

THE NEW TESTAMENT VALIDATES TORAH

Does the New Testament Really Do Away With the Law?

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MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS

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The New Testament Validates Torah

Does the New Testament Really Do Away With the Law?

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Cover Image: PapaBear via Istockphoto

ISBN 979-8316756919 (paperback)

ASIN B007007DRQ (eBook)

Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries
P.O. Box 516
McKinney, Texas 75070
(407) 933-2002

outreachisrael.net / outreachisrael.blog
messianicapologetics.net / messianicapologetics.blog

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Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
CJSB: Complete Jewish Study Bible (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: Greek New Testament
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: King James Version
Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: Septuagint
m. Mishnah
MT: Masoretic Text
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: New English Bible (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*

NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)

NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*

NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*

NIV: New International Version (1984)

NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NKJV: New King James Version (1982)

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)

NLT: New Living Translation (1996)

NT: New Testament

OT: Old Testament

REB: Revised English Bible (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)

TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

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What Are “Works of the Law”?

I remember the first time I ever heard the possibility that “works of the Law” in the Pauline Epistles could be anything *other than* just keeping the Mosaic Torah. I disregarded it immediately. Why? Because I heard this from someone, who read an article, whose author had read an article in a theological journal, an article which had likely been misinterpreted and misrepresented. Like the game of telephone—one person gave a message, and then it had been passed down to four or five people—sounding nothing like what had originally been said by the Biblical scholar who made the original proposal. Hearing things fourth or fifth-hand can make it pretty easy to disregard what has been said, especially if the person passing on the information is not a part of the theological conversation, who is able to go to the source, seeing what was originally proposed, and engage on any kind of reasonable level.

Anyone who enters into Pauline theological studies today will easily encounter the fact that there are scholars and exegetes who think that the term “works of law” or *ergōn nomou*—appearing first in Galatians (2:16[3x]; 3:2, 5, 10), and then appearing again in Romans (3:20, 28)—actually does designate something other than “works/deeds/actions required by the Mosaic Law,” or at least something a bit more specific than just “observing the law” (NIV) in general. These proposals, though, have been met with a great deal of criticism, and even some hostility, by those of particular theological traditions. Alternatives to the customary meaning of “works of law” have been proposed more frequently, as New Testament theologians, over the past half century or so, have had greater access to ancient Jewish literature and resources, and this information has had to be considered in their exegesis. Their thoughts, suggestions, and conclusions have just in the late 2000s been discussed by normal lay people in evangelical Protestantism.

Did the Apostle Paul use *ergōn nomou* as a polemic against Jewish observance of the Torah, against a kind of salvation-by-works doctrine? Or did he use *ergōn nomou* in reference to something like ancient *halachic* matters which affected a faith community,

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which should have been welcoming of non-Jewish Believers in the Messiah, but were not?

Today's Messianic movement has grown in leaps and bounds significantly, because Believers want to know more about the First Century place and setting of the Apostolic Scriptures. While this has certainly affected much of how we view the teaching style of Yeshua the Messiah as a First Century rabbi, it has unfortunately not affected as much of how we view the Pauline letters. The Pauline letters are a part of the Bible which too many of us do not deal with, either because we just do not know what to do with them, *or* because entering into the world of contemporary Pauline scholarship is too much of a minefield and a hassle for us to do. Too few of our congregational leaders and teachers are aware of the considerable progress which has been made in the past few decades within Pauline theology, and how it opens up parts of Galatians and Romans—which have traditionally been interpreted as being anti-Torah—to really not be anti-Torah at all. They included, rather, specific critiques of practices and attitudes which impeded the work of the good news or gospel, among the nations in the First Century.

In this article, we will discuss some of the various proposals made regarding “works of the Law,” and see how they play out. Are “works of the Law” just observing the Mosaic Torah? Are “works of the Law” some kind of legalism? Or, are “works of the Law” various identity barriers set up by an ancient sect of Judaism? How might knowing about these things bring greater clarity to passages in Galatians and Romans? What kind of contemporary application might help us to be a vibrant Messianic faith community, which can positively impact society at large?

Joining the Conversation

The first time *ergōn nomou* appears in the Apostolic Scriptures is in Galatians 2:16. Paul rebuked Peter in Antioch, telling him,

“nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Galatians 2:16, NASU).

If you are like most Bible readers, you have interpreted Paul's words here as meaning that justification—often meaning forgiveness and reconciliation before God provided by Messiah Yeshua—cannot be accomplished via observing the Mosaic Law. Peter was in error for separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers (Galatians 2:11-14), because he could not eat with them as a good Jew who observed the kosher dietary laws. But if you think about it for a moment, why would Paul have rebuked Peter with justification language for what he was doing? Was the scene in Antioch one of the Believers being forgiven of sin and brought into God's salvation? Or, was the issue really how the Believers, regardless of if they were Jewish or Greek or Roman, were supposed to all be getting along at fellowship gatherings? If you have ever read

this text closely—seeing Paul’s usage of “works of law” and “justification” together—thinking that there is probably more at work, **you will not have any difficulty** joining into the conversation we are about to have. You may have recognized, based only on an English reading of the verses where “works of law” appears, that there might be contextual and historical issues worthy of some more investigation.

Over the past three to five decades, there has been a great renaissance in Pauline scholarship, particularly as Paul’s letters have been re-examined with more ancient Jewish resources to consider. It would be downright impossible to examine all of the academic discussion and publications in a single article, but there are some trends you need to be made aware of. Much of what we are preparing to consider regarding “works of law” can find its origins in E.P. Sanders’ book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). This publication was monumental in analyzing as to whether or not ancient Judaism really was a legalistic, works-righteousness religion, as it had been stereotyped by a great deal of prior prejudices which had consistently failed to examine quotations from ancient Jewish literature such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Midrashim, and by the time of Sanders’ writing, the Dead Sea Scrolls. While many scholars who followed after Sanders may not have agreed with all of his conclusions on Paul himself, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* certainly did stimulate an interest among Pauline scholars to investigate more into the Jewish background and setting of his letters.

While traditional perspectives on Paul’s view of Judaism, the Law of Moses, and whatever “works of law” were, continued through the 1980s and 1990s, what became called the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) also grew considerably. The “New Perspective of Paul” was a title given by British scholar James D.G. Dunn in a 1983 article by this same title,¹ where aside from the various aspects of Paul and “works of Law” which Dunn wanted readers to consider, he specifically wanted to remove “a misunderstanding of Paul, based on the standard Protestant (mis)reading of Paul through Reformation spectacles.”² While he was clear to state how he was not trying to deconstruct foundational doctrines such as justification by faith, he did want people to reconsider the scene in Antioch in Galatians 2, with Peter separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers, and what the issue regarding “works of law” actually was. In his words, *ergōn nomou* can be specifically classified

“as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people; given by God for precisely that reason, they serve to demonstrate covenant status.”³

¹ Reproduced in James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp 99-120.

² *Ibid.*, 118.

³ *Ibid.*, 111.

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Dunn opened an important door for Bible readers to see that a targeted issue regarding “works of law” was present in Antioch, and likely also in the other places where “works of law” appears in both Galatians and Romans.

Since this time in the 1980s, with Dunn writing a considerable number of articles on the NPP, and his own commentaries on Galatians and Romans, a number of scholars have come to agree with him that “works of law” were not just rote observance of Mosaic rituals, and a number of scholars have been quite pessimistic of such a proposal. Almost every Galatians or Romans commentary, written at the technical level, has had to take into consideration the suggestion that *ergōn nomou* is not just following the Mosaic Law, with sides both in favor and against proposed. The full release of the Qumran document 4QMMT (4Q394-5),⁴ includes the only outside attestation of something similar to Paul’s usage of “works of law,” appearing as the Hebrew *ma’asei haTorah*. A possible connection between 4QMMT in the DSS, and how “works of law” was used in Galatians and Romans, also spurred a great deal of academic discussion. And today, in various entries on “works” in general Bible encyclopedias and dictionaries, “works of law” being something other than just rote observance of the Mosaic Law, is discussed to some degree or another.⁵

Into the early 1990s, Dunn was the main voice in New Testament theology credited with proposing that “works of law” regarded identity barriers which defined the ancient Jewish people, and not just rote observance of the Mosaic Law. But very few outside of New Testament theology, other than those teaching at the academic level, or new students acquiring a seminary degree, would probably be aware of these proposals. Even though books were written in favor in the NPP, and books were written against it, the discussion would simply not affect your average evangelical Protestant church—much less any fledgling congregation in the young Messianic Jewish movement. Unless various lay people were amateur theologians in their spare time, reading big fat books with a lot of Hebrew, Greek, and references to scholarly journals and conversations—your average evangelical Believer well into the 1990s, would not even be aware of proposals made about “works of law,” ancient Judaism, and Pauline theology.

This began to change because of the writings of Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright, sometimes considered to be “the C.S. Lewis of the Twenty-First Century.” Wright,

⁴ For an English translation, consult Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp 220-228; Florentino Garza Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English, Second Edition* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1994), pp 77-85; Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp 358-364.

⁵ T.R. Schreiner, “Works of the Law,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 975-979; James W. Thompson, “Works,” in David Noel Friedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1387; “deeds, works,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 159; M.J. Thomas, “Works of the Law,” in Scot McKnight, Lynn H. Cohick, and Nijay K. Gupta, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), pp 1143-1150.

similar to Dunn, is of the British academic tradition, but he is more theologically conservative and evangelical—and more than anything else is much easier to read! Because Wright is much more of a popular writer, he has a much larger audience than Dunn. In his 1997 book *What Saint Paul Really Said*, he summarized his view of how “works of the law” were “the works...which marked [the Jewish people] out as covenant-keepers,” labeling such works as “sabbath, food-laws, circumcision.”⁶ This conclusion was no different than Dunn’s proposals, even though normal lay people would have to now be considering it. So while Dunn may have been the first to use the actual description “New Perspective of Paul,” and has probably written the most about it, Wright’s publications have probably been the most read and influential at the popular level.⁷

In this analysis, we will be discussing what the NPP has proposed regarding what *ergōn nomou* might mean where it appears in Galatians and Romans. We can be thankful for the NPP opening up the discussion on Paul’s First Century Jewish background. It is undeniable that in the future, today’s Messianic people will be engaging more with the proposals made by scholars such as Dunn, Wright, and others who see “works of law” as being something more specific than just rote Law-keeping.

The Current Array of Opinions on “Works of Law”

It is quite easy, especially if one is outside the current conversation in Pauline theology, to just casually disregard or summarily reject the idea that “works of law” might be something other than rote observance of the Mosaic Law. One has to be willing to realize that letters like Galatians and Romans were not originally written to people living in the Twenty-First Century, and to break out of some old, incomplete viewpoints. Yet, even while there has been scholastic resistance to the idea that “works of law” is something more specific than just following the Mosaic Law, we really cannot disagree with scholars such as Douglas J. Moo, who argue that:

“‘Works of the law’...is a subset of the more general category ‘works.’ The Reformers and their heirs were quite right to use these verses to deny that human beings could be justified before God by anything that they might do.”⁸

If we were to use the broad definition of “works of law” as being any human activity associated with the Mosaic Torah, and that such activity will not bring justification, I would not be in substantial disagreement. Yet the issue we have to address is why “works of law” and “justification” are connected in passages like Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20. Were these intended to just amplify the fact that people were not to be saved by their actions or works (Ephesians 2:8-9), or were these

⁶ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 132.

⁷ For a relatively easy-to-read analysis of the relevant issues to the NPP, I would recommend N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 327.

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statements targeted for a specific reason for ancient First Century circumstances? If the latter is the case, then the principle that people cannot be justified by their actions can surely be *supplemented* by Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20—but these verses were delivered in an ancient setting which must first be considered and cannot at all be casually disregarded.

Wrapping one's brain around the idea that "works of law" might have been something specific to the First Century, can be very difficult for today's evangelical Protestants, who often hear sermon after sermon with passages like Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20 quoted as to why human activities will not bring salvation. It is difficult to acclimate such people to an ancient First Century religious world, where Judaism is quite diverse, and the good news or gospel message was going out to God-fearers and total pagans. It is easier for newer pastors—even those who have heard current proposals made about "works of law" in their seminary studies—to simply fall back into the old view that it just means "observing the law" (NIV). The thought is that lay people should not be informed about discussions which are likely to remain constrained to the academic level, and that it is best to keep preaching on Sunday morning rather simplistic.

A significant reason why many of today's Messianic Believers *are Messianic* is because they want to know more. They want to know what the ancient First Century setting of letters like Galatians and Romans actually were, and what "works of law" really meant to the Apostle Paul. Unfortunately, though, some are not often willing to investigate such topics thoroughly enough, consulting the thoughts of the scholars who originally made connections between *ergōn nomou*, *ma'asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT. I have witnessed a number of populist Hebrew Roots teachers make proposals about "works of law" not necessarily being rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, but these teachers have not at all been engaged with contemporary discussions present within the New Perspective of Paul. *Things have been made a bit too simplistic.* We need to move beyond this, and not only engage with the various NPP proposals on "works of law," but develop realistic interpretations *and* applications of the relevant Pauline texts for the current mission and focus of our emerging Messianic movement.

The current array of opinions regarding what "works of law"—*ergōn nomou* in Paul's actual letters—actually are in today's Biblical Studies, can be divided into three broad categories:

1. "works of law" as **keeping the law**
2. "works of law" as **legalism**
3. "works of law" as **identity markers**

The following is a table with some references to various scholars to consider, relevant to our examination of what "works of law" actually are. This will give you a good idea about where various streams of thought have led, when you engage with any of these individuals' writings:

What Are “Works of the Law” in Contemporary Theology?	
Keeping the Law	<p>“...when Paul used the phrase ‘works of Law’ he referred to <i>doing what the Law commanded</i>....’works’ (<i>erga</i>) in Paul refers to ‘deeds that are performed,’ and that ‘works of Law’ signifies the ‘deeds’ or ‘actions’ demanded by the Mosaic Law.”⁹</p> <p>T.R. Schreiner, in <i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i></p> <p>“It would seem clear from the fact that Paul uses the phrase ‘works of the Law’ interchangeably with just the word ‘works’ to speak about the same subject...and from the fact that [<i>ergon</i>] is regularly used of actions rather than attitudes...”¹⁰</p> <p>Ben Witherington III, <i>Grace in Galatia</i></p> <p>“‘Works of the law’...as most interpreters have recognized, refers simply to ‘things that are done in obedience to the law’....‘Works of the law’ are inadequate not because they are ‘works of <i>the law</i>’ but, ultimately, because they are ‘works.’”¹¹</p> <p>Douglas J. Moo, <i>NICNT: Romans</i></p>
Legalism	<p>“...the Greek language of Paul’s day possessed no word-group corresponding to our ‘legalism’, ‘legalist’ and ‘legalistic’. This means that he lacked a convenient terminology for expressing a vital distinction, and so was surely seriously hampered in the work of clarifying the Christian position with regard to the law. In view of this, we should always, we think, be ready to reckon with the possibility that Pauline statements, which at first sight seem to disparage the law, were really not directed against the law itself but against that misunderstanding and misuse of it for which we now have a convenient terminology.”¹²</p> <p>C.E.B. Cranfield, <i>ICC: Romans</i></p> <p>“We agree with C.E.B. Cranfield that Paul had no separate word-group to denote ‘legalism,’ ‘legalist,’ and ‘legalistic.’ Consequently some of the passages translated ‘law’ are incorrect, for what he is opposing is the quest for a righteousness obtained as a result of one’s own efforts and works.”¹³</p> <p>Walter C. Kaiser, <i>Toward Old Testament Ethics</i></p>

⁹ Schreiner, “Works of the Law,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 975, 977.

¹⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 176.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp 209, 217.

¹² C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 853.

¹³ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 309.

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Identity Markers	<p>"We may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by 'works of law' Paul intended his readers to think of <i>particular observances of the law like circumcision and the food laws</i>....we know that <i>just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish</i>."¹⁴ James D.G. Dunn, <i>Jesus, Paul and the Law</i></p> <p>"...'works of Torah' here is not about the works some might think you have to perform in order to <i>become</i> a member of God's people, but the works you have to perform to <i>demonstrate that you are</i> a member of God's people....works of Torah would simply create a family which was at best an extension of ethnic Judaism..."¹⁵ N.T. Wright, <i>Paul in Fresh Perspective</i></p> <p>"'works of Law'...refers not to meritorious deeds in general but specifically to those practices that stand as outward symbols of Jewish ethnic distinctiveness: circumcision, dietary observances, and sabbath keeping."¹⁶ Richard B. Hays, <i>NIB: Galatians</i></p>
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Some theologians fall into some combination of the categories listed above, perhaps altering a previous position they held, to account for new proposals made in New Testament scholarship. F.F. Bruce says that "The [*erga nomou*] are the actions prescribed by the law. They are not deprecated in themselves, for the law of God is 'holy and just and good' (Rom. 7:12)...What is deprecated is the performing of them in a spirit of legalism."¹⁷ Bruce sits between the traditional view which holds "works of law" as rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, and C.E.B. Cranfield who argues that "works of law" was a Torah-based legalism. Richard N. Longenecker issues a synthesis together of all three views, recognizing that "works of law" could be some kind of ancient Jewish identity markers, yet having to conclude,

"Paul here in [Galatians] 2:16 uses [*ergōn nomou*] not just to refer to 'the badges of Jewish covenantal nomism'...but a catch phrase to signal the whole legalistic complex of ideas having to do with winning God's favor by a merit-amassing observance of Torah."¹⁸

¹⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 191.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 112.

¹⁶ Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:239.

¹⁷ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137.

¹⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), 86.

What Are “Works of the Law”?

Among contemporary scholars, perhaps the most significant which will affect our examination, is how Walter C. Kaiser slightly alters his position between “works of law” just being legalism, seen in his 1983 *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, to now including some kind of sectarian Jewish observances. In his 2008 book *The Promise-Plan of God*, he indicates,

“It would appear that in light of the Qumran document called the *Misqat Ma’ase ha-Torah* [4QMMT], which uses the same phrase Paul used...that this phrase is used at Qumran and later Rabbinic Judaism to refer to what was known as the *halakah*.¹⁹

Kaiser goes on to define

“The *halakah* [as] an interpretation of the law of Moses that demanded obedience to the law as a basis for acceptance into membership of the people of God.”²⁰

Kaiser is notably an Old Testament theologian who is known for having a very high view of the moral instruction of the Torah, something concurrent with the Reformed theological tradition.

The alternative position to believing that “works of law” is just rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, that many of today’s Messianics are likely familiar with, is the proposal that “works of law” is some kind of legalism. This is the view which has been advocated by the late Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern, following Cranfield, in both his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* and *Complete Jewish Bible*. Stern remarks,

“I submit that in every instance ‘*erga nomou*’ means not deeds done in virtue of following the *Torah* 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 having faith, without having trust in God, without having love for God or man, and without being empowered by the Holy Spirit.”²¹

A verse like Romans 3:20 appears in the CJB/CJSB as, “For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because what *Torah* really does is show people how sinful they are.” Outside of these two publications, Stern wrote very little, and so we do not know what position he might have taken regarding 4QMMT and proposals made by the NPP, which became more significant to engage with in the 2000s.

¹⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 259.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 537.

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One cannot avoid the fact that the view of “works of law” in Galatians, and to a lesser extent Romans, being some kind of ancient Jewish identity markers, has not been entirely met with a great deal of enthusiasm among some evangelical Protestant writers. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo suggest in their New Testament introduction, that Paul only wanting things like “circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath...dropped because he wants to build a unified church composed of Jew and Gentile alike...is too narrow.”²² They cannot accept the NPP proposal that only *part* of the Torah could be in view, because their view of Pauline theology requires them to advocate that he only taught Believers to follow a “Law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2), something widely independent from the Pentateuch. One of the most significant reasons why such theologians oppose the idea of “works of law” in Paul being something specific—and not just general observance of the Mosaic Torah—is that it would require them to similarly reevaluate the justification language frequently associated with it (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20, 28). As Dunn describes,

“Paul...prefaces his first mention of ‘being justified’ with a deliberate appeal to the standard Jewish belief, shared also by his fellow Jewish Christians, that the Jews as a race are God’s covenant people. Almost certainly, then, his concept of righteousness, both noun and verb (to be made or counted righteous, to be justified), is thoroughly Jewish too, with the same strong covenant overtones...God’s justification is God’s recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel.”²³

Some evangelical theologians believe that the NPP proposals on “works of law” and “justification” are deliberately trying to dismantle the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. *This is actually not the case*, as the issue regarding “justification” as inclusion among God’s covenant people is limited to only a handful of passages in Galatians and Romans, where ancient issues were in specific view. The NPP has never argued against the overall Biblical doctrine of justification by faith—only that something *more specific to First Century Judaism* was present in passages like Galatians 2:16-17 or Romans 3:20-21. Dunn clarifies how for him,

“My concern has not been to attack or deny the classical Christian doctrine of justification by faith. My concern has always been that the doctrine of justification, as rediscovered (or reasserted) by Luther and as consistently expounded within Protestantism, has neglected important aspects particularly of Paul’s original formulation in the context of his mission.”²⁴

I believe that today’s Messianics can safely engage with the various proposals of the NPP, and theologians like Dunn and Wright, realizing that their intention—as

²² D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 466.

²³ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

ours should be—is to understand “works of law” in the context in which the Apostle Paul used the phrase. What were the issues confronted in letters like Galatians and Romans, and how were “works of law” an unnecessary impediment to the work of the good news?

“Works of Law” as Identity Markers

While it can be encouraging for various Messianics to hear that contemporary New Testament scholars have proposed that “works of law” are not just rote keeping of the Mosaic Torah, it can then be quite discouraging to hear that the same scholars often consider “works of law” to be identity markers—construed as barriers—such as: the Sabbath, appointed times, kosher dietary laws, and circumcision. These are, after all, important aspects of God’s Word which many of today’s Messianic people believe are important. These are things which Jewish Believers for sure need to be following as a part of their spiritual and ethnic heritage, and that non-Jewish Believers need to be considering as well—as the Holy Spirit leads all. How, and/or why, did various proponents of the NPP classify “works of law” as being these specific areas of Torah observance? Before we can analyze the connection between *ergōn nomou, ma’asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT, we need to trace some of the arguments which are made by the NPP.

That “works of law” were something which negatively affected the First Century Body of Messiah is difficult to argue against. In Galatians 2:12, Paul records how Peter, “prior to the coming of certain men from James...used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision” (NASU). The “works of law” evidenced by Peter disrupted the unity which was supposed to be occurring among the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Antioch, at their common fellowship meals. Previously, it is thought that Peter would have eaten whatever he wanted with the non-Jewish Believers, but once some highly conservative Jewish Believers from Jerusalem arrived, Peter immediately had to start eating kosher again. This caused a ruckus which forced Paul to rebuke Peter in public (Galatians 2:14).

The main proposal made by advocates of the NPP is that “works of law” are things purposefully intended to separate people. This idea is supported by sentiments seen in ancient Jewish literature, such as *Jubilees* 22:16: “Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs.”²⁵ Philo discussed how Israel “will never mingle with any other nation so as to depart from their national and ancestral ways” (*Life of Moses* 1.278).²⁶ For Dunn, it must have been the Maccabean Crisis of a century-and-a-half earlier, where the Jewish people were threatened with significant cultural assimilation

²⁵ O.S. Wintermute, trans., “*Jubilees*,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 98.

²⁶ Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 485.

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by the Greek Seleucids, that the “works of law” became more or less defined. 1 Maccabees 1:60-63 summarizes how,

“According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks. But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die” (1 Maccabees 1:60-63, RSV).

Dunn observes how “these demands of the law had become a principal target of Syrian persecution,” and how easily they would have become “a way of marking off the entity of Jewish self-identity from a Hellenism that had swamped and threatened to obliterate such national distinctiveness.”²⁷ So by the First Century, the NPP asserts that distinctively Jewish observances like circumcision, the kosher dietary laws, and the Sabbath had swelled to such a degree of national pride for Judaism—that they would have deliberately impeded the mission of Paul among the nations. The “works of law” separated the Jewish Believers from the non-Jewish Believers, and they would need to at least be minimized, or eliminated altogether in some cases. Dunn claims that “in Paul’s view, making these works a requirement additional to faith”²⁸ was totally unnecessary for membership within the people of God.

What is revolutionary about the NPP claim that “works of law” were only those things that marked out Jews as members of God’s covenant people, **is that Paul was not speaking against the Law of Moses in total** when he used the term *ergōn nomou*. Paul was still free to recognize God’s Torah as having continued ethical and moral validity for all of His people, including the new, non-Jewish Believers. In Wright’s assessment, “The new covenant work of the Spirit, transform[s] the heart so as to enable it to keep the commandments of the Torah.”²⁹ He also comments, “much of what Paul says he can draw upon the Torah for outline guidance.”³⁰ The greater aspects of the Torah, summarized best by Yeshua in His Sermon on the Mount, were the kinds of things which the Apostle Paul wanted *all* of the Believers to focus on. We can be thankful that the NPP has helped many Christians to see that Paul was not at all anti-Torah, instead claiming that he was only opposed to various Jewish “works of law” which disrupted unity and cohesiveness in the ancient Body of Messiah.

What can be very upsetting about the NPP conclusions about “works of law” is that today’s Messianics largely do not believe that things like the dietary laws or the Sabbath were abolished in the New Testament. Today’s Messianic community broadly believes that the significance of Torah institutions such as the Sabbath, appointed times, or dietary laws—and most especially their Messianic substance and

²⁷ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 174.

²⁸ Ibid., pp 15-16.

²⁹ N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 146.

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

the lessons they convey to followers of Yeshua—are things which the Lord is restoring to His people in this hour. So what is to be done about this predicament?

“Works of Law” and 4QMMT

Were “works of law” in the Pauline letters really intended to be things like the Sabbath, kosher dietary laws, or other outward observances of the Torah? **Only a further investigation will determine this for sure.** In the past several decades, various New Testament scholars have recognized that there is a likely connection between Paul’s usage of the Greek *ergōn nomou*, and the Hebrew *ma’asei haTorah*. Up until the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), and the Qumran document 4QMMT, there had been no significant extant Jewish literature which ever used the phrase “works of law.” Martin G. Abegg summarizes his view of how:

“Although it would be rather too bold to propose that Paul knew of 4QMMT, or that zealous members of the Qumran community had been the perpetrators of the problems in Galatia, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Paul consciously reflected the term ‘works of law’ which was used by the author of 4QMMT...[I]t appears highly likely that Paul was reacting to a position that was espoused in 4QMMT by the Qumran covenanters.”³¹

In order for one to know the possible orientation of Paul in employing the phrase “works of law” and its background from Second Temple Judaism, it is important to be familiar with how “works of law” is seen in the document 4QMMT, and the religious attitudes expressed by the Qumran community. The fact that the Qumran community was exclusivist—seeing themselves as the only true Israel of God—is difficult to avoid encountering in the DSS. Their literature expresses how “This is the rule for all the congregation of Israel in the Last Days,” which included only “the men appointed to the society of the *Yahad*” (1QSa 1.1, 28)³²—their own initiates. To what extent was this comparable to the Influencers who Paul warned the Galatians about? The Influencers upsetting the Galatians argued that in order for the new, non-Jewish Believers to be accepted among God’s people, they needed to undergo a ritual proselyte circumcision which only they could provide.³³

Paul told Peter, “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16a, NRSV). The plural participle *eidotes* or “[we] knowing,” would seem to indicate that “works of law” was a term known and used by a large enough sector of Second Temple Judaism—including people like Paul and Peter—to describe something. When Paul used it to rebuke Peter, he was rebuking Peter for doing

³¹ Martin G. Abegg, Jr. (1999). 4QMMT C 27, 31 and “Works Righteousness.” *Dead Sea Discoveries*. Retrieved 29 December, 2008, from <<http://jstor.org>>.

³² Wise, Abegg, and Cook, pp 144, 146.

³³ Consult Scot McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers: Requirements for Proselytes,” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 844-846 for a summary of diverse requirements present among Jewish sects for ancient persons being admitted as Jewish proselytes.

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something which caused unnecessary division among all the Believers in Antioch. This is where examiners need to understand what the Qumran document 4QMMT actually summarized by defining various “works of law.” Were these “works of law” really specific things like the Sabbath or dietary laws, or were they more specific practices, ideas, and attitudes which would identify one as a member of a particular Jewish sect?

The final stanza of 4QMMT says that **“we have written to you some of the works of the Law,”** or *miqtzat ma’asei haTorah*. When the complete text of 4QMMT is reviewed, what examiners specifically see are community regulations regarding ritual purity, what they considered to be the right course of action on any number of diverse subjects, and most importantly **what separated them from the other people.** M.O. Wise observes how

“4QMMT seems to prove that the Qumran movement split with greater Judaism primarily over legal issues, not matters of philosophy or the legitimacy of the high priest.”³⁴

He further notes that a major feature of 4QMMT was that

“[T]he authors oppose allowing Gentiles to make offerings on the grounds that such promotes idolatry. The assumption was that, regardless of outward procedures, in their hearts Gentiles would be honoring their own gods, not the God of Israel.”³⁵

Within 4QMMT, examiners find 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.³⁶ On the contrary, what examiners witness is a strict, sectarian style of *halachah*, not only focused on purity—but a praxis which 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 which held them to be important. The issue in 4QMMT, in a manner of speaking, **was the club rules of the Qumran community**, which they felt were the proper interpretation and application of the Torah. Dunn 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.”³⁷

³⁴ M.O. Wise, “Dead Sea Scrolls: General Introduction,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 261.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁶ M.J. Thomas, “Works of the Law,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Second Edition*, pp 1146-1148 discusses how various ancient Christian discussions may have affected this selection.

³⁷ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

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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.’”³⁸

Traditionalists argue that “works of law” simply means obeying the Mosaic Torah by rote. NPP advocates, in light of the evidence which 4QMMT provides, would argue that *ma’asei haTorah* employed here is “simply a sectarian and more particularist expression” (Dunn)³⁹ than how Paul would have used *ergōn nomou* in a more general sense to concern broad Jewish identity markers.

So when Paul used *ergōn nomou* or “works of law” in Galatians and Romans, it is fair to deduce that he was referring to the specialized *halachah* which defined a particular sect of ancient Judaism. In his letters of Galatians and Romans, “works of law” would have been a style of Torah observance and application, which likely impeded or deterred the activity of the good news or gospel, and the Lord’s plan of bringing His salvation to the larger world. In 4QMMT, examiners see extra-Biblical rulings which were to restrict interactions between the Qumran community and outsiders.

Similarly in the Pauline letters, a major area of contention was how the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers were to all get along *as one in the Lord*, not only being united in Him—but also overcoming any **ungodly social prejudices**. Various “works of law” practiced by some of the Jewish Believers, deterred the Apostolic mission among the nations which Paul had been Divinely commissioned to accomplish (cf. Acts 26:17-18).

If “works of law” in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans might be considered a negative, sectarian style of Torah observance—one which would impede the Torah’s mandate to Israel to be a blessing to all (i.e., Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 4:6)—then how does it affect one’s reading of specific passages which have been traditionally read from a grid of Paul refuting a salvation-by-works doctrine? We can

³⁸ N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 146.

He continues in his remarks, stating, “The works in question will not *earn* their performers their membership within God’s true, eschatological covenant people; they will *demonstrate* that membership.” This is where I would disagree with Wright, as the main issue in Galatians, and to a lesser extent Romans, is indeed how you *get in* to God’s people: man-made “works of law” versus trust in Israel’s Messiah and what He has achieved for sinful human beings.

³⁹ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

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only know this by considering Paul's uses of *ergōn nomou*, and what he was trying to teach in the letters where this phrase appears.

“Works of Law” and Galatians

The terminology “works of law” plays a very distinct role in what Paul wrote to the Galatians, who were being led astray by outside Influencers. These were individuals who had come into the Galatian assemblies after Paul had left (Galatians 1:6-7), and who advocated “circumcision.” While there are some legitimate questions to be asked about the Influencers’ identity, who they might have been, and why Paul would say “those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves” (Galatians 6:13, NASU)—what did Paul mean when chastising the non-Jewish Galatians for adopting “works of law”? Were the Galatians, as is traditionally interpreted, adopting a lifestyle in obedience to the Mosaic Law? Or, were they adopting a sectarian form of Judaism—advocated by the Influencers—which was contrary not only to the thrusts of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), but would bring them back into bondage to ungodly principles they should have left behind in paganism (Galatians 4:9)?

If “works of law” may be considered the *halachah* of a sect of ancient Judaism, how might it change one’s approach to how it was used in Paul’s letter to the Galatians?

Galatians 2:15-16

“We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law [ou *dikaiooutai anthrōpos ex ergōn nomou*] but through faith in Messiah Yeshua, even we have believed in Messiah Yeshua, so that we may be justified by faith in Messiah and not by the works of the Law [ouk *ex ergōn nomou*]; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified [ex *ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthēsetai pasa sark*]” (NASU).

The first time “works of law” appears in the Apostolic Scriptures is in a very complex series of arguments. Paul relayed to the Galatians a situation which took place when Peter had visited Antioch, and how he saw it necessary to rebuke Peter for some inappropriate actions. Paul mentioned how “prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:12a, NASU), which many interpreters conclude means that Peter ate non-kosher meals along with them. When the (hyper-)conservative Jewish Believers arrived, “he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:12b, NASU). It is thought that word might get back to the Jewish Believers in Jerusalem that Peter was not eating kosher, and so Peter found it necessary to eat kosher food with these conservative Jewish Believers now visiting Antioch. All of the Jewish Believers in Antioch followed similar suit (Galatians 2:13), something which would inevitably cause divisions.

The NPP advocates that when Paul used “works of law,” he was referring to a major Jewish identity marker such as kosher eating. This is something which would cause inappropriate divisions between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and so Paul

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wanted it removed. It is good that the NPP recognizes that the Torah as a whole—especially its ethical and moral instructions—was not the issue in Antioch. But in light of the specific background of *ergōn nomou, ma'asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT, was the issue in Antioch really Peter reasserting some kind of kosher diet? Or, might it have been an *halachic* issue regarding diet and/or table fellowship?

A highly controversial view, as indicated by Richard B. Hays, is that while

“It is possible that the food at the common meals [in Antioch] was not kosher...it seems unlikely that such flagrant violations of Jewish norms would have been practiced at Antioch, particularly if the Gentile converts [to the gospel] were drawn primarily from the ranks of the ‘godfearers’ [in the local synagogue]...[who] would have already assimilated to Jewish dietary practices.”⁴⁰

This may have not been a very high level of *kashrut*, but certainly one which avoided pork, shellfish, blood, etc. The First Century historian Josephus recorded,

“The Jewish race, densely interspersed among the native populations of every portion of the world, is particularly numerous in Syria, where intermingling is due to the proximity of the two countries. But it was at Antioch that they especially congregated....Moreover, they were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks, and these had in some measure incorporated with themselves” (*Wars of the Jews* 7.43, 45).⁴¹

Due to how the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch were likely to have already integrated into the Jewish community to some degree, it is improbable that the issue regarding “works of law” was related to what was being eaten at these meals. Instead, the issue was that Peter withdrew himself to *only eating* with the Jewish Believers, breaking table fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers. Even while the Pentateuch itself contains no specific prohibition against eating with outsiders, ancient Jewish *halachah* was far from united on the issue, as some permitted it with various stipulations observed (m.*Avodah Zera* 5:5),⁴² and others opposed it (m.*Ohalot* 18:7).⁴³ In his vision of the sheet Peter was revealed, “God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (Acts 10:28, NASU), and then he left to share a table with the Roman centurion Cornelius. Having been shown by God Himself that those of the

⁴⁰ Hays, in *NIB*, 11:232.

⁴¹ Flavius Josephus: *Josephus: The Jewish War, Books IV-VII*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1961), pp 517, 519.

⁴² “[If an Israelite] was eating with [a gentile] at the same time, and he put a flagon [of wine] on the table and a flagon on a side table, and he left it and went out—what is on the table is forbidden. But what is on the side table is permitted. And if he had said to him, ‘You mix and drink [wine],’ even that which is on the side table is forbidden. Jars which are open are forbidden. And those which are sealed [are forbidden if he was gone] for a time sufficient to bore a hole and stop it up and for the clay to dry” (m.*Avodah Zera* 5:5; Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], 571).

⁴³ “Dwelling places of gentiles [in the Land of Israel] are unclean” (m.*Ohalot* 18:7; *Ibid.*, 980).

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nations were not unclean, and then to renege on this by separating himself to the Jewish Believers in Antioch, Peter was clearly guilty of “hypocrisy” (Galatians 2:13, NASU). **On the contrary, Peter should have been encouraging the Jewish Believers from Jerusalem to fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch.**

The result of this occurring was that Peter had adopted the exact kind of attitude that the Gentiles or pagans at large held of the Jews, perhaps similar to what the Roman historian Tacitus claimed: “The...practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness” (*The Histories* 5.5.1-2).⁴⁴ Paul publicly rebuked him, “you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews” (Galatians 2:14a, NASU). By separating himself to the Jewish Believers in Antioch—and not sharing table fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers—a big gulf between them would be created. And this is why Paul asked Peter the pertinent question: “how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:14b, NASU).

The significance of this question can only be appreciated from the original Greek: *pōs ta ethnē anagkazeis Ioudaizein*, literally rendered as “how can you compel the nations to Judaize?” (author’s rendering). Galatians 2:14 is the text of Scripture where the common designation “the Judaizers” originates, yet by his usage of the verb *Ioudaizō*, Paul was making an important point to the Jewish Believers in Antioch which need not be overlooked. *BDAG* defines this verb as to **“live as one bound by Mosaic ordinances or traditions, live in Judean or Jewish fashion.”**⁴⁵ But what one considers to be Jewish customs or traditions has considerable variance within Second Temple Judaism.

Perhaps the most significant usage of the verb *Ioudaizō* outside of Galatians is seen in the Septuagint rendering of Esther 8:17, where it is seen how “in every city and province wherever the ordinance was published: wherever the proclamation took place, the Jews had joy and gladness, feasting and mirth: and many of the Gentiles were circumcised, and became Jews [*Ioudaizon*], for fear of the Jews” (LXE).⁴⁶ The Greek verb *Ioudaizō* renders the Hebrew *yahad*, meaning **“to pose as a Jew”** or **“to embrace Judaism”** (*HALOT*).⁴⁷ As Longenecker renders Galatians 2:14, “If you, a

⁴⁴ Cornelius Tacitus: *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 273.

⁴⁵ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 478.

⁴⁶ Another important usage of the verb *Ioudaizō* appears in Josephus’ account of the Jews fighting the Romans, and how a Roman named Metilius was spared from death, because he promised to be circumcised and become a Jew:

“And thus were all these men barbarously murdered, excepting Metilius; for when he entreated for mercy, and promised **that he would turn Jew, and be circumcised** [*peritomēs Ioudaisein*], they saved him alive, but none else” (*Wars of the Jews* 2.454; Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987], 626).

The verb *Ioudaizō*, “to Judaize,” is something which tends to occur in instances or situations of force.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:393.

Jewish believer, can live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentile believers to become Jews?” (WBC).⁴⁸ Hans Dieter Betz well summarizes the issue of Galatians 2:14: “In Paul’s view...it describes forcing one to become a Jewish convert...”⁴⁹

The answer to the problem caused by Peter separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers to the Jewish Believers, **was that the non-Jewish Believers would have to become Jewish proselytes** in order for unity to be restored. This was something which Paul would have nothing to do with, as unity among God’s people was not something to be achieved by one’s ethnicity, economic status, or even gender (Galatians 3:28). Peter was scolded by Paul, “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:15, NASU), and so having God’s Torah and what it mandates about Israel being a blessing to all, the Jewish Believers should not have been adopting attitudes toward the non-Jewish Believers *which the pagans at large had of the Jews*. And with this in mind, Paul said that people were not to be justified by “works of law”:

“[W]e know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16, ESV).

Galatians 2:16 includes three usages of the phrase *ex ergōn nomou*. Paul had just said that the non-Jewish Believers do not have to be Judaized, meaning go through ritual proselyte conversion, in order to be considered full and equal members of God’s people. Their justification—their identity of being a part of God’s people—was not to be derived via “works of law.” Dunn may remind us, “As in MMT, the phrase seems to be first used (in Gal. 2.16) as a summary reference to a series of legal/halakhic rulings/practices which have been at the centre of the previous paragraphs” regarding “table-fellowship with Gentiles.”⁵⁰ In the case of Peter and the other Jewish Believers rebuked in Antioch, their “works of law” involved ritual proselyte circumcision being required for one to be justified, or made a full member of God’s own.

Paul asserted to Peter that such justification, being reckoned a member of God’s own, did not come *ex ergōn nomou*—their human rulings and subsequent activity misusing His Law. Quite contrary to this, being justified was to come *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*. While traditionally rendered as “through faith in Jesus Christ,” this genitive clause (indicating possession) should actually be rendered as “through [the] faith(fulness) of Jesus Christ.” In stark difference to human activity, “works of law” or *halachah* being one’s primary source of justification and spiritual identity—“the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah,” His obedient work to His Father on humanity’s

⁴⁸ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 63.

⁴⁹ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 112.

⁵⁰ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 343.

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behalf unto death, **was to be the primary source of justification and spiritual identity**. As Paul put it, in order for Jewish Believers like Peter to be “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14, NIV), they would need to recognize how the atoning sacrifice of Yeshua was what saved *all people*, uniting all Believers as equal members of His own.

Galatians 3:2, 5

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law [ex ergōn nomou to pneuma elabete], or by hearing with faith?...So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law [ex ergōn nomou], or by hearing with faith?” (NASU).

Having just associated “works of law” with how the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch would have to “Judaize” (Galatians 2:14)—undergo ritual proselyte circumcision—the Apostle Paul could now ask some rhetorical questions of the Galatians and how they had been affected by the Influencers. Paul asked the Galatians whether or not they had received the Spirit via “works of law”—the *halachah* of those who had led them astray. This would be most unlikely, because these were people whom Paul labeled as those who “bewitched you” (Galatians 3:1, NASU), the last description one would expect to use for those who were operating by the Spirit of God!

Did the Holy Spirit and the subsequent miracles come to the Galatians as a result of following the Influencers’ *halachah*? Or, did it come by hearing the gospel message of Yeshua and responding accordingly, as Paul had previously taught them? Bruce rightly summarizes, “here [Paul] makes an...appeal to the Galatians’ experience: their acceptance of the gospel as Paul preached it was in fact followed by miraculous signs, whereas presumably nothing of that sort accompanied the activity of the agitators.”⁵¹ Galatians is not an epistle depicting a duel between God’s grace and God’s Law, as it is so frequently viewed—but it represents a clash between Paul’s *halachah* which focused on the Torah’s outward mission of Israel being a blessing to the nations, and the Influencers’ *halachah* which focused on communal isolationism.

The Holy Spirit did not come to the Galatians via the Influencers’ “works of law,” but instead via “hearing with faith,” *ex akoēs pisteōs*. This is another genitive clause, perhaps better translated as “the hearing of faith” (KJV/YLT). Far be it from the Galatians’ required faith just being some random set of beliefs, Paul used “hearing” not just in the sense of audibly hearing the good news, but also properly acting upon it and fulfilling all that it represents. The term *akoē* simply means “*the act of hearing*” (LS).⁵² With a likely Semitic background in mind, the corresponding Hebrew verb *shama* should Bible readers to think of the call to not only love God and one’s neighbors, but also to pursue Him with a diligent obedience:

⁵¹ Bruce, *Galatians*, 151.

⁵² H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 28.

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 6:4-8, NASU).

While Paul did not at all approve of the Influencers’ “works of law”—something which would have done very little for the spiritual maturity of the Galatians—he did emphasize “the hearing of faith.” **This involved a reception of the good news, the transforming activity of the Holy Spirit, and then the obedience to God which would naturally follow.** It is foolish to argue that the Apostle Paul did not at all expect the new, non-Jewish Believers to obey any of God’s commandments. Yeshua Himself called Paul to the nations so “that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance⁵³” (Acts 26:20, NASU). Likewise, Paul himself attested how his “apostleship [was] to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (Romans 1:5, NASU).

The Influencers’ “works of law” or *halachah*, requiring ritual proselyte circumcision of the non-Jewish Galatians, would not bring the miracles which the Holy Spirit had provided. Paul’s emphasis was on “the hearing of faith,” which involved an obedience to God brought about by the Holy Spirit. It would not only be accompanied by miracles, but it would always remind the Galatians of the sacrifice the Lord Yeshua had endured on their behalf (Galatians 3:1b).

Galatians 3:10

“For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse [Hosoi gar ex ergōn nomou eisin, hupo kataran eisin]; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM’ [Deuteronomy 27:26]” (NASU).

When viewed from the traditional perspective, and coupled with Paul’s quotation of Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 3:10 can be a very difficult passage to interpret. Yet when understood from the vantage point that “works of law” related to sectarian Jewish *halachah*, the Apostle Paul’s quotation from the Torah was quite poignant. Those who are “of the works of the Law are under a curse” (NASU), meaning that they will suffer some kind of penalties. This was not because they were obeying God—because obeying God’s Torah will actually keep people from being penalized by Him—as the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy chs. 27 and 28 detail. Paul referred to Deuteronomy 27:26, in the listing of blessings and curses upon Ancient Israel, where the people were to declare “Cursed is he who does not confirm the

⁵³ Grk. *tēs metanoias erga prassontas*; “works worthy of repentance” (HCSB).

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words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen'" (NASU). Those who break God's Torah are those who will be punished by Him.

The Apostle Paul, not doing something irregular to his epistles, has slightly adapted Deuteronomy 27:26 to make an important point. He said that those who were of "works of law" were cursed because they did not "obey all the things written in the book of the law" (NRSV). What would be one of the most obvious things written in the Torah, which even a relative new person to reading it would easily encounter? Paul had previously stated what it was in Galatians 3:8: "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, 'ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU' [Genesis 12:3]" (NASU). For the Apostle Paul, those who were of "works of law," would inevitably be cursed or penalized by the Torah because their *halachah* would overlook and exclude the important and quite obvious things which it teaches. For the Influencers, **they failed to consider all of the ramifications of the Abrahamic promise**, being a blessing to all. And not at all to be overlooked, was how the Abrahamic promise was not only intended to effect the world at large, but how "all nations" undeniably included the Jewish people themselves (cf. Galatians 3:14).

In requiring proselyte circumcision for the Galatians' primary acceptance among God's people, *not recognizing their faith in Messiah Yeshua*, the Influencers would inevitably find themselves cursed by the Torah by failing to follow one of its most foundational instructions. Dunn remarks how an "insistence on 'works of the law' [is] itself failure to observe *all* that is written in the Torah (notably the Genesis promise of blessing to the nations)."⁵⁴ The Influencers were those who had forgotten the example of Abraham—"those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (Galatians 3:9, NASU)—one whose relationship with God began by his steadfast trust in Him. The non-Jewish Galatians were to be reckoned as members of God's own because of their faith, the same as with the Jewish Believers (cf. Acts 15:11), and they were to move forward in obedience to God emulating Abraham.

"Works of Law" and Romans

The terminology "works of law" does not play the same role in Paul's letter to the Romans, like it did in his previous letter to the Galatians. Much of what Paul wrote to the Romans was in the form of sermon-like vignettes, as Romans was an epistle composed to a group of Believers whom Paul had never met before in person (even though he did know [of] various individuals in the Roman assembly, and they knew of him). Because of this, what he wrote in this letter basically presented what his ministry service was all about, and some of the major things which he taught. Phoebe was responsible for carrying the letter to Rome (Romans 16:1-2), and with it was likely able to answer any questions which the Roman Believers would have had. Within Romans "works of law" only appears within ch. 3. This is a section where Paul taught against any prideful attitudes Jewish people may have had for possessing God's

⁵⁴ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 44.

Torah, thinking that they would face a less stringent judgment than the pagans who did not have it.

If “works of law” may be considered the *halachah* of a sect of ancient Judaism, how might it change our approach to how it is used in Paul’s letter to the Romans?

Romans 3:19-20

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law [*tois en tō nomō lalei*], so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified [*dioti ex ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthēsetai pasa sark*] in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (NASU).

Because of Jewish possession of the Torah, over and against the nations at large who did not possess the Torah, there was a great deal of pride expressed by many of the Jews of Paul’s day, as somehow the Jewish people were privileged and they would be shown special favors by God on Judgment Day. In Paul’s writing to the Romans, while he agreed that the nations at large were sinners (see esp. Romans ch. 1), he further asked, “Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin [*huph' hamartian*]” (Romans 3:9, NASU), substantiating this with a litany of references from the Tanach (Romans 3:10-18; cf. Psalm 14:1-4; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1). Jewish possession of God’s Torah would actually make His chosen people *even more accountable*, should they fail to follow its mandate for them.

While Romans 3:19a is rendered in most Bibles as “we know whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law,” the clause *en tō nomō* should actually be rendered as “in the law” (YLT). Those who know they stand within the sphere of God’s Torah will be spoken to by its righteous instructions. And the reason for this is not difficult to see: in order (Grk. *hina*) “that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God” (Romans 3:19b, NASU). The Torah’s standard of holiness spoke to the Jewish people who possessed it, in order for them to understand that the whole world—*themselves included*—stood as sinners before the Almighty. The original intention of God giving the Torah to Israel was for it to be “a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth” (Romans 2:20, NASU) of the Lord. The Torah was to be taught as a part of God’s light to the nations (cf. Romans 2:19), so that they would come to the same truth of God as the Jewish people. But by the First Century, this is not something which had been done. Wright observes,

“Paul’s critique is not that the Torah was a bad thing that the Jews should not have followed, nor that their Torah-observance was done in order to stake a claim on God that God had not already granted in the covenant. His point, rather, was that all who

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attempted to legitimate their covenant status by appealing to possession of Torah would find that the Torah itself accused them of sin.”⁵⁵

This is why Paul must clarify, *dioti ex ergōn nomou*, “For by works of the law shall no flesh be justified before him” (Romans 3:20a, WBC).⁵⁶ If the main purpose of the Torah was to define God’s standard of right and wrong, and what He expected of His people—then all the Jews of Paul’s generation should have known how their justification and identification as His people were found via their faith in Him (Romans 3:27a). But for many, this purpose of the Torah was instead supplanted by “works of law,” sectarian *halachot* which would have directly interfered with the mission of teaching the Torah’s standard of God’s holiness to the nations. (Looking back at Galatians, immediately requiring circumcision of new recipients of the gospel would have done this.)

The purpose of the Torah, according to the Apostle Paul, was not to turn it into man-made “works of law” where different Jewish sects found their identity; it was instead to understand “for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b, NASU). The Torah was to point sinful human beings to the Redeemer who had arrived in the person of Messiah Yeshua (Romans 10:4, Grk.).

Romans 3:27-28

“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? [*dia poiou nomou? tōn ergōn?* Ouchi] No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law [*dikaiousthai pistei, anthrōpou chōris ergōn nomou*]” (NASU).

The Apostle Paul had just stated one of the most foundational Biblical principles, which we as Twenty-First Century Believers often take for granted: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NASU). Writing to Jewish Believers in the First Century, the attestation *pantes gar hēmarton* could have been met with a great deal of hostility. If all human beings stand as condemned sinners by God, then there was nothing *anyone* could boast about, even ancient Jews who possessed God’s Torah.

Paul asked the Jewish Believers in Rome, “Where then is boasting? It is excluded” (Romans 3:27a, NASU). He then asked why such a boasting would be excluded. “By what kind of law” (Romans 3:27b, NASU) would boasting be excluded? Is it a law “of works,” *tōn ergōn*—a likely reworking of *ergōn nomou*—which excluded boasting? No, because “works of law” was a likely *cause* of boasting. Paul said that instead what excluded boasting is by “a law of faith” (Romans 3:27c, NASU), *dia nomou pistēōs*. The first was how the Torah for many had turned into man-made “works of law,” as

⁵⁵ N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:461.

⁵⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 38a. (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 38a:145.

various exclusionary measures—but the second was what God intended the Torah to be.

When one has his or her priorities straight, then trust in God will enable His Torah to accomplish its function of revealing human sin, defining His holiness, and it will point to the Redeemer. A “law of faith” reveals sin, and forces a person to be shown his or her fallen humanity. Contrary to this, when the Torah is turned into sectarian “works of law,” the original function of the Torah can be totally lost, or at least skewed. Wright further remarks,

“Paul is thus distinguishing, not for the last time in his letter, between the Torah seen in two different ways. On the one hand, there is ‘the Torah of works’—this is Torah seen as that which defines Israel over against the nations...On the other hand, there is the new category Paul is forging here: ‘the Torah of faith’...[which] gives the indication of where the true, renewed people of God are to be found.”⁵⁷

And from this point, the Apostle Paul reaffirmed his teachings on what identification among God’s own was to be marked by: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28, NASU). One’s trust in God, and now in His Messiah—and in all that Yeshua had achieved—was to reckon both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as full and equal members of His people (Romans 3:29-30). Yet interestingly enough, against any conclusion which someone might draw in thinking that Paul was opposed to anyone following the Torah in any capacity, he was clear to say, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31, RSV).

Some Clarification on Works

Conducting a root search on the Pauline Epistles, examiners find that the term *ergon*, “work” or “deed,” is used a total of sixty-three times.⁵⁸ It would be entirely irresponsible of any interpreter to conclude that every time “works” were referred to by the Apostle Paul, that “works of law” were being talked about. Most of the time *ergon* was employed, it was used to refer to either good works or bad works. The Apostle’s Paul’s specialized usage of *ergōn nomou*, appearing in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, is a unique case. Interestingly enough, *ergōn nomou* in Galatians could very well be paralleled with *ta erga tēs sarkos* or “the works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19 (RSV)—with the Influencers’ *halachah* actually being considered some level of sin—a reflection of their bad character.

While Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10, and also Romans 3:20, 28, include a highly specialized usage of *ergon*, and were targeted words pertaining to ancient First

⁵⁷ Wright, in NIB, 10:480-481.

⁵⁸ This figure was determined using a Lemma search of BGT in BibleWorks 7.0:

Romans 2:6f, 15; 3:20, 27f; 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 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; 5:19; 6:4; Ephesians 2:9f; 4:12; 5:11; Philippians 1:6, 22; 2:30; Colossians 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.

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Century Jewish issues—the whole of usages within the Pauline corpus do regard how works, deeds, or actions in general cannot provide a person with redemption. There is perhaps no better passage which lays this out than Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (NASU). Salvation comes to sinful human beings solely because of the grace of God; it is “not from works” (HCSB), *ouk ex ergōn*, which people can perform to merit God’s favor. Even though the Pauline usages of “works of law” would specifically regard inclusion among His covenant people, and not principally doing works to earn salvation—the **Biblical reality that trying to earn one’s salvation via deeds should not be denied** when the rest of Paul’s words are tallied together.

At the same time, though, let it never be said that the Apostle Paul thought that works were completely out of the equation of a person’s life. The seldom-quoted Ephesians 2:10 continues, saying, “For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (NASU). Born again Believers are God’s workmanship, molded by Him *epi ergois agathois* or “to do good works” (NIV). Good works evidenced by someone who claims faith in Messiah Yeshua will testify of the spiritual transformation enacted within the heart. The good works are not what provides the transformation, **but rather are to come as a result of it**. If any of you have wondered what the proper place for Torah obedience is in the life of a Messianic Believer, Ephesians 2:8-10 lays it out perfectly.

Are there any “works of law” present in today’s broad Messianic movement?

If our conclusions about “works of law” relating to sectarian *halachah* of an ancient Jewish sect can be considered accurate, then how might this apply to religious people today—or even today’s broad Messianic movement? None of Paul’s usages of “works of law” may be considered positive; he used “works of law” to chastise problems which impeded the spread of the good news among the nations. In Galatians 3:10, he said that those who derive their identity from “works of the law” would actually be cursed (Deuteronomy 27:26), because they would forget the imperatives of the Abrahamic mission of God’s people being a blessing to the world (Galatians 3:8; cf. Genesis 12:3).

An excellent ancient example which would constitute *halachah* impediment God’s mandate of Israel being a blessing can be found in the Qumran literature. In His Sermon on the Mount, Messiah Yeshua taught “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy’” (Matthew 5:43, NASU; cf. Leviticus 19:18). Of course **nowhere in the Torah or Tanach** will readers *ever* find a verse which actually instructs or endorses the concept of people hating their enemies! Yet those in the Qumran community were specifically commanded to love only the members of one’s covenant community, and have hatred for the outsider:

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“He is to teach them both to love all the Children of Light—each commensurate with his rightful place in the council of God—and to hate all the Children of Darkness, each commensurate with his guilt and the vengeance due him from God” (1QS 1.9-11).⁵⁹

Just like failing to fulfill the Abrahamic mission of being a blessing, so would hating others as a form of “works of law” or *halachah*—actually merit the Torah’s curse. Let us never be found doing something like this!

Do today’s Messianics ever establish their own “works of law” which can deliberately impede what the Lord wants to actually accomplish through us? Will any of us ever find ourselves penalized by forms of *halachah* which miss the mark—things which Paul specifies are the fault of limited humans and not that of the Lord (cf. Galatians 2:17)? In seeking to apply some of the proposals he makes about “works of law” within a more contemporary Christian setting, Dunn indicates,

‘Replace ‘halakhoth’ with such terms as ‘inerrancy’, ‘six-day creation’, ‘Papal infallibility’, ‘Sabbath observance’, ‘penal substitution’, ‘male headship’ and the same could be said of not a few factions/groups/traditionalists within Christianity. Yes indeed, in each case there is a danger that the pureness of divine grace is being compromised, that zeal for God and for God’s law/word has exalted secondary issues/adiaphora, to the status of essentials/fundamentals. Sadly, fundamentalists of all sorts fail to appreciate that justification by faith alone stands opposed to all such fundamentalism: *justification is by faith alone and not by reference to factional shibboleths!*’⁶⁰

Dunn is entirely correct in that contrary to “works of law,” possessing faith in God’s Messiah is the common denominator of what should bond all of His people together. To the list of divisive issues seen in today’s Christianity (Dunn could have, of course, included a reference to the abuses of the charismatic movement), today’s Messianics could add things like:

pre-tribulationism versus post-tribulationism, the populist Two-House teaching, the Sacred Name Only agenda, end-of-the-world hype/datesetting/conspiracy theories, the Karaite calendar, insistence on wearing headcovering garments at all times, insistence on men wearing long and unkempt beards, an over-emphasis placed on Davidic dance, and utter infatuation with Jewish mysticism.

To varying decrees, no different than contemporary Christianity, today’s broad Messianic community has allowed various side issues, at times, to take our attention off of being unified around faith in God the Father and His Son Yeshua the Messiah. Entry and acceptance into and among God’s own (“justification”) **should occur because a person believes in God, and believes in His Messiah**—not because one is

⁵⁹ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 127.

⁶⁰ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 70.

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of this faction or that faction. While all the issues listed above are worthy of being addressed as one matures in faith and studies Scripture, *regardless of what position you may hold to*, what binds us all together is Yeshua the Messiah. If we fail to do this, then Dunn's following observations have the unfortunate capacity to manifest:

"[T]o see others [of a particular faction] as essentially a threat to my own or my people's status (or rights/privileges), will always cripple and destroy mutual acceptance and community; to insist that others can be respected and accepted only if they share the same tribal loyalty, only if they formulate their faith in the words that we recognise, only if they act in ways that we approve, narrows the grace of God and the truth of the gospel in ways that would cause Paul the same anguish and anger as he experienced in Antioch."⁶¹

What is portrayed here is the classic problem of the man marooned on a desert island. When rescued, he is asked what the three buildings he had constructed were for. One is his house. One is the church (or synagogue) he attends. The other is the church (or synagogue) *he does not attend*. The lesson is one which is well learned. We too often define ourselves *by what we are not*, a negative effect of factionalism.

Modern manifestations of "works of law" are seen when we elevate secondary and tertiary issues to the level of salvation issues. Believe me when I say this: I would not be a Bible teacher if I did not have positions on secondary or tertiary issues. I definitely have some opinions on the issues listed above *and I have even made a few rivals within the Messianic world because of those issues*. Yet, what should bind us together is: "*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all*" (Ephesians 4:4-5, NASU). When we can learn to understand those common elements of faith which should bind us all together, then those other issues can be worked through in a very civil and constructive manner. **To do anything else would be to erect unnecessary barriers between God and the work He wants to accomplish through us.**

Today's Messianic community—not too dissimilar than any other religious movement which has preceded it—has a great deal of factionalism. It has allowed not only secondary or tertiary issues to divide it, *but also a great deal of sideshow issues*. People in the Messianic world are known more for releasing bullish white papers or position statements on various issues—that smear or demean others—rather than actually addressing *the issues* themselves from the Biblical text, and resolving them in a tenor of fairness and equity. We have a great deal of potential to become not only a movement of God's holiness and righteousness, **but a force**—but this will not be achieved by people who remain unobjective and place their own interests ahead of the good news, and the actual things our Heavenly Father wants us to achieve.

How we learn to do this properly will only come when we allow faith in the Creator, and trust in Yeshua the Messiah, to be placed at the center of who we are.

⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

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From this, approaching various other spiritual and theological issues should then be able to take place in a reasonable and responsible way, with people whose loyalty is to the Holy Scriptures and mission of God. Yet as we have seen too much in the recent past, other things have largely taken the place of the agenda of the good news. Various “works of law,” human *halachot*, or a skewed praxis, have all taken the place of the message of Yeshua. The choice to change this, and heed the message seen in what “works of the law” meant in an ancient First Century context, is entirely up to us.

I pray every day that our emerging Messianic movement—one which still does not know what it will *emerge into* in the future—will make the right decisions in the long term. But in order to make the right and proper decisions, we are likely going to face some painful opposition in the short term, no different than how the good Apostle Paul did. Rather than our focus being on any man-made “works of law,” we need to instead focus on “the hearing of faith” which can only come from placing Yeshua the Messiah at the center of all we do!