

WHAT DOES THE TERM "WORKS OF THE LAW" MEAN?

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WHAT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY TEACHES

Does the term “works of the law” as translated in most English Bibles mean that the “law of Moses” (which should be correctly translated as the “Torah [instructions or precepts] of Yahweh”) was abrogated, nullified or done away with in part or in whole and therefore is partially or totally irrelevant (depending on one's theology) to a “New Covenant” believer in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah?

Many Christians have the notion that Messianics (those returning to the Hebraic/Jewish roots of the Christian faith) are returning to or going back under the “works of the law” in order to procure and keep salvation. They believe that the “Old Covenant,” “Mosaic system” was based on a works-based salvation model (properly referred to as *legalism*) from which Yeshua and the Apostle Paul came to free “New Covenant” believers, so why would anyone want to return to that?

Most Christians who raise the objection to Messianics that they are “returning to the works of the law” would be hard-pressed to correctly define the term *works of the law* itself which they are throwing out as a sort of verbal arrow or pejorative epithet. Furthermore, most would not be able to cite where in Scripture this term is found and who used it and the Scriptural context in which it was used. In fact, it is probably safe to say that most who use this term as a verbal assault don't even care to know where in Scripture it is found, who said it, how and why it was used and what it means. They just *feel* that the Messianic is wrong, that the “Old Covenant” and its “laws” are negative, against us, and are passé, and therefore their rejection is a knee-jerk one. Often they are simply using a buzz-word or cliché that they have picked up during their tenure as a Christian being exposed to antinomian (anti-Torah) theological rhetoric. Therefore, as a *feeling-based* reaction their objection is not based in logic or a rational, which is a function of the cognitive or reasoning faculties of the mind. Therefore, they are not able to give a reasoned explanation or defence for why they believe as they do. I have personally witnessed this scenario play itself out (sadly) numerous times.

WHERE IN SCRIPTURE IS THE TERM *WORKS OF THE LAW* FOUND?

First, let us cite everywhere in the Renewed Covenant (NT) Scriptures the term *works of the law* is used:

- Rom. 3:27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what **law? of works?** Nay: but by the law of faith.
- Rom. 9:32 Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the **works of the law**. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone;
- Gal. 2:16 Knowing that a man is not justified by the **works of the law**, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the **works of the law**: for by the **works of the law** shall no flesh be justified.
- Gal. 3:2 This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the **works of the law, or** by the hearing of faith?
- Gal. 3:5 He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the **works of the law**, or by the hearing of faith?
- Gal. 3:10 For as many as are of the **works of the law** are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

HOW DID PAUL VIEW THE *TORAH* (“LAW”)?

In all of these cases the Apostle Paul is the author. Before we proceed, let's establish Paul's predisposition with regard to “the law,” hereafter correctly referred to by the Hebrew term *Torah*. Was he a proponent or opponent of it? Several Scriptural quotations from his own pen should suffice:

- Rom. 7:12 Wherefore the law [Torah] is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.
- Rom. 7:14 For we know that the law [Torah] is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.
- Rom. 7:22 For I delight in the law [Torah] of God after the inward man...
- Rom. 6:1-2 1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin [i.e., violation of the laws/Torah of Yahweh, see 1 Jn. 3:4], that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?
- Rom. 3: 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. (Romans was written in about A.D. 56)
- 1 Tim. 1:8 But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully...(First Timothy was written just before Paul's martyrdom in about A.D. 66)
- Gal. 2:17 But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners [i.e., violators of the law/Torah], is therefore Christ the minister of sin [lawlessness/Torahlessness]? God forbid. (Galatians was written from A.D. 55 to 56)

Toward the end of Paul's life and ministry when, according to Christian theology, Paul was supposed to have already liberated the first-century believers from the “shackles and bondage” of the Torah we read in Acts the following:

- Acts 20:20-24 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe [in Yeshua the Messiah]; and they are all zealous of the law [Torah]: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. (Written in about A.D. 58 to 60)
- Acts 25: 8 While he answered for himself, Neither against the law [Torah] of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all. (Paul made this statement in a court of law about A.D. 62.)
- Acts 28:17 And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, [i.e., the Torah] yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. (Written about A.D. 63)

Though briefly stated and not exhaustively treated, hopefully the above passages will help to dispel the idea that Paul came to liberate Christians/Gentiles from any responsibility toward the Torah as given by Yahweh to Moses.

WAS PAUL BOTH *FOR* AND *AGAINST* THE *TORAH* (“LAW”)?

Now let's revisit the term *works of [the] law*. If we believe, at face value, the above-cited passages, can there be any doubt that Paul was consistent in his theology? He did not keep Torah and speak positively toward it, and

all at the same time fail to live it and teach against it. Either he kept it or he didn't. Either he taught that it was valid or he did not. He did not waffle back and forth between Torah obedience and Torahlessness. Quite to the contrary, he warned that in the last days spiritual delusion would come upon the saints of Yahweh, that they would fall away from the truth of Scripture (i.e., Torah literally meaning *Yahweh's instructions, teachings, precepts in righteousness*) and turn to a Torahless gospel message which he refers to as the “mystery of iniquity [the Greek word is *anomia* which means *without Torah*]” which would be championed by the very man of sin himself (1 Thes. 2:1-12).

IT'S ABOUT JUSTIFICATION

In every instance where Paul uses the term *works of [the] law* in his writings (Rom. 3:27; 9:32; Gal. 2:16; 3:2; 3:5; 3:10) he is discussing how one is justified or how one's sins are remitted or how one is declared righteous by Yahweh (i.e. saved).

What is the scriptural definition of *justification*? It is the process by which sinful humans beings are made acceptable to a holy Elohim. Justification is by grace unlike all the other religions of the world which are works based (Rom. 3:24). Elohim extends the grace, and it is man's responsibility to exercise believing faith and receive it. It is not based on man's works, and he can neither earn it nor keep it through is own human efforts (Eph. 2:8-10).

Paul says that through Yeshua Elohim is reconciling the world to himself not imputing their sins (violation of Torah) to them (2 Cor. 5:19). This reconciling covers all our past sins (Rom. 3:25) which we have confessed, repented of and turned away from (Ps. 32:5; Prov. 28:13; 1 Jn. 1:9).

When Elohim justifies, he charges the sin of man to Yeshua, the Savior and Redeemer (2 Cor. 5:21). Justification is based on the righteous, Torah-obedient life of Yeshua and is a free gift to men and results in eternal life (Rom. 3:21).

Justification saves us from the wrath of Elohim (Rom. 5:9) against sin (violation of Torah - 1 Jn. 3:4) and results in our being at peace with him (Rom. 5:1) and we now have access to his grace (Rom. 5:2).

The word *justify* according to *Websters* means “to show to be just, right; to free from blame or guilt.”

HOW ARE WE JUSTIFIED? THROUGH GRACE AND FAITH OR THROUGH OUR WORKS? AN ANALYSIS OF THE SCRIPTURES WHERE WORKS OF [THE] LAW IS USED:

Now that we see what the Scriptural definition of *justification is* let's see how Paul used this idea with regard to the term *works of [the] law*.

In **Romans 3:22**, the first place the term is used, we see that justification is by faith in Yeshua the Messiah and his shed blood (v. 25) and that we are freely justified and redeemed from our sinful past by the grace of Yahweh (v. 24), not through our own works of righteousness and fastidious obedience to a legal code of do's and dont's (v. 27). We are justified by faith and faith alone (v. 30). Paul succinctly and pointedly makes the point in Romans 3:21-30 that one is justified by faith and not by works, but such justification does not nullify or invalidate Torah (the law), for he goes on to say in verse 31: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the [Torah].” Justification and Torah obedience are not mutually exclusive concepts but two separate things serving two separate purposes. They are complimentary to each other.

In **Romans 9:32** Paul carries the same theme through: that justification comes by faith and not through obedience to a set of rules (Torah or otherwise) where man is obeying Yahweh out of a mechanical, letter-of-law approach without a heart of faith and trust. The writer of Hebrews alludes to this in chapter four where he shows that the Israelites, though they had the gospel (of Torah truth) preached to them and though they obeyed the Torah, because they did not have faith, they were not able to enter into the Promised Land which is symbolic of the place of eternal rest for the believer in the Father's heavenly kingdom. (4:2,6). Their hearts were hard and they were full of doubt and unbelief (3:7-19; 4:7).

We see again and again in Scripture that Yahweh is an Elohim of grace and mercy. He reaches out in love to lost sinners while they are still in their sins, grants them grace (forgiveness and mercy), redeems them from the

curse of sin (the violation of his commandments), wipes the slate clean and gives them a fresh start, then helps them to go down a path of righteousness so that they will not fall back into the very sin that got them into the mess in the first place. He doesn't demand much from lost sinners. He doesn't demand that they obey him first before he saves or redeems them, for he knows that they are not capable of pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, so to speak. They are powerless to overcome sin in their own power. Without his helping hand to save them out of the spiritual quicksand of sins death-grip, man is doomed. Remember ancient Israel? This pattern was followed there: They were saved by the blood of the lamb from the death angel and were set free from the slavery to Egypt (a spiritual type of the world, flesh and the devil) and then they were given his laws and expected to obey them. Not given the laws and expected to obey them in order to be saved! This is what Paul is saying in these verses about *the works of the law*. One is saved by putting their trust in Yahweh's promises to save, deliver and redeem us. All we have to do is believe him, trust him, give him our hearts, and he will do the rest. Such an approach does not invalidate Torah. It didn't then, and Paul is clear that it doesn't now when he says in Romans 3:31, "God forbid!" that we void Torah through faith.

This is exactly what Paul is saying in **Galatians 2:16**. A man is not brought into right standing with Yahweh by how perfectly and legalistically he adheres to a righteous code of conduct. Rather he has to admit his own inability to obey, then cry out for help to the only one who can help and then place his trust and faith in that Person—Yeshua the Messiah, his Savior.

When we trust Him to save us, he not only saves from our past sins which had a death claim on us ("the soul that sins it shall die" [Ezek. 18:20] and "the wages of sin is death" [Rom. 6:23]), he gives us a whole new life in and through Messiah Yeshua (**Gal. 2:16**) and furthermore empowers us through the indwelling presence of his Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) to obey him. We start out in faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by works (**Gal 3:1-5**) which on our own strength we are incapable of accomplishing. This way, Yahweh gets all the glory, and not prideful man!

Abraham, like the children of Israel, as noted earlier, too was saved by faith and not by works (vv. 6-9), but his being saved thusly did not abrogate his responsibility to obey Torah. Rather it empowered him to be able to obey Torah, (Gen. 26:5) and obedience to Torah kept him from falling back into his pre-saved, sinful past and it guaranteed his future rewards (vv. 4-5; Heb. 11:8,11,16)

Paul concludes his discussion on the *works of [the] law* between **Galatians 2:16** and **3:10** (during which he uses the term six times by saying) by stating that those who are relying on their legalistic adherence to a set of do's and don't's to gain the acceptance of a perfect Elohim have actually placed themselves under a curse (3:10-11). What is that curse? It is a curse to think that our good works can gain us right standing with Yahweh Elohim. If we labor under that misconception we will end up trusting in ourselves (instead of having faith in Yahweh to save us) to deliver ourselves, and no man can save himself. We will end up dying in our sins in an unsaved condition.

Furthermore, verse 13 speaks of the *curse of the Torah*. What is this? It is the violation of Torah that brings the penalty of sin, which is death, upon us in the first place ("the wages of sin is death," and "sin is the transgression of Torah") and why we need justification and grace from our Heavenly Father. But after being redeemed from the penalty of Torah (or the curse of Torah) if we go back into Torahlessness (lawlessness), we place ourselves back under the penalty or curse of violating Torah again which is death. To walk in agreement with and obedience to Torah is salvation, blessings and life. To walk contrary to Torah is damnation, curses and death. Torah comes with built in blessings and built in curses depending on our response to Torah: obedience or disobedience. Deuteronomy 28; 32:46-47; 4:6,30).

IS WORKS OF THE LAW THE SAME AS LEGALISM?

What must be seen from the above study is Paul was not speaking out against the Torah, but against *legalism*. "*Legalism* is the attempt to earn, merit, or keep one's salvation through obedience to [Torah]. However, one problem that Sha'ul [Paul] faced was that here were not sufficient words in his native Hebrew, nor his Greek, express *legalism*. Instead, he had to use certain phrases which, interpreted incorrectly, could easily lead one to believe that he was against the Torah" (*The Ha Yesod Student Manual*, by First Fruits of Zion, p. 10.30).

LAW VERSUS THE LAW

To additionally corroborate the premise that we have proffered that Paul, in using the term *works of [the] law* to express the idea of legalism and not to invalidate the Torah, let's note another point that escapes many who are attempting to excise Torah obedience from the believer's life. In every instance where the term *works of [the] law* is used in the Renewed Covenant (NT) the definite article *the* is not to be found in the original Greek. This can be easily verified by checking a Greek Interlinear which shows the Greek language with the English translation underneath the Greek text. In our English Bible's, the word *the* has been added. Does this change the meaning? Yes! Ask yourself what the difference in meaning, in a Scriptural context is between the term *law* and *the law*? It is the same difference between the term *car* and *the car*. The first is indefinite and is speaking about any law or car out there, while the second is definite and is referring to a specific law or car.

As we have asserted above, Paul is taking a stand against any form of legalism (or a man-made system of works) of which performance-based acceptance is the core belief. So the phrase *works of the law* should be properly translated in your Bibles as *works of law*. For example, Galatians 2:16 should read “Knowing that a man is not justified by the **works of law**, but by the faith of [Yeshua haMashiach], even we have believed in [Yeshua haMashiach], that we might be justified by the faith of [Mashiach], and not by the **works of law**: for by the **works of law** shall no flesh be justified.” Again, we reiterate that Paul is not coming against Torah specifically as some would have us to believe, but against any form of legalistic, works-based system man might use to be justified before Yahweh.

The Torah then was not in question. Our constant need in the flesh to feel good about ourselves by believing that we have earned righteousness is what is in question! Any time the Torah of God is reduced to a system of works, what we have is not longer Torah, but a man-made system of works—law. Man will always try to reduce God's Words to laws to be obeyed instead of Words of Life—what they really are (*Take Hold* by Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz, p. 221)

David Stern, the translator of the *Complete Jewish Bible*, addresses this same thing in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Stern says about Paul's usage of the term *works of [the] law* that it “means not deeds done in virtue of following the Torah in the way God 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 faith, without having to trust God, without having love for God and man, and without being empowered by the Holy Spirit” (Stern's comment on Gal. 2:16, p. 537). He goes on to explain why in his translation of the “New Testament” he substitutes the phrase *legalistic observance of Torah commands* for *works of [the] law*. To wit, let's see how he translates Galatians 2:16: “Even so, we have come to realize that a person is not declared righteous by God on the ground of his legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, but through the Messiah Yeshua's trusting faithfulness. Therefore, we too have put our trust in Messiah Yeshua and become faithful to him, in order that we might be declared righteous on the ground of Messiah's trusting faithfulness and not on the ground of our legalistic observance of *Torah* commands. For on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, no one will be declared righteous” (*Complete Jewish Bible*).