

Works of the Law

I have heard a teaching which stated that the term “works of the Law” actually refers to Rabbinical extra-Biblical commandments? Is there any substantiation for this?

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The Apostle Paul’s usage of the term “works of law” three times in Galatians 2:16 is the first usage of *ergōn nomou* (ἐργων νόμου) in the Apostolic Scriptures. “Works of law” is used a total of six times in Galatians (2:16; 3:2, 5, 10), and is only used elsewhere in his letter to the Romans (3:20, 28). Generally speaking, common Christian interpretations of this phrase have advocated that *ergōn nomou* or “works of law” means “observing the law” (NIV), meaning some kind of general Torah observance. It has only been in recent days with the proposals made by the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) in theological studies, that *ergōn nomou* takes on something different, or more specific, than just rote observance of the Mosaic Law. These propositions have significantly aided Messianic understanding of Paul’s words,¹ as Paul is seen to be criticizing a sectarian observance of the Torah that impedes God’s mission of blessing all nations (Genesis 12:2; Galatians 3:8-9), rather than general observance of the Torah itself.

Of course, there is considerable discussion as to whether or not when Paul uses *ergōn nomou* he is really connecting it to some of the ideas present in *ma’asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה) in 4QMMT from the Dead Sea Scrolls.² After defining some of the major rules of the Qumran community, this document ends with the statement,

“Now we have written to you some of the works of the Law [Heb. *miqsat ma’asei ha-Torah*, התורה מעשי מִקְצַת], those which we determined would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen [that] you possess insight and knowledge of the Law” (4Q399).³

Many, acknowledging a connection between *ergōn nomou* and *ma’asei haTorah*, conclude that the “works of law” of which Paul speaks are “the boundary markers that clearly distinguished Jews from their neighbors—circumcision, the sabbath, and the purity laws” (EDB).⁴ There are, however, Christian theologians who are resistant to “works of law” having any technical reference to either boundary markers, or to the *halachah* of a sectarian Jewish community. Those who are resistant are often so because it requires one to take a more moderate view of the Torah in Pauline literature. Among these, T.R. Schreiner argues, “the expression ‘works’ (*erga*) in Paul refers to ‘deeds that are performed,’ and thus ‘works of Law’ signifies the ‘deeds’ or ‘actions’ demanded by the Mosaic Law.”⁵

It would certainly be irresponsible for readers to think that any time Paul uses the term “works” he is speaking of “works of law.”⁶ He most often uses “works” as comparable to “deeds.” Likewise, when Paul uses “works of law” or *ergōn nomou*, the Torah is somehow involved. The question is whether these “works of law” are

¹ Cf. Hegg, *Galatians*, 11.

² Wise, Abegg, and Cook, pp 358-364; Vermes, pp 220-228.

³ *Ibid*, 364.

⁴ James W. Thompson, “works,” in *EDB*, 1387.

⁵ T.R. Schreiner, “works of the law,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 977.

⁶ Other instances in his letters where Paul uses the term “works” or “deeds” (Grk. sing. *ergon*, ἐργον) in more a general sense, includes: Romans 2:6f, 15; 4:2, 6; 9:12, 32; 11:6; 13:3, 12; 14:20; 15:18; 1 Corinthians 3:13ff; 5:2; 9:1; 15:58; 16:10; 2 Corinthians 9:8; 10:11; 11:15; Galatians 5:19; 6:4; Ephesians 2:9f; 4:12; 5:11; Philippians 1:6, 22; 2:30; Col. 1:10, 21; 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; 2:17; 1 Timothy 2:10; 3:1; 5:10, 25; 6:18; 2 Timothy 1:9; 2:21; 3:17; 4:5, 14, 18; Titus 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 5, 8, 14.

It is only in specific areas of Galatians and Romans where “works of law” as a technical phrase needs to be considered, that can reorient our understanding of what Paul is communicating.

simply “*doing what the Law commanded*” (Schreiner),⁷ or alternatively, applying the Torah’s instructions in a particular way. If it is the latter, then it can reorient our interpretation of some of Paul’s words in Galatians and Romans. Paul’s argument would not be against “the Torah” per se, but rather its interpretation and application by a particular sector of the ancient Jewish community.

Galatians 2:15, 16 give us some clues that *ergōn nomou* is likely Paul’s Greek equivalent of *ma’asei haTorah*, especially considering the way he addresses Peter. In v. 15 he tells Peter *hēmeis phusei Ioudaioi* (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι), “we are Jews by nature,” continuing in v. 16 with *eidotes de hoti ou dikaioutai anthrōpos ex ergōn nomou* (εἰδότες [δὲ] ὅτι οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου), “nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law.” The verb *eidotes* is a plural participle, indicating that “we know” (NEB, NRSV, ESV). Paul is likely communicating to Peter as a fellow Jew, and we can deduce that as Jews they had some ideas as to what “works of law” meant as a technical phrase.

Christian commentators, recognizing the probable connection between *ma’asei haTorah* and *ergōn nomou*, have only so far been able to concede that “works of law” in the Pauline corpus pertain to Jewish identity markers. So, while not being general obedience to the Mosaic Torah, per se, “works of the law” were those things that were to clearly separate Israel from the Gentile world around it, namely things like the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, and circumcision.⁸ While this may prove discouraging to some Messianic interpreters—as these are elements of Biblical practice that we believe God is restoring to His people as relevant—the discussion of “works of law” being something other than general Torah observance as a whole, certainly opens up some useful interpretational possibilities. Among Messianic interpreters, Tim Hegg describes,

“What we now understand is that the phrase ‘works of the Law/Torah’ was used in Paul’s day to refer [to] specific sets of rules or *halachah* which a group required for its self-definition. Simply put, such a list of ‘works of the Torah’ constituted the entrance requirements into the group...‘Works of the Torah,’ then, refers to *halachah* required for entrance into the covenant community (as required by each sect), not personal obedience to God’s word.”⁹

In the actual text of 4QMMT, one finds that “works of law” were not, actually, some kind of macro-Jewish identity markers such as the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, or circumcision. These appear to have been assigned somewhat arbitrarily by New Testament scholars. On the contrary, what we see is a strict, sectarian style of *halachah*, not only focused on purity—but a praxis that will inevitably keep more people out of God’s community than welcome people into it. The “works of law” may be considered as some kind of micro-Jewish identity markers, specific to the group or sect that held them to be important. The issue in 4QMMT, in a manner of speaking, **is the club rules of the Qumran community**, which they felt were the proper interpretation and application of the Torah. Dunn actually concurs, “‘deeds of the law’ denote the interpretations of the Torah which marked out the Qumran community as distinctive, the obligations which members took upon themselves as members and by which they maintained their membership.”¹⁰ N.T. Wright offers a further and more detailed explanation:

“The (sectarian) code of MMT is designed to say, ‘Do *these* particular “works of Torah,” and they will mark you out in the present as the true covenant people.’ These ‘works’ in question in MMT were not sabbath, food laws and circumcision...Rather, the particular and very specific codes in MMT include various aspects of ritual performance (the calendar, regulations about water, marriage laws and so on), some of which were markers against Gentiles, but most of which were markers designed to demonstrate membership of the particular sect, the people that believed itself to be the inauguration of God’s new covenant people. What the author is saying is: these ‘works of Torah’ will bring upon you God’s reckoning of righteousness’ here and now, and that verdict will be repeated ‘on the last day.’”¹¹

The primary “works of law” in view in Galatians, and to a lesser extent Romans, would involve the **demand of ritual proselyte circumcision** for the new, non-Jewish Believers entering into the Body of Messiah, most likely by a rigid and legalistic sector of Jewish Believers.

⁷ Schreiner, “works of the law,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 975.

⁸ Cf. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, pp 218-220.

⁹ Hegg, *Galatians*, 100.

¹⁰ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 146.

For some of those who have difficulty seeing “works of the law” as anything other than general observance of the Torah, it should be stressed that what is emphasized in the passages where *ergōn nomou* appears (Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Romans 3:20, 28) is **an inappropriate application of the Torah**. When Paul says in Galatians 2:16 that “a man is not justified by works of the Law,” concurrent with Paul’s *specific incident* with Peter in Antioch, and what he wants the Galatians to understand, “works of law” regards human observances and interpretations of how a particular group has decided to, in this case, inappropriately apply the Torah to restrict membership in the people of God.

The controversial part of not being “justified” by “works of law,” particularly for those from more fundamental Christian backgrounds, is acknowledging that the Biblical concept of “justification” contains more elements than just an individual’s vindication before God via the work of His Son. Given the usage of *tzedaqah* (צְדָקָה) in parts of the Tanach pertaining to Israel’s status before God, and the issues that Paul addresses in Galatians pertaining to non-Jewish Believers’ inclusion in the community of faith, such justification *is also corporate*—not just individualistic. One’s entry into God’s covenant community is not “works of law,” namely the *halachah* of a particular group (in the case of Galatians, those requiring ritual proselyte circumcision)—but it is faith in the Messiah of Israel and what He has accomplished in being sacrificed for sinners. Some difficulty can admittedly ensue, especially for a passage like Galatians 2:16-22, where “justification” language is used in multiple ways: first to mainly describe inclusion among God’s people (2:16a-b), and then second to decisively describe vindication and forgiveness of human beings from their sins (2:16c-21).

“Works of law” being the particular *halachah* of a sectarian community gives much for the contemporary Church to not only consider, but also for today’s Messianic community. Do we allow people to join our assemblies because they have made a proclamation of faith in Yeshua? Or, in the case of some Messianic congregations, because they fit a series of requirements? Today in some growing sectors of the Messianic community, non-Jewish Believers are spurned unless they undergo some kind of ritual “conversion” that only a sub-sect of the denomination can offer. But this goes against Paul’s clear instruction in Galatians. Not only does one’s personal redemption not come from keeping “works of law,” but one’s inclusion among God’s people is not to occur from “works of law,” either. Instead, one is to stand justified before God on the basis of faith in Him and what Yeshua has accomplished via His atoning work for fallen humanity, and one is to be accepted in the *ekklēsia* on the basis of faith in Him and His saving activity for all sinners.¹²

¹² For a further discussion, consult the chapters “What Are ‘Works of the Law?’” and “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah” in the author’s book *The New Testament Validates Torah*.