

What's Bothering Paul?

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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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[A]nyone with a casual knowledge of the Apostle Paul (also known as Saul) and his writings on the Law of Moses would have to conclude that he is either the champion of “authentic Christian faith and liberty in Christ” or that he is a defender of Messianic Torah-based living, two ideals that seemingly oppose one another in these theologically-charged days in which we live. Which statement would you regard as more accurate?

A) Paul established historic Christianity on the freedom grounded in Jesus Christ, the only one to ever fulfill the Law of Moses, thus setting all believers free from any previous obligations to the old covenant and its ceremonies.

B) Paul continued to establish and teach the Torah of Moshe as a viable and foundational way of life for Jews who embrace Messiah, as well as for Gentiles grafted into Isra’el via the exact same faith in the very same Messiah.

With confusion like this rampant in the Body of Messiah, how are we to uncover truth?

In a nutshell, what I attempt to get across to my audience is the idea that we as the historic church have miscast Paul and his 1st century Judaisms. Basically, I am challenging 1500+ years of church history to show that Paul did not have any problem with Torah for the gentiles per se (circumcision included). Rather, he was on a mission to correct the mistaken notion that only Jews could be covenant members. This is an important opening

hypothesis for the simple fact that for the most part, standard Christian theology teaches that the problem plaguing the Judaisms of the 1st century (as well as today) can be neatly labeled “merit theology” or “legalism.” What exactly is legalism, and how has historic Christianity defined it? Theopedia.com states,

Legalism, in Christianity, is a term referring to an improper fixation on law or codes of conduct for a person to merit or obtain salvation, blessing from God, or fellowship with God, with an attendant misunderstanding of the grace of God.

Simply put, legalism is belief that obedience to the law or a set of rules is the pre-eminent principle of redemption and/or favor with God. Its opposite extreme is antinomianism, which claims that moral laws are not binding on Christian believers.[1]

In such a caricature, Judaism’s preoccupation with the Torah—this would by default include historic and modern Messianic Judaism—is seen as a mere system of works-based salvation and justification, a theology rightly condemned by church father Martin Luther. How are we the emerging Torah communities of the 21st century to answer this scathing accusation? In the eyes of the mainstream Christianities of today I imagine they might think to inform we Messianics,

“Is it not obvious that they, the “Messianics,” are also falling headlong into a legalistic preoccupation with Torah, just like the Judaism of Paul’s day and just like the Judaism of today?”

“They claim faith in Jesus and that they only follow after Moses in order to live “sanctified” lives, walking the way Jesus walked because they believe that such is the Father’s will, but their insistence that we Christians too follow after Moses proves their true legalistic tendencies!”

“Don’t the Messianics know that Paul taught that we are not under the law but under grace? Don’t you Messianics understand that circumcision is bondage, making Christ of none effect? Paul also stated that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Christ alone!”

“Our New Testament clearly proves beyond doubt that Christ nailed the law to the cross, and that we as Christians are not to be judged for things like Sabbaths, New Moons, or Festivals. Jesus declared all foods cleansed; Peter was shown not to call that which God cleansed unclean, and one man may now choose Sabbath while another chooses Sunday—everyone should be fully convinced in his own mind!”

With sentiments such as the above-mentioned examples coming from mainstream Christianity, many issued from the friends, family members, and well-respected pastors and clergy of their heritage religions, how are the emerging Torah communities to make sense of the seemingly contradictory tug within their hearts to indeed follow after “the Ancient Paths?” Many well-meaning, Hebraic-minded believers turn to David H. Stern and the Complete Jewish Bible or the Jewish New Testament Commentary for answers. Here is how David Stern defines legalism:

“It becomes clear in what follows that the particular bad news to which the Galatians had been exposed is legalism. Legalism I define as the false principle that God grants acceptance to people, considers them righteous and worthy of being in his presence, on the ground of their obedience to a set of rules, apart from putting their trust in God, relying on him, loving him, and accepting his love for them.”[2]

As much respect as I have for Stern (I use his translation nearly exclusively in every one of my commentaries to

the Torah portions!) I simply cannot agree with his historic understanding of the “legalism” plaguing the 1st century Judaisms. Theologically, Stern—along with mainstream Christianity—is correct in asserting that mere obedience to a set of “dos” and “don’ts” will not merit an individual righteousness, forensic or behavioral. This is important to keep in mind as we Messianics enter into dialogue with our well-meaning Christian friends and family members as to why we follow after Torah now that we have come to believe in Jesus for our personal salvation. So, if I, the author of this commentary, do not believe that David Stern’s translation or commentary provides the historically correct answer as to how to navigate through Rav Sha’ul’s letters, what hermeneutic am I suggesting that we Messianics adopt? Let us turn to the book of Acts first to unravel this theological mystery.

The situation in Acts is a delicate one to be sure. If the reader is not aware of the technical discussions taking place, he will not understand the problem, and he will certainly misunderstand the solutions presented by the key players. The situation in Acts seems to mirror the situation facing the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys to Galatia. He who seizes the key to understanding Paul seizes the key to understanding Acts, and more importantly, the Jerusalem Council. I will touch more on Paul after taking about the book of Acts first.

Acts

The beginning of the sect called The Way is chronicled in the book of Acts. Obviously there have been many gentiles who have joined the people of Isra’el throughout her history, beginning with the exodus from Egypt. But the coming of Yeshua, the promised Messiah, had initiated the era promised by the prophets in which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In fact, the book of Acts is the history of how Yeshua’s command to make disciples of all the nations was actually carried out.

Peter’s Acts 10 Vision and the Drawing-In of the Gentiles

Peter understood the purpose of the vision through the test of authority it required of him. God’s Torah stood above that of the Sages. When it came to the gentiles, Peter was to follow God’s Written Torah, not the halakhah of the rabbis (or more accurately, “proto-rabbis”). As noted above, Peter got the message! He passed this test as well. He did not hesitate to go to the house of Cornelius, and he knew that he was free to eat (kosher food of course) with these covenant members without thinking that he would be engaging in ritual impurity. The rabbinic wall that had separated Jew and gentile had been abolished in the death of Messiah. To suppose that this incident in chapter 10 of Acts abrogates relaxation of explicit Torah commands, especially as it pertains to dietary restrictions is to miss the entire thrust of the vision! To relax the Torah as pertains to Jews and gentiles in Christ does not advance the genuine gospel message one iota.

The Giving of the Ruach to the Gentiles

Peter recognized beyond doubt that God had brought these gentiles into the covenant, yet he had done so without the ceremony of the proselyte. If they were to be circumcised later, this would be a matter of obedience. Circumcision for non-Jews (read in the 1st century as becoming Jewish) was not a means of entering the covenant. Genuine entry had been accomplished entirely by their faith in the risen Messiah. Like Abraham, they were reckoned as righteous while still uncircumcised, that is (from the rabbinic perspective) while non-Jews.

Summary: Acts 15 – The Jerusalem Council

The conclusion of the council, then, was that gentiles did not need to become proselytes (the term “circumcision” being shorthand for “conversion to Judaism”) in order to enjoy full covenant status in Isra’el, to include Torah participation. Indeed, as Peter had first testified in the home of Cornelius, the inclusion of the gentiles was by the grace of God, not by means of a man-made ceremony. In order to assure their acceptance into the newly emerging Messianic Communities, the gentiles were to make a decisive break with the pagan temple and its idolatry, which would involve ridding themselves of any of the pagan customs that marked that idolatrous form of worship (remember, throughout the book of Acts the gentiles were already to be found in the mainstream Jewish

synagogues as “potential converts to normative Judaism”). The “yoke that neither we nor our fathers could bear” most certainly is NOT HaShem’s gracious Torah; it is a man-made system of “righteous behavior” as regulated by the prevailing halakhah of that day. I say again, the Judaisms of that day were NOT advocating “works-based salvation,” as articulated by the current Church teachers of today. Rather, a “covenantal nomism” (more on this term below) for all who would be counted as righteous in the community of Isra’el was the standard party line expected to be towed by every “good Jew.”

The bringing near of the Gentile believers was not effected through negating the Torah, but through overcoming the rabbinic teaching that required gentiles to “become Jews” through becoming proselytes in order to be received into the covenant people of Isra’el. The gospel message of the Apostles proclaimed that, like Abraham of old, covenant membership was based upon faith, not upon the flesh (ethnic status).

“So, what was really bothering Paul?”

Did the possibility of 1st century gentiles following after the Torah that was historically given to Isra’el pose a problem for Paul? Did the possibility of gentiles following after a “Jewish Messiah” pose a problem for Paul? Did the possibility of gentiles being forgiven of their sins by this Jewish Messiah pose a problem for Paul? The answer to all of all these questions is a resounding “NO!” Paul had no problem with gentiles embracing Torah. Paul had no problem with gentiles following after Yeshua. Paul had no problem with Yeshua forgiving the sins of the gentiles. What Paul had a problem with was the 1st century theology surrounding “covenantal nomism” and “ethnocentric Jewish exclusivism.” “What the heck do those fancy terms mean,” you may ask.

Allow me to elaborate. 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.

E.P. Sanders is known for coining the term “covenantal nomism”. This term is essential to the New Perspective on Paul (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”.

So let us turn now from my Galatians commentary back to our current teaching here and summarize what we have learned thus far about Paul...

Power Points:

- What Sha’ul is really talking about when he employs the Greek phrase “ergon nomos”, translated most often as “deeds of Law” is in actuality a technical phrase that the Judaisms 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 1st 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Conclusions:

- God is the God of both Jews and gentiles! One need not change his station in life before God can accept him. 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! Man cannot add to that which God perfects. A conversion to Judaism (a.k.a. circumcision), in Sha’ul’s mind, added nothing to those wishing to be counted as true Israelites in the Torah Community. 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.
- Failure to continue in genuine trusting faithfulness for either Jew or Gentile participants invited God to

place them in a position that Sha'ul called "broken off". In other words, natural branches (Jews) could be broken off because of lack of trust, and grafted-in branches (gentiles) could also be broken off due to lack of trust (read Romans chapter 11)! Far from purporting that some "ethnic-driven" halakhah secured one's place in the 'olam haba (Age to Come), the native born Jew, the convert Jew, and the good old fashioned gentiles all faced the same penalty for remorseless lack of faith: spiritual death. 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.

The "mystery of the Gospel" is that Isra'el is actually comprised of both Jews and gentiles! To be grafted into the family of God is to join oneself to a Jewish Olive Tree without having to succumb to any kind of man-made conversion policy whatsoever! To this end, one becomes submissive to the instructions and righteousness of God, and inherits the blessings of God, whether he is of Gentile or Jewish stock!

Solution: Grafted Into Isra'el

- Through the efficacious ministry of the Messiah Yeshua, Gentile believers are covenant-bound to 'Father Abraham's Olive Tree'—Isra'el—thereby making them fellow citizens and full-participants with the Commonwealth of Isra'el ([Eph. 2](#) ) , thus granting them the divine privilege of following the whole of the Torah.
- We believe that YHVH has written this very same Torah upon the hearts of those, Jews and gentiles, who have placed their trusting faithfulness in Yeshua ([Jer. 31:31-34](#)  ; [Heb. 8:7-12](#) ).
- We believe that this same Torah is a foundational revelation of the righteousness of HaShem and serves as a description (along with the rest of the Scriptures) of the lifestyle of the Redeemed Community ([James 1:16-27](#) ).
- Furthermore, 'grafted in' bespeaks of our affirmation to our true identity as a people—Jew and Gentile—that is securely rooted in the Finished Work of Yeshua HaMashiach.

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[1] <http://www.theopedia.com/Legalism>

[2] David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 521.

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