

Paul, Opposed or Not Opposed to the Torah (Law)

I am having difficulty understanding the writings of the Apostle Paul. In my spirit, I believe his letters to be inspired of the Holy One, but in reading them I sense that they might be opposed to Torah. Can you help me with this?

There are a variety of important things that any reader of Paul's letters needs to keep in mind, the foremost being that Paul's letters were written to ancient groups of Believers in the First Century. When Twenty-First Century readers encounter the Pauline Epistles, we are definitely reading *someone else's mail*. Our responsibility, as with any text of Scripture, is to do our best to place ourselves into the original circumstances and setting of a letter's audience, interpret the letter for what it meant to the audience, and then seek a reasonable application for modern times. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those who have difficulty with Paul's letters, either Messianic or Christian, do not keep this in mind. They think that Paul writes directly to them in the Twenty-First Century, almost ignoring how every one of his letters bears the title of its *specific recipients*.

A wide number of today's Messianic Believers tend to have a love-hate relationship with the Apostle Paul. On the one hand, the many passages in Paul's letters that laud the love of God demonstrated via the Messiah Yeshua, and the service that Believers should have one for another, are greatly appreciated. On the other hand, passages in Paul's letters that appear to be negative toward the Torah or Law of Moses are either ignored, or they tend to be interpreted along some traditional Christian (typically dispensationalist) lines.

Few of today's Messianic Believers have really expelled significant efforts to dig beyond an English translation of Paul's letters, much less into their background and joining into conversations in contemporary Biblical Studies. The widely-known controversy over Romans 10:4, which is commonly rendered with "Christ is the end of the law" (NASU), although *telos* (τέλος) can also mean "aim," "purpose," or "goal" (Common English Bible), or at least "culmination" (TNIV), is something that can be overlooked.¹ If something like this can be overlooked, then more complicated issues like how to render *dogma* (δόγμα) in Ephesians 2:15,² or *exesti* (ἔξειστί) in 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23,³ can catch people completely off guard. Issues like what "under the law" means, as either having to obey the Mosaic Torah or born again Believers not standing under the condemnation of the Torah upon Law-breakers, are often not even probed or considered.⁴

There are some commonly encountered approaches seen regarding the letters of the Apostle Paul in the broad Messianic movement. Some of these are a bit disturbing, whereas others of these are representative of a particular theological vantage point:

- **View #1:** "Paul is a false apostle!" Paul's writings are against Torah and they should not be considered Scripture.
- **View #2:** "I don't know what to do with Paul." Paul's writings are somehow inspired Scripture of the Holy One, but they are just too difficult to interpret or handle. Paul's approach to the Torah is too complicated for us to really understand.

¹ Consult the FAQ, "Romans 10:4."

² Consult the FAQ, "Ephesians 2:14-15."

³ Consult the FAQ entries, "1 Corinthians 6:12" and "1 Corinthians 10:23."

⁴ Consult the author's articles "What Does 'Under the Law' Really Mean?" (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*) and "What Does 'Under the Law' Really Mean?—A Further Study" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

- **View #3:** “Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles.” Paul’s words about the Torah represent a bilateral ecclesiology of Israel and the Church. His letters about Torah speak of Gentiles in the Christian Church not having to follow it, and were not written to Jews who are to keep it. While appearing to be negative, Paul does not think that Gentiles have to follow Torah, as that would erase or blur Jewish and Gentile distinction.
- **View #4:** “Paul’s letters have transmission and background issues to be carefully considered.” The issue of Paul and the Law is a complicated debate in theological studies. In the Lutheran tradition, Paul is believed to place God’s Law and God’s grace at odds with one another. In the Calvinist and Wesleyan traditions, though, Paul is believed to always uphold God’s moral Law as a standard of Christian holiness, to be followed by all. Messianic Believers need to appreciate approaches like that of Calvinism and Wesleyanism, and further investigate the text of the Pauline corpus for its transmission from Greek into English, and potential First Century background issues.

View #4, “*Paul’s letters have transmission and background issues to be carefully considered,*” is definitely how a ministry like Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics has chosen to handle and interpret Paul’s letters. We do not consider the Apostle Paul to be anti-Torah by any means, but there should also be no question that Paul, as well as other figures like James, Peter, and John—all believe that faith in Yeshua and what He has accomplished by His sacrifice for sinful humanity, are more important than the Torah of Moses. The Apostolic Scriptures are absolutely opposed to a principle of Torah-keeping for salvation and a legalistic misuse of the Torah. Consistent with the cries of Ancient Israel’s Prophets, the Apostolic Scriptures also tend to be stridently focused on the moral and ethical issues addressed by Moses’ Teaching, as Yeshua Himself directed His followers to focus on “the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). This does not mean that things like Sabbath-keeping or kosher eating were unimportant,⁵ just that the focus of teaching we see in the Apostolic Scriptures seems to be more targeted toward basic human behavioral issues. In terms of the early non-Jewish Believers, who often came from the lower classes, it should not be difficult to understand why the Apostles stridently focused on them repenting from gross sins such as idolatry or sexual immorality.⁶

Like all texts of the Apostolic Scriptures, it would go too far for one to think that the issue of Torah-keeping is the only issue addressed by the Pauline Epistles. Each one of Paul’s letters is addressed to a particular ancient audience or person, and likely to issue specific instruction or admonitions for circumstances faced by such audiences or persons. In much of today’s Messianic movement, there tends to not be a wide enough comprehension for the actual identity of the audience of Paul’s letters, and the basic situation(s) being addressed. If this is done, then readers will see that Paul is not at all anti-Torah.

The following is a brief summary of each of the Pauline letters, listed in their canonical order. This should be useful for providing you with some basic guidelines when approaching Paul’s letters as a Messianic Believer:

Romans: This letter was largely written to tell the Roman Believers that Paul was coming their way, as he intended to travel all the way to Spain. Not having encountered these Believers before, Paul lays out much of his teaching style and approach in the form of various vignettes. As he does this, he must address the circumstances which have arisen from the Roman Jews having been expelled from Rome by the Edict of Claudius, but were now returning. This created a power struggle between the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, the latter not being forced to leave. Romans emphasizes how the non-Jewish Believers rely more on the Jewish Believers than they realize, and how all are to respect one another given the universal realities of human sin. Paul lays out in salvation historical terms how all Israel is to be restored, and the place of the nations in such a restoration.

1 Corinthians: This letter was composed to address an intensely complicated series of circumstances, for one of the most dysfunctional groups of First Century Messiah followers. The Corinthian Believers had been booted out of the local synagogue, they were factionalized, and they were known by various slogans (i.e., “everything is permissible for me”). Paul had to address an entire series of problems faced by the Corinthians, including fornication, eating meat sacrificed to idols, and disorderly conduct in the assembly. It is detectable within

⁵ Consult the *Messianic Sabbath Helper* and *Messianic Kosher Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁶ Consult the author’s commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*.

Paul's letter that he quotes various Corinthian slogans, and refutes them or shows them to be significantly problematic. The doctrine of resurrection is significantly expounded upon as a core tenet of Messianic faith.

2 Corinthians: This letter was a follow up to various reports that Paul had received about the spiritual progress of the Corinthians. While the Corinthians still had problems yet to be resolved, they had taken much of the Apostle's admonishment to them seriously, and were improving in their behavior.

Galatians: This letter was written to address how the non-Jewish Believers in Galatia had been led astray by outside Influencers (or "Judaizers") who were forcing them to go through ritual proselyte circumcision to Judaism, to really be members of God's people. The "works of law" spoken against in this letter likely had to do less with general obedience to God's Torah, and more to do with ancient *halachah* or how the Torah was followed by an ancient Jewish sect. In Galatians, Paul places the emphasis of membership in God's covenant people on faith in Yeshua and what He has achieved via His sacrifice, not how human works associated with the Torah are to achieve redemption and such membership.

Ephesians: This letter was a general epistle written to various assemblies of Messiah followers in Asia Minor. Paul expresses how the great work of Yeshua the Messiah has reconciled Jewish and non-Jewish Believers together as "one new humanity" in the Commonwealth of Israel. Their unity is to be a reflection of the greater work to come in salvation history, and is to be modeled by Believers' good conduct and service to one another, via employment of their unique spiritual gifts in the Lord. This letter was likely written at the same time as Colossians, perhaps expanding various themes seen in Colossians.

Philippians: This letter was written to a group of Paul's dear friends in Philippi, as he languished in a Roman prison, not quite knowing what was yet to happen. Unlike some of Paul's other letters, there are no major negative rebukes issued to this audience, as the words are largely those of great appreciation to fellow Believers. Paul undoubtedly has lived a life with Yeshua the Messiah at its very center, as who He is and what He has accomplished make all human achievements—Jewish, Greek, or Roman—utterly meaningless.

Colossians: This letter was written to address a congregation that Paul had never before seen in person, but had grown up in Colossae as a result of his preaching in Ephesus. The people were largely influenced by a false teaching that was rooted within a local Judaism that itself had been infected by the local paganism and mystery cults (perhaps to be described as proto-Gnostic). This false teaching had advocated that Yeshua the Messiah was only one of various intermediary forces, and not really that Divine, and also pushed various ascetic rituals and practices like intense fasting. The false teaching had an emphasis on various Torah practices, but such Torah practices were misused as they were associated with various ungodly emphases.

1 Thessalonians: This letter was largely written to provide some reassurances to the Thessalonians, whom Paul had to abruptly leave because of pressure enforced upon him by the local Jewish leaders because of his preaching the gospel. The Thessalonians were experiencing persecution, and Paul gave them some important instruction about the return of the Messiah and future resurrection of the dead.

2 Thessalonians: This second letter was written to the Thessalonians shortly after the first letter, because of a misunderstanding of various remarks made about the end-times. The Thessalonians thought the Messiah was imminently coming, probably due to some agitators who had entered in among them, and so Paul must assure them how various events must precede the return of Yeshua.

1 Timothy: This first letter to Timothy was composed as Timothy was given the task by Paul of overseeing various assemblies in the vicinity of Ephesus. A false teaching had arisen in Ephesus with inappropriate emphases from the Torah, which had widely overlooked the many key teachings of the Law on proper and upstanding living. Timothy also had to see that proper leaders were raised up among the Ephesians, and see that the women in Ephesus were correctly trained and dignified in their activities.

2 Timothy: This second letter to Timothy includes more details about the false teaching that had arisen in Ephesus, which apparently advocated that the general resurrection had already taken place. More than anything else, 2 Timothy represents a kind of "last will and testament" of the Apostle Paul, in Roman imprisonment once again, as he knows he is soon to die and meet the Lord Yeshua.

Titus: This letter was written to address the unique service that Titus performed for Paul, helping to get the Messiah followers on the island of Crete established in the Lord. There are some overlaps between the Cretan

false teaching, and the Ephesian false teaching faced by Timothy, likely detectable. Titus seemingly had to face a group of opportunistic Jewish people who were misusing the Torah, and negatively influencing the Cretan Believers.

Philemon: This letter was written to address the circumstances by which the runaway slave Onesimus encountered Paul in Rome, and how he came to faith in Yeshua as a result. Paul writes this letter to Philemon, a Believer in either Colossae or the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor, entreating him to be kind and generous to Onesimus. Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians.

The Apostle Paul is not anti-Torah, in that he is opposed to the Law of Moses as a standard to be followed by all of God's people. He makes it clear in Romans 8:4, for example, "that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit," a certain reference to the New Covenant promise to supernaturally transcribe the Torah onto the hearts and minds of the redeemed (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).⁷ Torah-keeping is to definitely come via the supernatural compulsion of God's Spirit on those who are in Messiah.⁸ Yet, Paul is also clear that who Yeshua is as the Savior is superior to the Torah, as he says in Philippians 3:9 that "[I] may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Messiah [or, *the* faithfulness of Messiah]⁹, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith."

It is irresponsible for any of today's Messianics to claim that the Apostle Paul is anti-Torah, when most frequently those who make such a conclusion have not conducted a targeted examination of the passages they struggle with, including the Greek source text and potential historical and background issues.

Our ministry has released a wide array of materials that can aid you in your understanding of the Pauline Epistles, including the general book *The New Testament Validates Torah*, various "Message of..." articles, the relevant entries in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*, and specific volumes of the *Practical Messianic* commentary series.

⁷ Consult the author's article "What is the New Covenant?" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

⁸ It may be useful for you to review the FAQ, "Galatians 5:2-3," which examines the issue of whether or not Jewish people are "obligated" to keep the Torah, and non-Jewish people are not "obligated."

⁹ Grk. *dia pisteōs Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ).