “led by the Spirit” to be tantamount to being “filled with the Spirit,” a familiar phrase also found in Paul.<sup>81</sup> As one reads through my commentary here to Exegeting Galatians and notices the way I regularly disagree with standard Christian commentaries, one might get the impression that I have nothing positive to say about the prevailing Christian views at all, but that is far from the case. In point of fact, I have the utmost respect for every Christian translator and commentator that I encounter, often gleaning rich spiritual nuggets from their non-Law related materials. To be sure, John MacArthur is one of my all time favorites, and because of his pertinent words on the concept of being filled with the Spirit, I want to quote him at length here:

### **Facets of Spiritual Filling**

When we use the word fill in English we normally think of something being placed into a container such as milk being poured to the brim of a glass, water being run into a bathtub, or gasoline being pumped into a gas tank. But none of those examples conveys precisely the meaning of to fill or be filled as does the Greek pleroo, a form of which is used in Ephesians 5:18 .

Pleroo has three shades of meaning that are helpful in illustrating the scriptural meaning of Spirit-filled. The first carries the idea of **pressure**. It is used to describe wind billowing the sails on a ship, providing the impetus to move the vessel across the water. In the spiritual realm, this concept depicts the Holy Spirit providing the thrust to move the believer down the pathway of obedience. A

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<sup>81</sup> Ephesians 5:18.

Spirit-filled Christian isn't motivated by his own desires or will to progress. Instead, he allows the Holy Spirit to carry him in the proper directions. Another helpful example of this first meaning is a small stick floating in a stream. Most of us have tossed a stick into a creek and then run downstream to see the twig come floating by, propelled only by the force of the water. To be filled with the Spirit means to be carried along by the gracious pressure of the Holy Spirit.

Pleroo can also convey the idea of **permeation**. The well-known pain reliever Alka Seltzer illustrates this principle quite effectively. When you drop one or two tablets into a glass of water, they instantly begin to fizz and dissolve. Soon the tablets are transformed into clear bubbles throughout the glass, and the water is permeated with the distinct flavor of the Alka Seltzer. In a similar sense, God wants the Holy Spirit to permeate and flavor our lives so when we're around others they will know for certain we possess the pervasive savor of the Spirit.

There is a third meaning of pleroo, actually the primary one in the New Testament, which conveys the sense of **domination** or total control. It is used by the Gospel writers to indicate that people were dominated by a certain emotion. In Luke 5:26, after Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and healed the paralytic, the people were astonished and "filled with fear." In Luke 6:11, when Jesus restored a man's hand on the Sabbath, the scribes and Pharisees "were filled with rage." When our Lord told the disciples that He would soon be leaving them, He told of their reaction: "sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:6). Each of those uses reveals an emotion so overwhelming within the people that it dominated their thoughts and excluded every other emotion.

Most people are able to balance their emotions from day to day. But there are times when the emotional balance is tipped to one extreme or another. Such occasions might include a wedding, the death of a close family member, or an extreme emergency or trial. When someone is totally dominated by a particular emotional reaction in secular contexts, it can be foolish, sinful, a waste of time, or even frightening and physically harmful. But in our spiritual lives we are commanded to yield to the total control of the Holy Spirit, so every emotion, thought, and act of the will is under His direction. That kind of complete spiritual control is for our benefit and totally in line with God's will.

A directly parallel passage to Ephesians 5:18 is Colossians 3:16, which explains in a slightly different way the meaning of the command "be filled with the Spirit." The Apostle Paul says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." One can be filled with the Spirit only when controlled by the Word. It is knowing truth and obeying it (all emphases his).<sup>82</sup>

Such powerful words for us to contemplate! John MacArthur hit the nail on the head with this one! I cannot stress enough the importance of this need: As believers we absolutely must, must, must be led by/filled with the Spirit! Jesus must, must, must be first and foremost in our lives if we ever hope to bear genuine and lasting fruit for the Kingdom of God, and if we ever hope to live

<sup>82</sup> John MacArthur, *What Does it Mean to Be Filled with the Spirit?* (www.gty.org, 2003) <http://www.gty.org/resources/positions/P04/what-does-it-mean-to-be-filled-with-the-Spirit>.

victorious lives over our stubborn flesh. As Paul is going to admonish us in a few verses from now, those who belong to Yeshua prove their belonging by living lives marked by being Spirit led and Spirit filled. Such individuals have, by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh, crucified the sinful nature so that they not only live by the Spirit but they keep in step with the Spirit's leading.

*5:19-21 - The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Comments: Paul provides a sample list of what life is characterized by when the old nature is in control instead of the Spirit of God in our lives. The harsh reality of this passage is, in my opinion, the very real possibility that if a person's life is indeed regularly marked by actions similar to this list (which is not all-inclusive), then perhaps that person has not been truly born again. Again, getting ahead of myself here, those who belong to Christ have in fact crucified the sinful flesh with its passions and desires already. It is a spiritual reality in the mystery of Messiah! Even though true believers occasionally slip up and sin from time to time, our lives should not be characterized by such slip ups. Paul warns those who claim to belong to Yeshua, yet allow the acts of the sinful nature to dominate and control their lives, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. I don't believe he is saying that the acts of the sinful nature have the ominous ability to somehow uproot the work of Christ in our lives somehow. Rather, I believe he is saying that if we are consistently and unremorsefully sinning, even while professing faith in Yeshua, that we just might be fooling ourselves about being a genuine child of God.

*5:22, 23 - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

Comments: This is one of the first verses that I memorized while growing up in a Baptist school. And I am so glad I memorized it! The first part of the verse is self-explanatory and (Surprise! Surprise!) I heartily agree with every single Christian commentary that I consulted on the first part! It is the last part of the verse that I regularly found disagreement with. Luther's comments are representative:

*Galatians 5:23. Against such there is no law.*

There is a law, of course, but it does not apply to those who bear these fruits of the Spirit. The Law is not given for the righteous man. A true Christian conducts himself in such a way that he does not need any law to warn or to restrain him.

He obeys the Law without compulsion. The Law does not concern him. As far as he is concerned there would not have to be any Law.<sup>83</sup>

When one properly reads through and studies the Torah with unbiased eyes, one does not encounter laws without love or rules without relationship. Instead, one encounters a God brimming with love for his people Isra'el! A God so in love with and concerned about them that he rescues them from the clutches of lawless Egyptian bondage and brings them to the foot of Har Sinai to personally hand them his gracious and righteous Law! This is the very same Law that Paul calls "holy and righteous and good" in Romans 7:12! This is the same Law that Paul calls spiritual in Romans 7:14! This is the same Law that Paul says he delights in with his inner being in Romans 7:21! This is the same Law that Paul confesses he is subject to with his mind in Romans 7:25! Are you beginning to see my point yet? I think it hardly considerate of the Torah or of Paul's writings to pin Paul with the concept of identifying the Law of God as worthless when it comes to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Of course we know and understand that the Law in and of itself without the commensurate Spirit's indwelling is nothing more than—as Tim Hegg likes to call it—letters on parchment. Thus, the proper position to take when studying Law and Spirit is not to contrast them against one another, but rather to compliment them one with another! They go hand in hand. They are both necessary in the life of a genuine follower of Yeshua. For indeed, as we have already noted from our quote from MacArthur above, to be Spirit-filled is to be controlled and filled with the Word of Christ! It is to have the Word of God permeate your every facet of being until you are saturated with the Words of the Master! One can be filled with the Spirit only when controlled by the Word. And all of this is in accordance with what has already been promised in the TaNaKH of old—to which we are certain Paul understood and agreed with. For indeed, when God promised Isra'el that he would take out the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh, he also promised to write his Law—the very same Torah given on Sinai—on the hearts of those whom he redeemed:

**“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek. 11:19, 20, ESV).**

And,

**“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will**

<sup>83</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians Five*  
([http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther\\_martin/Gal/Gal005.cfm?a=1096023](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/luther_martin/Gal/Gal005.cfm?a=1096023)).

**cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you” (Ezek. 36:24-29, ESV).**

We of course are also familiar with the famous passage out of Jeremiah 31 that speaks of a “new covenant”—a passage quoted at length in Hebrews chapter eight and repeated in Hebrews chapter ten—a passage which also promises that God would write the Torah on the hearts of all those who participate in his New Covenant!<sup>84</sup> In light of these data, I think it inconceivable that Paul would fail to make the positive connection between being genuinely Spirit-led as a follower of Messiah coupled with walking out the Torah in one’s everyday life.

*5:24-26 - Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

Comments: Bringing his comments of Chapter Five to a close, Paul reiterates the true believer’s position in Messiah. We are dead to sin. We are dead to legalism. We are dead to trying to earn God’s favor. And for the Galatian Christian, this means he doesn’t need to undergo an unnecessary legal status change from Gentile to Jew as if that will somehow improve his existing right-standing with God in Messiah! To be sure, outside of the genuine heart-change that is wrought about when we are filled with the Spirit of Yeshua, a change in ethnicity (if such a thing is possible, according to some!) can never do anything to improve our true inner man, especially if that man is an ‘old man.’

As he is going to go on and write in Romans 6:2, Paul teaches, “*How can we who died to sin still live in it?*” Indeed, we have in fact been given a new nature in Yeshua, one that does not seek to belong to the ways of the world, but instead seeks to be pleasing to the One who shed his very life-blood so that we might live as new creations unto God. And since we live (Greek= ζάω *zao*, exist among the living, enjoy life, have vital power<sup>85</sup>) by this Spirit of Yeshua inside of us, Paul emphasizes, we will also keep in step (Greek= στοιχέω *stoicheo*, a word that has military connotations of proceeding or marching in a row<sup>86</sup>) with the Spirit! It is vital as we read through Paul—indeed all of the Apostolic Writings—that we understand the teachings on ‘old man’ vs. ‘new man.’ In Paul, ‘old man’ is a way of describing the old nature or volition or will of a person before coming

<sup>84</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34; cf. Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16.

<sup>85</sup> Thayer’s and Smith’s Bible Dictionary (TSBD), ζάω.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., στοιχέω.

to genuine faith in Jesus as LORD. By contrast, 'new man' is a way of describing our nature or volition or will once we have surrendered to Yeshua's Lordship:

**"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17, KJV).**

The truth of the matter is that Torah observance exists (from God's perspective) as a matter of the heart. It always has been and always shall be. Genuine and lasting covenant membership will always be characterized by genuine and lasting obedience:

**"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (James [Jacob] 2:14-26, ESV).**

And also see,

**"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8, 9, ESV).**

The Judaisms of Paul's day quite possibly had this sequence backwards: "Submit to the 'works of the Law' and God will grant you genuine faith and right standing in his people Isra'el."



## Galatians Chapter Six

*6:1-10 - Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

Comments: At this point in Paul's letter to the Galatians, I think he is confident that the charlatans known as the Influencers (whom other Christian commentators call the Judaizers—a term I feel is inappropriate and possibly a racial slur) will eventually show themselves to be false teachers, particularly if they stay on in the congregation and continue to be shepherded as the flock of God along with the true sheep. In simpler terms, God vindicates his own. Indeed, Paul confidently states that a man reaps what he sows. The seed of the Influencers was rotten to the core and Paul knew all too well that once that seed had become full-grown, it would reap a harvest not of eternal life (as the Influencers were promising) but of destruction, because of the eventual revealing of the sinful nature of man as 6:7, 8 promises.

In these verses, which are packed with wonderful spiritual nutrition, Paul also states that by seeking the well-being of our fellow believers and putting their needs and burdens above our own (a theme he expounds upon quite nicely in Romans chapter 14 and 15), we show ourselves to be fulfilling the Law of Christ (Greek= νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ *nomon tou Christou*), a phrase that standard Christianity interprets in contrast to the Law of Moshe.

- Paul says that when we live this way, we are fulfilling the Law of Christ
- The Law of the Christ is the law written on our hearts that Jeremiah promised would come with the New Covenant
- They are found on our heart and directed by the Holy Spirit
- That's why I can't give you a list of the Law's of Christ
- The Law of Christ can be summarized though, because Jesus did it for us
- This Law replaces the Law of Moses
- This is why we say that Christians still live by rules and standards
- But those standards aren't found in reading the Ten Commandments or any other part of the Law of Moses
- Our flesh loves to see things written in black and white
- But in His wisdom, God chose to right His law in blood on our hearts where we can't see it

- Instead, we can only follow Him in spirit and truth - if we follow Him at all<sup>87</sup>

But why should we interpret this phrase as anything other than the perfect Law of God as already revealed in the pages of Scripture and as perfectly modeled by our Master himself? I think that when we unnecessarily add meanings to the text that are not warranted by the context (eisegete instead of exegete), we do damage to the text and bring about all manner of gross interpretations and practical applications. David H. Stern's translation of verse two reveals what I think to be the true meaning:

**Bear one another's burdens - in this way you will be fulfilling the Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds.**

What is more, Tim Hegg, in my opinion, also brings out the proper meaning of the phrase "law of Christ" in his commentary to Galatians:

*fulfill the Torah (teaching) of Messiah* – The teachings of Yeshua were no doubt known among the congregations of The Way, even before the gospels as we know them were finalized in their canonical form. The Apostles were commissioned to "make disciples of the nations" and to "teach them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:18ff). Thus, the "Torah of Messiah" (νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) should be understood as "the Torah as Messiah taught it and lived it." It is anachronistic to interpret the phrase as though the Torah of Messiah is different than the Torah of Moses. Surely it is at variance with a good deal of the rabbinic interpretations of the Torah, but it was not in any manner contradictory to Moses. To postulate such a thing would be to call into question the very veracity of Yeshua Himself, for any one who comes teaching something contrary to what is found in the Torah is considered a false prophet. Rather, Yeshua, both in His words and in His actions, brought the divinely intended meaning of the Torah to the eyes and ears of those He taught. His emphasis was upon a living out of Torah in which genuine love for God and for one's neighbor was the driving factor in *halachic* decisions. While the sages were expert at piling burdens upon men's shoulders without lifting a finger to help them bear the load (Matt 23:4), Yeshua sought to unwrap the Torah from the entanglements of men, and to show that living a life of Torah by faith is not a burden, but a delight.

Therefore, by bearing the burdens of one another, the followers of Yeshua fulfill the Torah as it was intended to be fulfilled, by living it out in the context of love for God, and love for one's neighbor. In this way, the Torah as taught and modeled by Yeshua would be fulfilled.<sup>88</sup>

This may be more related to the concept of Law of Christ than to Galatians, but I feel the need to say it here anyway. If we in the Messianic Movement, Torah Communities, etc., are to be pleasing to God, simply following after Torah the way traditional Judaism does may not always prove to be appropriate for us, since we identify and belong to him and history shows that Yeshua quite often

<sup>87</sup> Verse By Verse Ministry, Galatians, 2013, [https://www.versebyverseministry.org/images/uploads/Galatians\\_6.pdf](https://www.versebyverseministry.org/images/uploads/Galatians_6.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (www.torahresource.com, 2002), p. 214.

had differences of opinion in the way his contemporary Jewish leaders were ostensibly following after Torah. I am not saying that everything that Traditional Judaism is in regards to Torah is wrong. But what I am saying is that, as Jews and Gentiles in Messiah, our primary source of halakhah should not be Traditional Judaism, or Talmud, or Shulchan Arukh, etc., but instead should be the Law of Christ—the Torah as fulfilled and demonstrated perfectly by the Living Torah!

*6:12 - Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

Comments: Call a spade a spade! Paul is through with being coy about the whole situation. Indeed, we have already seen him “lose his cool” in 3:1-3 when he called his readers “fools” for being bewitched by the message of the Influencers. And then he really went overboard when he wished that those false teachers would follow through with the whole operation on themselves if they were so obsessed with taking off just a bit of the flesh from someone else merely for the purpose of notching their belts. (Hint: Read 5:12 and 13 again carefully in a few different versions and ask yourself this question: “Is Paul saying what I think he is saying?”) Now here once again, he levels his guns at his detractors by revealing their impure motives of stooping to underhanded methods such as threats. What is more, according to Paul, their reasoning for wishing Gentile circumcision is shown, not to be so that they can sincerely help these Gentiles find a place in covenant Isra'el, but rather out of fear of identifying with Yeshua in persecution, an odd fact indeed, considering that the Influencers may have actually been accepting of Yeshua but not accepting of Gentiles in Isra'el as Gentiles. One verse later (down in 6:13, which we will explore shortly), he tips the hand of the Influencers, shows us their cards, and accuses them of hypocrisy by not even obeying Torah themselves!

The Greek word for ‘compel’ in this verse is ἀναγκάζω anagkazo, and it carries the idea of compulsion by force or threat if necessary.<sup>89</sup> We have encountered this word before in our studies, twice earlier in this letter, at 2:13 and again at 2:14. In fact, if you will recall, Paul was guilty of ‘compelling’ Christians to blaspheme before he himself came to believe in Yeshua as Messiah of Isra'el.<sup>90</sup> Of course context shows that it is not always wrong to try to ‘compel’ someone to do a particular thing. For instance, of the nine times this word is found in the Apostolic Scriptures, only four of those times does the context seem to indicate compulsion to do something wrong.<sup>91</sup> The point I am trying to make by bringing this verse up is that as far as the Influencers were concerned, the Gentiles were not being given a choice in the matter. Circumcision was being presented as the

<sup>89</sup> TSBD, ἀναγκάζω.

<sup>90</sup> Acts 26:11.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Matt. 14:22; Mark 6:45; Luke 14:23; Acts 26:11; 28:19; 2 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 2:3, 14; 6:12.

exclusive entry point into covenant Isra'el and Paul was seeking to set the record straight once and for all by correctly demonstrating from the Torah itself that God recons a person righteous, not by their ethnic status, but by their position of faith in the Risen Christ.

This also brings up an important historical fact for us to consider concerning the sharp disputes between the prevailing Jewish groups of Paul's day and the members of the emerging sect known as The Way. Tim Hegg explains this disagreement for us:

Here we are given a most important insight into the situation of Paul's day. The antagonism of the mainline Jewish community against the people of The Way did not center primarily upon the theology of Yeshua as Messiah. Other sects of the day had also proclaimed leading members of their sect as fulfilling the role of Messiah (as would happen eventually in the Bar Kochbah rebellion). The issue that was most egregious, and which had begun the split between the traditional synagogues and the synagogues of The Way, was the matter of Gentiles. Gentiles, as Gentiles, simply could not be tolerated nor accepted as full-fledged covenant members, and to treat them as though they were (which the congregations of The Way did) caused deep theological and sociological problems. From the standpoint of the rabbis, to allow a Gentile to assume full covenant membership was to diminish the basis of covenant membership from their perspective, that is, that covenant membership was guaranteed on the basis of a Jewish status. Moreover, the presence of Gentiles within the community was too dangerously close to acceptance of idolatry, for the Gentile world in Paul's day was characterized first and foremost by their idolatrous practices. As long as The Way insisted on equal acceptance of Gentiles, the mainline Jewish communities simply could not accept them. Gentiles, as far as the rabbis were concerned, needed to be encouraged to become proselytes. For the traditional synagogue had no problem with Jews who held divergent opinions (note the stark contrasts between Pharisees and Sadducees in terms of their fundamental beliefs, yet the obvious manner in which the two sects interacted and lived together). It was the presence of Gentiles that created the division.<sup>92</sup>

All too often the historic Church of yesterday and today seems to think that the belief in Yeshua was the primary dividing point between The Way and those of the traditional Judaisms of the time. And as we have already mentioned, indeed Jewish followers after The Way were eventually expelled from their own synagogues over their loyalty to Yeshua—just like their Master promised in John 16:2. But, as Hegg has so eloquently pointed out, as we earnestly study 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism in Isra'el, we must reckon with the fact that eventually The Way's insistence of Gentile inclusion into Isra'el as Gentiles was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back when it came to differences between Paul's Judaism and the others.

*6:13 - Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.*

<sup>92</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* ([www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com), 2002), pp. 224-225.

Comments: Wow! That had to hurt their pride hearing the Apostle Paul accuse those representing the Jewish norm of failing to uphold one of the central pillars in Isra'el's history—namely—the Torah. According to all they understood and professed, the Torah was for Jews only, and the Influencers no doubt felt it was their sacred duty to uphold the truth of God's Word by preserving it from idolatry and supposed Gentile corruption. The irony of Paul's words ring loudest when one realizes that according to the prevailing Judaisms of Paul's day, circumcision was no longer merely another commandment found in the 613 Commandments of the Torah, but it had in fact become the pinnacle of social identity from an ethnic point of view. In the Torah it was originally given to Avraham as a sign of an existing covenant, but by Paul's day, it had been wrongly elevated by Isra'el to its position as a badge of social status among people groups of the ancient Middle East, ostensible marking Isra'el and Isra'el alone apart as the Chosen People with no room for other people groups to join their lot unless they became legally-recognized Jews first.

So what we have going on in this verse is a physically circumcised, Torah observant Jewish man accusing other physically circumcised Jewish men of not only violating Torah observance, but of the sin of hypocrisy by demanding that uncircumcised Gentiles become physically circumcised so that these same non-Torah-keeping yet circumcised men can boast about how they got those poor physically uncircumcised Gentiles to succumb to their threats. This sounds strikingly similar to what Paul is going to write about later on in Romans Chapter Two. Speaking to fellow Jews, he levels the following stinging accusation:

**“But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God... You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Romans 2:17-29, ESV, with edits by myself).**

The Influencers were calling themselves Jewish but Paul called them Law-breakers. The Influencers viewed the Gentiles as unqualified until they became circumcised, but Paul maintained that those Influencers disqualified themselves in the eyes of God with their violation of the truth of the genuine Gospel of the Torah—even though they were physically circumcised already. Such hypocrisy indeed!

There may be other ways to interpret the phrase “*that they may boast about your flesh.*” Hegg sees the strong possibility that this phrase means the Influencers were ready to welcome the Gentiles who underwent proselytism with a full embrace as covenant members, to welcome them into the life, culture, and history of the Jewish people. They were ready fully to affirm the Jewish identity of the proselyte.<sup>93</sup>

*6:14 - May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Comments: In stark contrast to boasting about one’s ethnic status as a Jew, Paul proudly confesses that he will never boast about anything save his trusting faithfulness in the cross of his LORD Yeshua. This does not mean that he considers Jewish identity worthless. Rather, that he knows how to prioritize what is most important against those details that are of lesser importance. We in the current Messianic/Torah Movement could stand to learn a lot from Paul’s example. Sadly, all too often, we are found to be quibbling about the ethnic identity of this person and the ethnic identity of that person, but what we should be focusing on is the identity of the Man from Galilee and how his righteousness has graciously paid the price for our sin!

*6:15 - Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.*

Comments: Paul now repeats what he stated earlier in 5:6 as well as what we find in 1 Cor. 7:19 (see my notes from that section above). However, he changes the ending part of the phrase here to say that what counts is a “new creation” (Greek=καινή κτίσις *kaine ktisis*), a phrase which carries the notion of a recently made form, fresh, a new kind of substance, unprecedented, or unheard of.<sup>94</sup> That the man-made conversion ceremony of the proselyte only “washed the outside of the cup, but does nothing for the refuse in the inside”<sup>95</sup> I think, is exposed by Paul in this verse. Indeed, Paul knew that a conversion from one ethnicity to another, without the heart change brought on only by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh, could never do anything to solve the dilemma of the sinful nature of man in his quest to be pleasing to God.

Think about what the prevailing Judaisms of Paul’s day were offering to the proselyte prospect: A chance to begin a new life as a Jew, as a genuine member of Isra’el, as a citizen of the society of those especially chosen to carry and proclaim Torah as God’s true Word! To be sure, Jewish identity was/is something to be proud of and I am not mocking that reality here. But what I am trying to emphasize is that Jewish identity does not guarantee a person will have a right heart before God and before his fellow man. To borrow a lesson from the

<sup>93</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (www.torahresource.com, 2002), p. 227.

<sup>94</sup> TSBD, καινή κτίσις.

<sup>95</sup> Matt. 23:25, 26; Luke 11:39.

book of Hebrews, the entire sacrificial system with its priestly cult was never designed to bring the worshipper to “perfection”—viz—a changed heart. Only true faith in the Promised Messiah to come could move the heart of God to write the Torah of God on the heart of the individual—thrusting him into the community of genuine and lasting covenant members.

Thus Paul has to reiterate over and over again in his letters that being Jewish or being Gentile is not the most important thing a person should be focusing on in this life. We need to get our priorities straight and begin to see our heart situation from God’s perspective. Membership into earthly Isra’el only gained one a temporal place among the people of God, a membership that effectively expired the moment one died. By comparison, if one desired to graduate or matriculate to an eternal place among the people of God, a membership that carries over past death, past the grave, one must be found in Messiah, and it is to this theme that Paul is going to return over and over again in his letters.

*6:16 - Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.*

Comments: This verse represents the final blessing of our letter to Galatians and thus brings his arguments against the Influencers to a close. Since this verse follows immediately after verse 15, I take the term “this rule” to refer to the standard of forensic righteousness previously spoken of in verse 15, namely: Genuine and lasting covenant membership into the eternal people of God is not procured by one’s ethnicity, but only by placing one’s genuine and lasting faith in Yeshua HaMashiach.

Moreover, it would seem that Sha’ul extends this blessing of ultimate peace and mercy exclusively to the group who conforms to this halakhah—a group Paul identifies as the “Isra’el of God.”

But who or what is the Isra’el of God? Let us briefly examine a few Bible commentaries for some possibilities. Using Bible.hub’s online commentary resources, I was able to cull together these few examples. The Pulpit Commentary states:

The words, "and upon the Israel of God," seem to be an echo of the "peace upon Israel (εἰρήνη ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραήλ)," which, in the Septuagint, closes the hundred and twenty-fifth and hundred and twenty-eighth psalms. The addition of the words, "of God," seems intended pointedly to distinguish the "Israel" which the apostle has in view from that which boasted itself as being Israel while it was not, and also from the false brethren (ψευδοδελφοί, Galatians 2:4) in the Christian Church, who were for linking themselves with the false Israel. The addition is not merely honorific, as in the expression, "the Church of God" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9), but distinctive as well - that which alone God views and loves as "Israel" - to wit, the entire body of real believers in Christ, who, as portrayed in this Epistle, are "children of promise after the fashion of Isaac" (Galatians 4:28), Abraham's seed and heirs of the promise" (Galatians 3:29), and the children of "the upper Jerusalem, which is our mother" (Galatians

4:26). Of that portion of the true Israel which dwelt in Galatia (see 1 Peter 1:1; 1 Peter 2:10), those who, like the apostle, consecrated themselves to Christ as crucified, were the guiding and characterizing element; and therefore his blessing shed upon these spreads itself also upon those connected with them.<sup>96</sup>

Gill's Exposition of the Whole Bible adds the following description:

The "Israel of God", or as the Arabic version reads it, "Israel the propriety of God"; which he has a right unto, and a claim upon; who are chosen by him, Israel his elect; who are redeemed by him, out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation; who are called by his grace, and are styled Israel his called; who are justified in his Son, and by his righteousness; and for whose sake he is exalted as a Prince and a Saviour, to give them repentance and remission of sin; and who are, or will be saved by him, with an everlasting salvation; and is a name that includes all God's elect, whether Jews or Gentiles: though it may have a particular respect to such of the Israelites, or Jews, God had foreknown and reserved for himself; and who believed in Christ, and walked as new creatures, without confidence in the flesh. The Jews themselves own, that strangers, or proselytes, shall be called by the name of Israel; so they (b) explain Isaiah 44:5, latter part.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary adds these brief comments:

Israel of God—not the Israel after the flesh, among whom those teachers wish to enrol you; but the spiritual seed of Abraham by faith (Ga 3:9, 29; Ro 2:28, 29; Php 3:3).<sup>98</sup>

I was pleasantly surprised by my brief investigation of Christian commentaries to find a consistent agreement with what I feel to be an accurate definition of this phrase "Isra'el of God."

I have to wonder out loud if the Influencers felt the sting of Paul's descriptive and exclusive blessing since he did not automatically include those in traditional Isra'el who did not follow the rule he just laid out in 6:15. Indeed, Paul will end up repeating sentiments such as these in his letter to the Romans:

**"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the**

<sup>96</sup> Pulpit Commentary, *Galatians* 6  
(<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/galatians/6.htm>).

<sup>97</sup> Gill's Exposition of the Whole Bible, *Galatians* 6  
(<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/galatians/6.htm>).

<sup>98</sup> Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary, *Galatians* 6  
(<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/jfb/galatians/6.htm>).



**patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Romans 9:1-8, ESV).**

As painful as it was for Paul to admit the truth of the gospel at times, nevertheless he must not compromise on truth: HaShem extends genuine and lasting covenant status only to those who find favor with God through Yeshua the Holy One of Isra'el. I say painful here because surely Paul loved and cared for his fellow Israelites—even if, in spiritual blindness no doubt, they rejected the Promised Messiah spoken about in their very Scriptures. Paul may have had harsh words for the Influencers but that doesn't mean he counted them among his enemies. To be sure, he must've included them among those whom he spoke about when he coined his famous words from Romans 9:3 above.

We could stand to learn a valuable lesson from Paul's feelings about those fellow Jews who were constantly at odds with his theology. They may have thought he was an enemy of Isra'el and ultimately of God, but he regarded them as worthy of genuine concern and prayer nevertheless. Indeed, Paul is going to remind us as also as the “Isra'el of God” that our war is not *“against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”* (Eph. 6:12, KJV).

We see that those whom Paul extends his blessing to in 6:15 are the genuine faithful remnant, called out from among both Jews and Gentiles to bear the name of Yeshua the True Messiah, for the purpose of bringing glory to God's Name and honor to his Kingdom as it is represented here on earth. They are those who have crucified the flesh with its old passions and volitions, and walk not by ethnic identity and Torah social status, but by the power of the Ruach HaKodesh and the Torah written on the heart. This is the Isra'el of God. This is whom Paul identifies with, and for whom he poured his heart out to in this great letter to the Galatians.

Therefore, in the mystery of ecclesiology, we must understand by now that Isra'el exists on two levels simultaneously: Isra'el according to the flesh and Isra'el according to the Spirit. Isra'el according to the flesh has been promised temporal, this-world blessings if she will remain faithful to God and obedient to the written Torah given at Sinai. Isra'el according to the Spirit has been promised eternal, world-to-come blessings if she will remain faithful to God and obedient to the Living Torah—Yeshua the Messiah. The two Isra'els are not necessarily mutually exclusive; indeed God loves Greater Isra'el as well as Remnant Isra'el—which actually exists within Greater Isra'el. But they do represent two biblical teachings of righteousness that are not necessarily equal to one another: One earthly and one heavenly, one temporal and one eternal. It is not a bad thing to

go from being a “stone-cold pagan” worshipping idols to becoming an Isra'elite according to the flesh who pursues God and his Torah. After all, that is indeed a step in the right direction, correct? Paul would have us to understand that one need not even convert to Jewish status in order to get oriented in the right direction. Just set your eyes on the Cross of Calvary and you will find “joy unspeakable and full of glory!”<sup>99</sup>

And yet, those who choose to associate with Isra'el according to the flesh without also appropriating genuine faith in the Quintessential Israelite from Natzeret will find that their this-world blessings will end when life expires for them, and it may not end up being God who'll be waiting for them on the other side of the grave (if you catch my drift). Only those who have invested in the world-to-come blessings via genuine faith in Mashiach will be able to enjoy blessings both in this world and in the world to come!

Which “Isra'el of God” do *you* want to belong to?

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<sup>99</sup> 1 Peter 1:8, KJV.