

GALATIANS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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THE MESSAGE OF GALATIANS

a summary for Messianic teaching and preaching

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians is without question the most difficult book of the Bible for today’s Messianic Believers to understand (and interestingly enough, many Christians who read the letter as a whole are sometimes perplexed by it).¹ For those who have been convicted that they need to follow a life of Torah observance, Christian colleagues will often immediately (and quite haphazardly) quote from Galatians and tell Messianics that they participate in a life of bondage from which Christ has released us (cf. 5:1). All too frequently, today’s Messianic Believers do not know what to do with the Epistle to the Galatians. Some fall back into old understandings of Galatians, and others ignore Galatians altogether. Sadly, many Christians we encounter think that they have “won” when we do not know how to respond to their critiques of us from this ancient letter. And even more sadly, some Messianics I have encountered have disregarded Galatians altogether, perhaps asserting that Paul is wrong and that his apostleship is in doubt.

The history of Galatians interpretation is something to be noted before any reader, or any teacher, goes to the text. It was during the early days of the Reformation that Martin Luther originally appealed to Galatians 3:11—“Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’”—to protest many of the abuses of Medieval Catholicism. Assuming that Paul was confronting Jewish legalists teaching the Galatians that by observing the Torah they would gain merit before God, so was Roman Catholicism teaching European Christians that if they observed the Church’s sacraments that they would likewise gain salvation. What has followed in much of Protestant theology—or at least the thoughts of many Christians—is that First Century Judaism was staunchly legalistic, believing that one had to observe the Law of Moses perfectly in order to achieve salvation.

Lutheranism itself has been marked with a largely negative approach toward God’s Torah, something that was **not shared** in later Protestant sectors that would come forth such as the Reformed Church or the Wesleyan movement—the latter two historically holding to a very high view of the Old Testament’s “moral law” to be followed as a means of Christian holiness.² Yet even while John Calvin or John Wesley would issue some praise for

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

² These positions are well summarized in Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp 22-87.

the role that the Torah can play in the discipleship of a Believer, just about all Protestants up until the Twentieth Century *assumed* that the issue confronted in Galatians was a group of new, non-Jewish Believers being errantly persuaded that faith in the Messiah had to be attended with observance of the minute rituals of the Mosaic Law. And even among today's Messianics, whose obedience to the Torah is clearly an action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:25-27) and not of the flesh, there can be a tendency to interpret Galatians along the same traditional lines. For these people, the primary issue in Galatians is one of putting the cart before the horse: obedience to God is to follow salvation, not obedience *preceding* belief in Him. This is not an incorrect conclusion, but it does not appear to be the main issue encountered in Galatians.

Many common presuppositions regarding Galatians have changed in recent decades, in no small part due to proposals made by a theological school often known as the New Perspective of Paul (as best seen in the writings of E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright).³ While past generations could easily associate the religious culture of Medieval Catholicism with that of First Century Judaism, this was a far too convenient conclusion to draw. In the past century, with greater exposure to ancient Jewish literature and interreligious dialogue, various "Lutheran" opinions have changed, and it has affected how various interpreters have read Paul's letter to the Galatians (and to a lesser degree, Romans). Ancient Judaism was not as focused on legalistic dogma (even though there were surely legalistic people) as much as it was with corporate identity—and a corporate identity that could easily skew its mandate to proclaim the message of God to the nations (cf. Genesis 12:2; Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).

Is the main issue in Galatians *really* the imposition of the Law of Moses by a group of outside agitators—or is it, rather, how the non-Jewish Galatians were to be considered a part of God's covenant people? God's writing the Torah onto the hearts of all His people is, after all, a promise of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:10; 10:16), something to have been expected in God's unfolding plan and something that Paul would not have opposed (cf. Romans 11:27). But was this to be inaugurated via an act of faith, or an act of proselyte conversion? It is not difficult to see in the Hebrew Tanach how "righteousness" or "justification" does in fact have corporate connotations (i.e., Deuteronomy 6:25),⁴ and for Paul, various statements made in Galatians can be understood regarding such corporate identity (2:16-17), as opposed to individual status.

If covenant inclusion among God's people is in fact, the issue Paul primarily addresses in Galatians, then it is not only fairer to the ancient religious culture(s) of Judaism, but it makes the text far more relevant for the current development of today's Messianic

³ For a general review, you should peruse the following books: E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977); James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁴ Cf. Harold G. Stigers, "tzadeq," in *TWOT*, 2:754.

movement. Today's Messianic Judaism is struggling over the issue of non-Jewish inclusion every bit as much as the First Century *ekklēsia* did. When the Apostle Peter visited the Believers in Antioch, and then certain persons from Jerusalem arrived, he separated himself during fellowship meals. This incurred a sharp rebuke from the Apostle Paul, as it meant that the non-Jewish Believers were not being recognized by Peter as his equals in the Lord (2:11-16; 3:28). These people would have had to do something drastic in order to join with Peter and his associates—*like convert to Judaism*. The entryway into covenant standing with God was not to be considered “circumcision” (or the ritual procedure of a proselyte, which surprisingly could have involved *women* as well as men),⁵ but instead—as it always had been from the beginning—faith in God (3:6, 14).

Galatians is also a difficult text for Bible readers, because of the fact that it is very probable that it was one of the first Apostolic texts composed. It represents some of the very early controversies faced by the Believers, before they would be hashed out and resolved by the greater community. If Paul's audience in Galatia are the same people he visited in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:13-14:28) during his First Missionary Journey to the province of Galatia in Southern Asia Minor, then the Jerusalem Council had yet to convene (Acts 15). The final decision of the Council was that the non-Jewish Believers did **not** have to convert to Judaism in order to be accepted, although in following the Apostolic decree they would decisively be cut off from their old spheres of social and religious influence, making their new sphere of social and religious influence a Sabbath-keeping Jewish community where the Torah was taught (cf. Acts 15:19-21, 29). Paul's letter anticipates much of what would later be decided. While it is easy for one to think of Paul being anti-Law in this letter, this is problematic when the Torah and the Prophets were, in fact, appealed to in Paul's preaching to those in Galatia—being a part of *their* salvation experience (3:24)!

Anyone who reads Galatians can see that it is a text written with a great deal of emotion, because once Paul had returned to Antioch from visiting Galatia and teaching the new Believers, outside Influencers had come in and had started to ruin the proper course that the new Believers were on. *Much of Galatians likely addresses issues that Paul discussed with his audience when he visited them in person.* And who were these Influencers (more commonly called Judaizers)? While they were trying to force “circumcision” or proselyte conversion upon the people, with the Torah somehow involved (5:3-4), how can Paul say “Not even those who are circumcised obey the law” (6:13)? Could these Influencers have included relatively new converts to Judaism in their ranks? How could they actually *disobey* the very Torah that they at least claimed to uphold? While there has been a great deal of

⁵ This is realized in 5:3 when Paul speaks of *panti anthrōpō* or “every human being” circumcised, employing the generic *anthrōpos*, and not the male specific *anēr*. We have ample cause to consider the “circumcision” addressed in Galatians to be the ritual of a proselyte and not a medical operation. In First Century Judaism, one's “circumcision” became a significant sign of identity that one was a Jew.

For a further summary consult T.R. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 138.

speculation offered as to what this remark means, it could very well have to do with the Galatians returning to “the basic principles of the world” (4:3), ungodly practices that they should have left behind in paganism. But rather than Paul equating God’s commandments with paganism, instead we have to realize that paganism *had infected* some parts of the Synagogue (4:3) with esoteric and proto-Gnostic ideas. The Influencers in Galatia could have been promoting some Jewish practices associated with astrology and/or the occult, fused into their observance of the appointed times (4:8-11).

Because of some of the complexities seen in Galatians, many commentators are agreed that to interpret the Apostle Paul’s theology *exclusively* from the points made in Galatians would be a mistake. F.F. Bruce warns in his commentary, “Galatians is the most ‘Pauline’ of all of the Pauline letters—so much so, indeed, that those who derive their understanding of Paulism exclusively, or even mainly, from this letter are apt to present a lop-sided construction of the apostle’s teaching—to become ‘more Pauline than Paul.’”⁶ An interpreter needs to understand Galatians often in concert with Romans, particularly as this later epistle expands significantly upon some of the themes first described by Paul in Galatians—giving us additional information that we need to consider in formulating able interpretations of Paul’s whole theology.⁷

Paul’s thoughts in Galatians are not at all anti-Torah (3:21), as many readers conclude, but Paul is absolutely opposed to the Torah’s misuse where one would think proselyte conversion *somehow preceded* faith in God and His Messiah (5:6). This ritual likely became embedded in what is classified within the letter as *ergōn nomou* (2:16[3x]; 3:2, 5, 10) or “works of law.” In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hebrew phrase *ma’asei haTorah* is employed to describe the Qumran community’s sectarian *halachah* or Torah application (4QMMT). Seeing how Paul uses the Greek equivalent, he would not be deriding “observing the law” (as the NIV unfortunately paraphrases *ergōn nomou*), indicating some kind of rote, legalistic observance—but instead he is deriding “observing the law” in a particular way.⁸ This would have been a faulty interpretation and application of the Mosaic Torah that drew up inappropriate boundary markers—namely circumcision for covenant inclusion *over and against* faith in God. Paul’s desire is to get his readers to see the bigger picture and the bigger message of the gospel, which in fact was first proclaimed to Abraham and evidenced by Abraham’s trust in God (3:6-8). **The community of faith should require faith in God and His Messiah as the determining factor for entry.**

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 42.

⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, “Galatians, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 2:872 summarizes, “The literary genre and composition of Galatians have much in common with Romans. Both are apologies; but while Galatians is short and confrontational, representing the beginning of a controversy, Romans is conciliatory and greatly expanded, showing an advanced stage of debate in which Paul defends his theology as a whole by elaborate arguments formulating and even revising positions taken in Galatians.”

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 259; cf. James W. Thompson, “Works,” in *EDB*, 1387.

Paul opens his letter to the Galatians by affirming his commission as an apostle originating from the Lord Himself (1:1), a reminder to his audience that he has a Divine authority behind him. Contrary to many of his later epistles, Paul actually issues a doxology first (1:3-5), which includes not only praise to God, but also the fact that Yeshua came “to rescue us from the present evil age” (1:4), a period dominated by sin and disobedience.

Getting this out of the way, Paul wastes no time in expressing his disappointment with the Galatians, and how “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Messiah and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (1:6-7). This is a form of ironic rebuke where Paul is really not “amazed” (NASU), but rather is quite disturbed about the Galatians being led off course. He expresses being upset at how “some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Messiah” (1:8), actually telling the Galatians that even if an angel comes with a different message than the one that he had preached to them—“let him be eternally condemned!” (1:8b)—something he makes a point of repeating (1:9). Paul is going to make some very direct statements to his readers, because he is not looking for human approval: “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Messiah” (1:10). He does not like those who have come after him and led the Galatians into disarray.

Because outsiders have come in and taken the Galatian Believers—largely new, non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua—away from the path of faith on which Paul had set them, Paul had a great need to reestablish his credibility in their minds. He tells them how the gospel message that he proclaimed to them he “did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Yeshua the Messiah” (1:12), an indication of how important it was. He refers to his previous experience in Judaism prior to encountering the Lord (Acts 9:1-18), specifically of “how intensely I persecuted the [assembly] of God and tried to destroy it” (1:13). He was a person “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (1:14), an indication that he was a part of an extreme branch of Judaism, in stark contrast to his mentor Gamaliel who urged a live-and-let live policy toward the early Believers (Acts 5:34-39; cf. 22:3).⁹ *Paul instead hunted them down and had them stoned as blasphemers.* At the right time, though, “God, who set me apart from birth...was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (1:15-16), taking this sinner and transforming him into an apostle designated for great service.

As a new Believer in Yeshua, who had earned a bad reputation as a persecutor of the assembly, Paul found it necessary to go “immediately into Arabia” and later return “to Damascus” (1:17). After three years of sorting things out, perhaps as he prepared himself to enter into the purpose that the Lord had set out for him among the nations (cf. Acts 9:15-16), Paul goes to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Peter and James (1:18). In this season of

⁹ Consult N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp 26-29.

Wright actually concludes that prior to encountering the Lord, Paul was an extremely zealous Shammaite Pharisee, not that unlike the Torah student Yigal Amir who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin.

his early ministry he says, “I was personally unknown to the [assemblies] of Judea that are in Messiah” (1:22). Being largely called to minister to the Diaspora, “They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy’” (1:23). The Jewish Believers in Judea, Paul says, “praised God because of me” (1:24). Even though some may try to assert that Paul’s theology and the theology of the Jewish Believers in Judea were constantly at odds, this seems rather unlikely *if they were praising God* over his ministry work.

About fourteen years would pass until Paul “went up again to Jerusalem,” this time with his companion Barnabas, and also his Greek colleague Titus (2:1). We can safely assume that by this point his ministry had become substantial enough that the Jerusalem leaders would need to not only be informed, but now play a much larger role in the discipleship of the new, non-Jewish Believers he was responsible for bringing to Messiah faith. Paul tells the Galatians that this was a necessary visit: “I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles” (2:2a), a presentation before them of how he proclaimed the good news to the nations at large. He did this first “privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain” (2:2b), an indication that he did seek a level of approval from the leaders of the Jerusalem assembly. (This is different from the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council, which was a much more public meeting.) He could have expected these largely conservative, Jewish Believers to demand that the Greek Titus be circumcised and become a Jewish proselyte, but this was not required of him (2:3).

This was important for the Galatians to consider, because the circumstances that require Paul to write to them have already manifested themselves among the leaders of the *ekklēsia*, many of whom walked with the Lord Yeshua Himself. In contrast to the Jerusalem leaders, “some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Messiah Yeshua to make us slaves” (2:4)—entering into a private meeting that Paul was having and disturbing the conversation.

The kind of fleshly bondage that these “false believers” (NRSV) were trying to introduce stood in stark contrast to what Paul describes in Romans 7:22, with the person who is eager to exclaim, “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law.” The Psalmist considers following God’s Torah to be a means of freedom (Psalm 119:45-46), but when used improperly for the wrong reason (and Paul himself says in 1 Timothy 1:8 that “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly”), it can be considered a form of slavery no different than that experienced by Ancient Israel in Egypt. (The verb used by Paul, *katadouloō*, is employed in the LXX of Exodus 1:14¹⁰ to describe the slavery of Ancient Israel.) Ancient Israel was not brought out of slavery to the Egyptians only to be brought to Mount Sinai to be put in bondage to God’s Law. On the contrary, God’s Torah was to be a means by which Israel could fulfill His mandate of being a blessing to all (Genesis 12:2; Deuteronomy 4:6).

¹⁰ Heb. MT uses the verb *avad*.

The false brethren brought in an “obedience” of the flesh, versus what James the Just would emphasize as an adherence to the Torah of liberty (James 1:25). The demand of the false brethren that Titus be circumcised and thus become a proselyte was something that Paul and the Jerusalem leaders—“we”—“did not give in to...for a moment” (2:5).

Paul discounts these false brethren as having any importance at all, even though they “seemed to be important” (2:6). He tells the Galatians that the Jerusalem leaders to whom he went to specifically meet, “saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews” (2:7). A level of trust and mutual respect were formed between the Jerusalem leaders and Paul, as Paul could recognize that God “was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews,” and they recognized that God “was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles” (2:8). Obviously within these unique callings, there would be some difference of approach and emphasis. Paul’s opponents in Galatia may try to appeal somehow to the authority of the Jerusalem assembly, yet it is only Paul who can say “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me” (2:9). And when the Jerusalem leaders asked him to remember the poor, Paul says this was “the very thing I was eager to do” (2:10; cf. Acts 11:27-30). It is not unimportant that remembering the poor is a very critical component of the Torah’s instruction (Deuteronomy 24:10-22).¹¹

Paul relays to the Galatians how a problem erupted when Peter visited Antioch, where “I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong” (2:11). When various individuals arrived from the Jerusalem assembly led by James, “he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof” (2:12, NASU), eating with these Jewish Believers and not with the non-Jewish Believers, causing a schism. Peter was in the wrong because previously, in the vision of the sheet, God had shown him that all people were made clean via the work of Yeshua (Acts 11:4-10; cf. 10:9-16). There are many reasons proposed for Peter’s separating himself, and it could very well have been Peter’s having to answer to some ultra-conservative Jewish Believers when he returned to Jerusalem (cf. Acts 11:1-3), as “he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (2:12b). Other Jewish Believers in Antioch—even Barnabas—“joined him in his hypocrisy” (2:13). Peter had been shown by God that such separations among His people were unacceptable, yet he did it anyway.

In recounting this, Paul says “When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew’” (2:14). In separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch—thinking himself to act like a good Jew—Peter actually found himself treating these Believers in the same manner as pagans would have treated him! Causing a split in the assembly, Paul asked him that in order for the non-Jewish Believers to join with him: *pōs ta ethnē anagkazeis Ioudaizein*, or “why do you compel *the* nations to Judaize?” (2:14b, LITV).

¹¹ Cf. Psalm 10:9; 12:5; 14:6; Isaiah 3:14-15; 10:1-2; 58:6-7; Amos 8:4-6.

This is not a reference “to follow Jewish customs” (NIV) and/or obey God’s Torah, but rather by Peter’s actions of separating himself he would be communicating that the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch would have to go through the procedure of becoming a Jewish proselyte to join with him. (The verb *Ioudaizō* is used similarly in the Greek Septuagint rendering of Esther 8:17 to render the Hebrew *yahad*.¹²)

Paul tells Peter that both of them as good Jews should know better, not acting like “Gentile sinners” (2:15; cf. 1 Maccabees 1:34), as they had God’s Torah to guide them and to tell them how to relate to others, being a proper beacon of His wisdom (Deuteronomy 4:6). Both Paul and Peter should know enough from their reading of the Tanach Scriptures that being justified or a member of God’s covenant people was to come most principally via trust and belief in Him, and not human action. And then comes one of Paul’s most poignant remarks that cannot be separated from its ancient context:

“Yet [we] who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we 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 shall no one be justified” (2:16, RSV).

Here, the two important terms at work are: (1) *ergōn nomou*—“works of law” relating to the *halachah* or identity barriers of a religious community, and (2) *pisteōs Iēsou Christou*—“the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” relating to His obedience unto death.¹³ A person is not “justified,” meaning entering into covenant status among God’s people, by a community’s man-made rules—the kind of rules that caused Peter to separate himself from the non-Jewish Believers, requiring them to become Jewish proselytes in order to be considered spiritual equals. On the contrary to this human action, it is by the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah—His obedience to the Father via His sacrifice for all—whereby one is considered a member of God’s people. This is the faithfulness that the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch had recognized by virtue of them receiving the Messiah of Israel into their lives as Savior. Unfortunately, translations like the NIV skew the rendering of *ergōn nomou* as “observing the law,” so people think that obeying God’s Torah is the issue, when in actuality the scene in Antioch regarded debates over ancient *halachah*. (The issue of table fellowship was by no means agreed upon within Second Temple Judaism.)¹⁴

So if the scene in Antioch was *not* between a group of Jewish Believers which kept the Law of Moses, and a group of non-Jewish Believers which did not keep the Law of Moses—with both in fierce opposition—then what was it, actually? It was instead **an emerging and**

¹² “And many among the peoples of the land became Jews [*yahad*], for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them” (Esther 8:17b).

¹³ Consult the author’s article “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah” for an examination of the different grammatical nuances at work here (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

¹⁴ A somewhat open approach for Jews eating with non-Jews is seen in m.*Avodah Zera* 5:5; a closed approach is seen in m.*Ohalot* 18:7; and the common Roman approach to the Jewish customs is seen in Tacitus *Histories* 5.5.1-2; Juvenal *Satires* 14.95-104.

developing faith community where the Jewish Believers had to shed some of their ultra-conservative customs in order to accommodate the needs of the new non-Jewish Believers, bringing unity to the assembly. Not everyone had figured out what it meant to be “justified in Messiah” (2:17)—meaning that their main identity was found in Him (cf. Philippians 3:7-11)—and so there would inevitably have to be some kind of an incident, like the Apostle Peter separating himself, before a resolution could be determined.

In his rebuke to the Apostle Peter, the Apostle Paul gave him a brief testimony of how he had been changed by the Messiah: “If, while we seek to be justified in Messiah, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Messiah promotes sin? Absolutely not!” (2:17). Yeshua the Messiah is not to be blamed if some people define covenant inclusion in an inappropriate way, inconsistent with what His faithfulness (or work on the cross) has brought. Peter’s bad behavior is to ultimately not be regarded as a reflection back on Yeshua and His example. Paul reflects on his previous way of life as a zealous Jew, “If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker” (2:18) or a “transgressor” (NASU). To insist that Paul is saying here that he would be found a “Lawbreaker” by returning to a life of following God’s Torah is utterly absurd. But if Paul’s previous Jewish experience, which included things contrary to the missional thrust of God’s Torah, is in view, then it fits well with the theme of his letter. This would have been a previous life for Paul marked by a zealousness to persecute the early Believers (1:13), and also be more insistent of proselyte conversion than the Influencers in Galatia could ever be!

Galatians 2:19 is very difficult for Messianics to understand because Paul says, “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.” Is Paul saying that he died to the Torah as a standard of God’s holiness? No. Paul says later in Romans 7:12 “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good,” and examiners can often be agreed that Romans 7:9-10 gives a much further explanation of what is intended in Galatians 2:19: “Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.” Romans 7 depicts a common scene of a person coming to salvation, where the message is “you...died to the law through the body of Messiah...But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law” (Romans 7:4, 6)—speaking of the penalties pronounced upon sinners that Yeshua has taken away for us as Believers via His sacrifice (Colossians 2:14). Was this something that the Apostle Peter forgot to emphasize—the fact that the penalties pronounced upon sinners had been remitted via Yeshua’s sacrifice—“the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (2:16, Grk.)?

Paul is free of the Torah’s condemnation upon him, so that he might live the life God has intended for him. He says, “I have been crucified with Messiah and I no longer live, but Messiah lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). He recognizes that it is only by the “grace of God” that one can be considered “righteous”—here regarding Paul’s being forgiven of sin—and that “if righteousness could be gained through the law, Messiah died for nothing!” (2:21). Human

action will not merit a person remittance of sin, nor should it be the factor where one is admitted among God's people. **The Messiah's atoning death is what will do these things.** Contrary to the message being proclaimed by the Influencers in Judea of inclusion via their "works of law" (2:16), the message of Paul is one where one's life is to be found decisively in what Yeshua has done (2:20-21). The actual role that the Torah plays is secondary—one of revealing and condemning sin—to the primary role that Yeshua plays of freeing people from sin.

Paul finishes his encounter with Peter in Antioch, turning his attention back to the Galatians' situation. *He is very upset.* He tells them, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1a). While it is easy in today's West to disregard the idea that the Influencers were part of some esoteric Jewish sect—this can be supported from Galatians 3:1, and from Paul question of whether or not the Galatians were actually "hypnotized" (HCSB).¹⁵ The Galatians should know that their identity is first and foremost in Yeshua the Messiah, who "was clearly portrayed as crucified" (3:1b) to them in Paul's teachings. This was attendant with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit among them, something which did not come from the "works of law" advocated by the Influencers (3:2). Paul does not understand what could have happened: "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing...?" (3:4). God did not give the Galatians His Spirit and demonstrate miracles via the Influencers' "works of law," but rather "by hearing with faith" (3:5, NASU). Certainly, obedience to God is expected via this "hearing" (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-7),¹⁶ but the focus is on emulating the Messiah and not a group of human teachers.

Paul makes a strong appeal to the example of Abraham as the prototype for the Galatians to emulate. Abraham's trust in God resulted in him being considered righteous (3:6; Genesis 15:6). Abraham certainly obeyed God in His commands for him to leave Ur and sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 15:7; 22:2), but *his trust* in God *preceded* his obedience to Him. Paul asserts, "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" (3:7), emphasizing one of the most important statements he makes in his entire epistle: "**The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'**" (3:8; Genesis 12:3). Those who believe in God, and consequently now in the Messiah He has sent, believe in a good news that was originally given to Abraham (3:9)—a message largely underemphasized by those agitating the Galatians.

¹⁵ I mention the example of "today's West" as a New Testament professor I had at Asbury Seminary once recalled an exchange he witnessed between a British Bible scholar, and Kenyan seminary students. The British scholar dismissed any connection between "bewitched" (3:1) and errant religious practices, whereas the Kenyan students—living in an indigenous culture where witchdoctors were the norm—forced him to think about some things he had never considered before.

¹⁶ Obedience via "hearing" is only to be expected of the Galatians when *akoē* is understood with the Semitic *shama* in mind.

If one follows the Influencers’ “works of law,” then one will actually find himself cursed. Why is this the case? It is not as though obeying God’s Law will merit God’s curse, but *forgetting* things in the Torah will merit God’s curse. Paul says “as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse” (3:10, NASU), appealing to Deuteronomy 27:26 and saying “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (3:11). **One of the most obvious things written in the Torah is the promise that all will be blessed by Abraham and his seed.** If one’s missiology is devoid of this understanding, then for Paul, the “works of law” or man-made *halachah* of the Influencers causes them to disobey the Torah and thus find themselves cursed (or at least penalized) by God. By failing to recognize all of the ramifications of the original Abrahamic promise—*especially now that the Messiah has come*—one is likely to be found disobeying God and be subject to chastisement from Him.

But Paul’s message is not at all one where perfect obedience to the Torah—even its missional imperatives to be a blessing—is exclusively what God wants of us. He reminds his readers, “no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith”” (3:11; Habakkuk 2:4). Following the Torah is not enough, because “the law is not based on faith” (3:12a)—even though the Torah is certainly “spiritual” (Romans 7:14). Faith requires God’s people to reach out beyond what the Scriptures tell them (Hebrews 11:1). However, Paul is not discounting the Torah here as a standard of good conduct, saying *all’ ho poiēsas auta zēsetai en autois*, “yet¹⁷, HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM” (3:12b, my translation; cf. Leviticus 18:5). Paul certainly would have expected the Galatians to adhere to the good sexual ethics portrayed in Leviticus ch. 18, which he quotes from! While eternal life is to be found in trust in God (versus trust in idols—Habakkuk 2:18-19), God’s Torah is the sphere of where one’s standard for daily living is to be found.

As important as the Torah may be for such daily living, Paul wants the Galatians—and any Believer for that matter—to place his or her attention on Yeshua and His completed work. “Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23). Here, the issue is clearly *tēs kataras tou nomou* or “the curse of the law”—**not** the high standard of holiness embodied in God’s commandments. All of humanity, even persons in just a basic sense, are subject to the Torah’s curse upon sinners (cf. Romans 2:14-15). With God’s plan manifesting itself in the sacrifice of His Son, “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the [nations] through Messiah Yeshua, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (3:14). With the sacrifice of Yeshua enacted, what God originally promised to Abraham of *all being blessed* can be fully realized—especially in the lives of those individuals who have welcomed the gospel, been spiritually regenerated, and are no longer subject to the Torah’s curse.

¹⁷ BDAG, 45 indicates how the conjunction *alla* may mark “a transition to someth. new...**other matter for additional consideration**,” as the author’s rendering has chosen to translate it here with “yet.”

What the Influencers in Galatia had done was to muddy the waters by failing to emphasize the original promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:2). Paul provides an example from everyday life that the Galatians should be able to relate to: “when a man's will and testament has been duly executed, no one else can set it aside or add a codicil” (3:15, NEB). If such a human agreement can not be added to, why do the Influencers think they can add to God's agreement to Abraham by requiring proselyte circumcision? Abraham was physically circumcised at a much later point in his life, *after* God's agreement with him and as he matured in his relationship with God (Genesis 17:10; Romans 4:10-11). The gravity of trying to add to this original promise of being a blessing to all is most severe, because to Paul the principal Seed of which it speaks is the entry of Yeshua the Messiah into the world (3:16).

The Influencers had completely forgotten the life example of Abraham, thinking that the admonition to circumcise (Exodus 12:48) took priority over faith in God (Genesis 15:6). While the Torah was formally given to Israel after the life of Abraham, this does not make void God's agreement with Abraham (3:17). The inheritance that God intends for His people is by His promise (3:18). But let us not think that simply because the Torah given to Israel came after this promise that it is somehow invalidated. Paul is trying to re-prioritize the confused thinking of the Galatians, wanting them to see that Abraham's faith in God came first, with the Torah coming second. The Galatians' own faith in Yeshua is to come first, and anything relating to the Torah is to come forth as a result of that faith (3:5b).

The fact that *torah* existed prior to Mount Sinai, as Abraham himself observed God's *torot* or “laws” (Genesis 26:5; cf. Sirach 44:19-20), is something that can easily elude many readers of Galatians. When Paul says, “What, then was the purpose of the law?” he is clear to say “It was added because of transgressions...” (3:19), and here we are perfectly justified to ask: *Which law?* The verb *prostithēmi* primarily means “**to add to someth. that is already present or exists**” (BDAG),¹⁸ and so in 3:19 the regulations regarding the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifice in Moses' Teaching are likely what were added to a *torah* composing a basic ethical and moral code. With Yeshua's arrival, we have seen “a change of the priesthood” with “a change of the law” (Hebrews 7:12), not with the Torah's standard of holiness abolished—but with the necessary internal rearrangements made to accommodate Yeshua's sacrifice, so the New Covenant can be manifest (4:26).

The fact that the promise of God to Abraham is superior to the Instruction, given at Mount Sinai, is not difficult to see: “The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator” (3:19b). This is intended to affirm God's supremacy, more than anything else. If there were others involved in the giving of the Torah—with God directly, with no one else present, gave Abraham explicit promises (3:20)—it necessarily places a priority on the Abrahamic promise. Yet even though the Torah may be secondary to God's promise, Paul is insistent, “Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!” Paul's

¹⁸ Ibid., 885.

point is that “if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law” (3:21).

God’s intention is to bring His Son into the world, *who will provide righteousness to those who believe* (Romans 3:22)—being the Source of their forgiveness and their principal identity. The Torah is God’s holy standard defining sin, indicating what all people must be forgiven of. This is why Paul tells the Galatians, “Before this faith [in Messiah] came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until this faith should be revealed” (3:23). The condition of the unregenerate sinner is one of being condemned by the Torah—“under the law” (3:23, NASU)—locked up in a prison of relative unrighteousness and certainly unforgiveness. With this in mind, Paul asserts “the law was put in charge to lead us to Messiah that we might be justified by faith” (3:24). The Torah’s teachings and instructions are to reveal the sin nature of a person (Romans 7:7-9), being responsible for *revealing the need for a Savior*.

So is it Paul’s intention that once such salvation is found, as the NIV renders it, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (3:25)? In describing the Torah as a “tutor” (NASU), Paul employs the classical term *paidagōgos*, one who was a household servant designed to lead young boys to and from school, protecting them. This “disciplinarian” (NRSV) or “guardian” (ESV) would try to instill in the boys a basic sense of who a responsible citizen was until the boys were old enough to take care of themselves (Plato *Laws* 7.809). The *paidagōgos* was no longer necessary when the young people reached an age of maturity. The principles taught by the tutor would now become second nature.

Does the Torah play any role for the redeemed Believer, who is “no longer under a tutor” (3:25, NASU)? Certainly it does play a role, because it is God’s Word (2 Timothy 3:16). We need to understand the role of the Torah for born again Believers in the sense of how it “has become,” *gegonen*, “our tutor” (3:24, NASU). The perfect verb *gegonen* indicates that the training of the *paidagōgos* continues to have an effect throughout life. It has every bit as much of an effect as the fulfilled prophecies that speak of the Messiah’s arrival. When Matthew’s Gospel asserts, “All this took place [*gegonen*] to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet” (Matthew 1:22), are we expected to throw away and ignore Tanach or Old Testament Messianic prophecies now that they have been fulfilled via the Incarnation of Yeshua? Or are we to understand them in a new light? *In a similar way, the role of the Torah is no longer one of “tutor” for the redeemed person.*

No longer serving in the role of “tutor,” the Torah’s instructions for born again Believers should serve to aid their mission of being called to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). God’s people are called to be a missional community active in the world, making a difference—a mandate first given in the Torah (Genesis 12:2), and which does recognize obedience as important (Deuteronomy 4:6). In Yeshua the Messiah, all Believers are fellow sons and daughters of God (3:26), something realized via an identification of water immersion (3:27)—something anyone of either gender can partake, an identification with Yeshua in His death (Romans 6:3). The new status for human beings

inaugurated by Yeshua's sacrifice—and certainly something “to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (Romans 3:21)—is one of equality for Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, males, and females (3:28). Unlike the separation that took place in Antioch (2:11-16), the Apostle Paul wanted **all** united around the same table, “one in Messiah Yeshua” (3:28). All are to be recognized as recipients and beneficiaries of the promise originally given to Abraham (3:29)!

Paul includes a reference to both his and the Galatians' common status prior to faith in Yeshua, with a new one to now be inaugurated. He compares the state of a non-Believer to being a child, yet as an heir who “owns the whole estate” (4:1). This minor child is a *nēpios*, someone who is silly and foolish, and who lives in bondage to sin (Romans 6:16-22). This state persists “until the time set by his father” (4:2b), previously being “subject to guardians and trustees” (4:2a), individuals who must see that the child is raised properly. While Paul could likely be employing the common Roman custom of *patria potestas*, when a Roman father would formally acknowledge his son as heir at a particular date—applying to the Galatians' salvation experience and how they had entered into God's purpose via his preaching to them—it applied equally to the experience of the Jewish Believers as well.

Paul can tell the Galatians, “also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (4:3). It is quite problematic to associate *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* or “the elemental things of the world” (NASU), as many interpreters do, as somehow God's commandments actually being of the same substance as paganism. Paul was speaking of things that *both* Jewish and non-Jewish people of his time were subject to, particularly as it concerned the situation in Galatia. It is notable that elements of paganism had infected Paul's First Century Judaism, such as the Hellenistic concept of Fate (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.172). The Galatian Believers would similarly need to be freed from “those who by nature are not gods” (4:8).

What came to free them from these things was Yeshua the Messiah: “when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights as sons” (4:5). Yeshua's being born “under law” is a testament to His Incarnation as a human being, and the purpose of Him being sacrificed: “**to redeem those under law.**” Prior to encountering salvation in Yeshua, all either Paul or the Galatians could be is “confined under the law” (3:23, RSV) as unregenerate sinners. Yeshua's sacrificial work has freed Believers from the Torah's curse and penalties laid down upon them (3:13-14).¹⁹ Having been freed from the dominion of sin, the Galatians were to have the Holy Spirit present in their lives, and be able to recognize themselves as heirs able to refer to God as their *Abba* (4:6-7).

Paul's concern for the Galatians was that the Influencers leading them astray were *leading them right back into the life they should have left behind*. This is why many interpreters

¹⁹ Bruce, *Galatians*, 196 concurs, “To be redeemed from existence ‘under law’ is to be redeemed from ‘the curse of the law’ (3:13).”

conclude that Paul now associates Judaism with paganism—yet it is not at all difficult, if pagan elements had influenced parts of the Synagogue, to see how the Influencers could be promoting a form of ancient Jewish mysticism. Paul observes how “when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are returning back to those weak and miserable principles. Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (4:8-9).

The “bankrupt elemental spirits” (REB) were things that the Galatians were affected by, because of the result of sin in the world. His worry for the Galatians is, “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you” (4:10-11). These seem like the appointed times of Leviticus 23, and *they may be* the appointed times of Leviticus 23. But is Paul really concerned for the Galatians commemorating things like the Passover, which he instructed the Corinthians to celebrate (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)? Or, could it be that the appointed times advocated by the Influencers were infused with ungodly practices brought in via astrology?²⁰ Note how these people are said to not even keep the Torah they claim to uphold (6:13; cf. Deuteronomy 18:10-14). That Paul would have been concerned for the religious customs of the Influencers *involved* with their commemoration of the appointed times—mirroring pagan customs the Galatians should have left behind—is not at all impossible.

Rather than getting caught up in all of the confusion brought by the Influencers, Paul instead asks the Galatians, “Put yourselves in my place, my brothers, I beg you, for I have put myself in yours” (4:12, NEB), a need for them to imitate him the way that he imitates the Messiah (1 Corinthians 11:1). In getting all confused by the Influencers’ emphasis on “works of law,” or their sectarian *halachah*, they are likely to cause schisms that will deter the things they should instead be doing. Paul wants them to return to the spirit of hospitality that marked his visit to them. Paul was ill when he met the Galatians (4:13), and “Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Messiah Yeshua himself” (4:14). He asks the Galatians, “What has happened to all your joy?” (4:15a), as they would have even given him their own eyes (4:15b), further stating, “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (4:16).

The Apostle Paul wanted the Galatians—these new, non-Jewish Believers—to return to the path that he had set them on. He has honorable intentions, and is reminding them of the

²⁰ Samuel J. Mikolaski, “Galatians,” in *NBCR*, 1100 comments, “Are these Jewish or pagan observances? In writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly has Judaizers in mind. Did these worship elemental spirits? Astrological elements were at times infused into Jewish as well as pagan practices. The *elemental spirits* of this age refer probably to the ethos of an age traceable in part to pagan astrological mythology, but which had become a religious habit as much as, and perhaps more than, a metaphysical system.”

As the relatively new *Wesley Study Bible* notes indicate: “[Galatians 4:9-10] may refer to religious calendar observances that involve the movement of stars and planets, often believed in the ancient world to be controlled by spirits” (Joel B. Green, ed. [Nashville: Abingdon, 2009], 1428).

good times they had together. The Influencers, in contrast to this, are “people zealous to win you over, but for no good” (4:17a). “They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.” (4:17b, NRSV). Similar to how the Apostle Peter had shut out the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch, provoking the response on the part of Paul that they would have to “Judaize” (2:14, YLT) or convert as proselytes (cf. Esther 8:17) to join in—so do the Influencers isolate themselves from the Galatians to force them to admire them and seek them out. Now while Paul says that zeal is not always bad (4:18), the Galatians are not in a position to be considered spiritually mature. Almost as a mother giving birth, Paul tells the Galatians that “I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (4:19, ESV). He wishes he could be present with them in person “because I am perplexed about you!” (4:20).

If being “under the law” is a status for non-Believers in the clutches of sin (3:23; 4:4), then Paul’s words “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?” (4:21), serve as a form of ironic rebuke. If the Galatians follow after the agenda of the Influencers, adopting the sort of errant practices that they should have left behind in paganism (4:9), then they will find themselves “under the law” or subject to the Torah’s penalties.

To illustrate the circumstances in which the Galatians find themselves, Paul uses an analogy via the examples of Hagar and Sarah, and their respective sons of Ishmael and Isaac. Abraham’s “son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way” or “according to the flesh” (NASU), whereas “his son by the free woman was born according to the promise” (4:22). He says “These things may be taken figuratively” or “allegorically” (NASU), as “the two women represent two covenants” (4:23). The Mosaic Covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai is depicted as being Hagar, “and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem” (4:23-25), for the specific reason “she is in slavery with her children” (4:25). The Heavenly Jerusalem corresponds to Sarah, this city “is free, and she is our mother” (4:26-27; cf. Isaiah 54:1). Believers in the Messiah Yeshua are likened unto Isaac, being children of promise (4:28). Just like Isaac was, they will be persecuted by those born according to the flesh (4:29; t.*Sotah* 6:6). What Hagar represents is to be removed (4:30; Genesis 21:10), because “we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman” (4:31).

In far too many interpretations of this passage, it is thought that the Sinai Covenant could only bring people into bondage to the Law—and the Apostle Paul wants God’s Torah booted out of the Galatian assemblies. But we need not forget how Abraham’s joining with Hagar, *kata sarka* or “according to the flesh,” is specified as being the issue here. This is where Abraham and Sarah thought they were fulfilling God’s promise to them via the birth of Ishmael (Genesis 16:2-4), when in fact this was a faithless act and demonstrated a lack of trust in God. It was only at a later point, when Abraham and Sarah had natural relations between themselves (Genesis 18:10-14), that the child of promise Isaac would be born. This is something that required a great deal of faith, considering how old they were (Hebrews 11:11).

The original intention of the Mosaic Covenant given at Mount Sinai to Ancient Israel was not intended to make slaves—and this is why Paul is very clear to specify that he associates the Mosaic Covenant with *tē nun Ierousalēm* or “the now/current Jerusalem” (my rendering). Paul is not disparaging the agreement made between Ancient Israel and God at Mount Sinai, as many conclude. Yet, Paul is making an observation in his present day that the Sinai Covenant as it was *currently practiced* by those in Jerusalem was proving to be insufficient—especially now that Yeshua the Messiah had come on the scene. Due to *human error* that had entered in between Sinai and the arrival of Yeshua, the Sinai Covenant was largely bearing children for slavery at the time of Paul, caused by the zealotry of people like the Influencers to go out and make ritual proselytes of the nations (cf. Matthew 23:15), misusing the Torah’s message. Ritual proselyte circumcision would do no more good than Abraham joining with Hagar!

Things have certainly changed with the arrival, sacrifice, resurrection, and then ascension of Yeshua into Heaven. **It is hard to avoid that Paul is connecting the Jerusalem above with the New Covenant.** The issue is how the Sinai Covenant—especially considering how it became abused by the First Century—has now naturally given way to the New Covenant as salvation history has progressed forward. It is enacted in the lives of God’s people via the trust they place in His Messiah. The essence of the New Covenant is that God’s Torah can be written on the hearts of His people via the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jeremiah had prophesied several centuries earlier, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33; cf. Hebrews 10:16). Ezekiel 36:26-27 concurs, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Why is Paul’s approach in instructing the Galatians better than the Influencers’ approach? *Because he is clearly going to teach the Galatians what the right priorities are.* Just as Abraham and Sarah had relations at the natural time to conceive Isaac—“by the power of the Spirit” (4:29b)—so is Paul going to encourage the Galatians to follow the Holy Spirit and allow them to mature naturally in faith. *This course will surely include obedience to God’s Law,* but it will be an obedience brought at a steady, graded pace. In contrast to this, all the Influencers can bring the Galatians is a lifestyle not that unlike what they were to leave behind in paganism.

And how important is this? Paul tells the Galatians “It is for freedom that Messiah set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (5:1). Is this “yoke” one of “bondage” to God’s Torah, or is it being bound to sin? Here, Paul widely speaks of being “subject again” (NASU) to *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (4:8) or the elemental things of the world—errant religious practices brought in by the Influencers, actually opposed by God’s Torah (6:13). In contrast to this is the implied directive to follow the Messiah’s “yoke” (Matthew 11:18-30), or the example that He demonstrated of obedience

to His Father, something which surely *did* include the Torah (cf. Sirach 6:23-31; 51:23-26; m.*Avot* 3:5; m.*Berachot* 2:2).²¹ Emulating Yeshua's life of obedience, empowered by the Spirit—with love as a clear imperative (5:14)—should by no means be “slavery.”

The Influencers in Galatia were Jewish extremists, similar to Paul prior to His encounter with Yeshua on the road to Damascus. In advocating circumcision, they were in effect saying that expressing trust in Yeshua as the Messiah and Savior sent by God *was not enough* to be considered a member of God's covenant people. Formal conversion to Judaism was necessary. Paul is quite direct with what he tells the Galatians: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Messiah will be of no value to you at all” (5:2). And then comes a very interesting phrase, “Again I declare to” **not** “every man”—**but** instead to *panti anthrōpō* or “every human being”²²—“who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (5:3). *Panti anthrōpō* would have included *females* as well as males being “circumcised”—an indication that a mere medical procedure is not the main issue here, and that “circumcision” is indeed Paul's shorthand for the ritual of a proselyte.

Galatians 5:3 can easily catch English readers off guard, because of how the Greek *opheiletēs* is usually rendered as something along the lines of “under obligation” (NASU) in most modern versions, i.e., “I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.” This is usually taken to mean that only those who are formally converted to Judaism, and those who are native Jews, are expected to keep all of the commandments of the Torah. The term *opheiletēs*, though, is much better translated as “debtor,” as appearing in an older version like the KJV: “a debtor to do the whole law.” And, the term *opheiletēs* notably appears in the Lord's Prayer, in the famed word, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Consider how it is most probable that ancient Jewish groups would have required proselytes to make a vow to keep the whole Torah—and with it incur definite curses and penalties for Torah breaking—a precedent that had definitely been set by the returned exiles in Nehemiah 10:29.²³ Rather than Paul's words communicating that only circumcised proselytes and native Jews were expected to keep the entire Torah, **but instead that circumcised proselytes were making themselves debtors to perform all of the Torah's demands**—then if such people ever failed in their observance, they would effectively find themselves cut off from God's own, subject to His wrath. The Qumran community notably

²¹ Also see “yoke of the Torah,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 684.

²² Or “every person” (Kingdom New Testament).

²³ “Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (Nehemiah 10:28-29).

required its members “to return to the Law of Moses” via “a binding oath” (1QS 5.9),²⁴ subsequent with curses and penalties if such an oath were broken, and no doubt followed by some close (and perhaps even unfair) scrutiny of one’s personal and private affairs.

This is not at all something Paul would have wanted to have happen to his Galatian friends—converting to Judaism as proselytes, and for them looking to something *other than* faith in Yeshua to be considered a member of God’s people. They thought that the Torah would be their source of proper standing before God. Claiming curses of Torah breaking, by going through a proselyte procedure, would merit a falling away from grace (5:4)—especially as Yeshua Himself has nullified the Torah’s curse (3:13).²⁵ *And, disobeying the Torah’s instructions as limited mortals, would eventually happen.* Paul wanted the Galatians to focus back on the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives (5:5), reminding them the essential truth that “in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (5:6). Whether one has undertaken the ritual of a proselyte or not *does not matter* if a faith evidenced by love is not present. And where would the Influencers be found expressing love? If they were encouraging the Galatians to love, then why did Paul have to speak against gross divisions present among them (5:15)?

The Galatians had been doing the right thing, but then outsiders came in and stalled their path (5:7). The Influencers’ “kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you” (5:8), being likened to leaven (5:9). But Paul is “confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be” (5:10). Paul, the zealous and overbearing Jew that he had once been prior to encountering the Lord, no longer preached “circumcision” or proselyte conversion as the means to entry among His people, recognizing instead the cross and faith in Yeshua as the entryway (5:11). This is something the Influencers did not see, and so Paul—frustrated as he was—wished “they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (5:12). Wishing they would cut their testicles off would render the inflexible Influencers inept for service unto God, which would have similarly disqualified Levitical priests (Leviticus 21:20-21; cf. 22:24).

In spite of the fact that Paul did not expect the Galatians to go through with the ritual proselyte circumcision offered by the Influencers—and instead continue to grow on a steady path—he warns them “do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love” (5:13). He emphasizes the most important commandment in the Torah: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14; Leviticus 19:18). This is actually not that different from how Rabbi Hillel, a generation earlier, said “*What is hateful to you, to your fellow don’t do.*” That’s the entirety of the Torah; *everything else is elaboration. So go, study*” (b.Shabbat 31a).²⁶ To think that the only attention the Apostle Paul wants the Galatians to

²⁴ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 132.

²⁵ For a further summary, consult the FAQ, “Galatians 5:2-3.”

²⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

give the Torah is to the “love commandment” is an inappropriate conclusion. A proper Torah observance **begins** with having love for God and one’s neighbor, sentiments that are surely seen in the Apostolic Scriptures (Matthew 7:12; 22:40; Romans 13:8, 10; cf. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; John 13:34), and over time such obedience is expanded as one moves forward and is changed by God’s love.

The Influencers did not bring a positive message to the new Galatian Believers. If they did, then Paul would never have had to instruct them, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (5:15). They brought division and factionalism with their message of ritual proselyte circumcision. This is why Paul is insistent that their “works of law” do not bring miracles as does the Holy Spirit (3:5). The Holy Spirit filling God’s people “will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (5:16-17). It is interesting that Paul points out “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law” (5:18). Does this mean that with the Holy Spirit inside of a person, obedience to God’s Torah is unnecessary? Or does it mean that if one is truly led by the Holy Spirit, a person will not disobey God’s Law and suffer some kind of penalty for it? John Wesley answered this question over two centuries ago:

“*Ye are not under the law*—Not under the curse or bondage of it; not under the guilt or power of sin.”²⁷

A contemporary theologian like Ben Witherington III actually draws the most foolish assumption, “Christians are no longer under the Law, not even under the moral law, as this context makes very clear.”²⁸ With such a word, even the Ten Commandments bear no relevance to modern-day evangelical Christians. *Today’s Christian Church has certainly not benefitted from widely casting aside the Torah of Moses* (even just the “moral law”), otherwise debates like homosexual ordination or the legality of abortion would not be raging. If Paul really considers being led by God’s Spirit, and obeying God’s Torah, to be polar opposites with one another—then what are we to make of the deeds of the flesh seen in 5:19-21? Are these not gross sins that are spoken against in the Torah and the Prophets? Would not a person meditating on Old Testament texts like Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Proverbs, Amos, Lamentations, etc., see admonitions against these things?²⁹ Perhaps some need to remember what Paul says about the spirit and the flesh being in conflict with one another:

“The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (Romans 8:6-8).

²⁷ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 697.

²⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 396.

²⁹ Cf. Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), 202 for a chart and detailed summary of each one of the sins listed in 5:19-21.

What are some of the sins that are opposed by God's Torah? Paul says "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:19-21). Any person in Galatia, with a cursory knowledge of God's Law, would have known that these sins were condemned. The other sinful categories that Paul lists are clearly derived from concepts seen in the Tanach, and would have been spoken against in the mainline Jewish schools of the day. It is **utterly ridiculous** of any interpreter to suggest that Paul's categories of "works of the flesh" are not derived from the Torah and Tanach and Paul's own Jewish training.

It is interesting that Paul would take the time to list high sins, clearly things prohibited by the Torah, in his rebuke to the Galatians. Surely Paul cannot be opposed to the Torah when we consider the penalties merited for sexual perversions, idolatry, sorcery, etc. But why does Paul list these things as "works of the flesh"? Is it possible that as the Influencers have stressed their "works of law" or their style of *halachah*, that Paul is actually comparing them to "works of the flesh"? If so, is there an aspect of the Influencers' behavior or (private) lifestyle that can be overlooked? If Paul can later say that they do not even keep the Torah they claim to uphold (6:13), then what kind of people were they really? What did they do when they shut themselves out (4:17)? Perhaps it is best that the silence in Paul's letter only implies that such Influencers were not too honorable...

Being filled with the Holy Spirit of God requires a person to demonstrate proper behavior. And so Paul says, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (5:23-24). The Holy Spirit, while aligning one's character to the standard of holiness seen in the Torah, *is going to go beyond the Torah*. So while the Torah can only define acceptable and unacceptable behavior, the Spirit will conform and mold people to such acceptable behavior, *and* provide solutions where faith is absolutely necessary (3:12a). Paul asserts, "Those who belong to Messiah Yeshua have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

The Holy Spirit is to mold men and women of God to be mutually accountable to one another: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted" (6:1). Why is this so important? *Paul gives a very unique answer*. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Messiah" (6:2). Many theologians assert that this "law of Christ" is something completely independent—if not divorced—from God's Torah. They often say it is *just love*. Yet, in order to define this "law of Christ" as something beyond some vague "love," they are often forced to Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7)—our Lord's dissertation on what it actually means for His followers to "fulfill the Law"! As Messianics, we should by no means discount the priority of the commandments Yeshua lists in the Sermon on the

Mount, after saying that His purpose **was not** to abolish the Torah (Matthew 5:17-19). His teaching does largely instruct us how to bear each other's burdens—demonstrating that we are transformed people by His love—and we need not forget it! Paul says that none of us are to think of one another as being better than one another (6:4-5).

About as close as Paul gets in this letter to encouraging the Galatians to financially support his efforts is seen in his reminder to them, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor” (6:6). The Galatians cannot forget how Paul was *the one* who introduced them to the Messiah, and who started their training in faith. Were the Influencers going to actually help them, or hurt them? The need for the Holy Spirit to work through them is apparent as Paul says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (6:7-8). Paul's words to the Galatians are clear: “Let us not become weary in doing good” (6:9a). In Messiah Yeshua, Believers are to find themselves doing good *to all*—especially those of the community of faith (6:10).

The Epistle to the Galatians ends with Paul actually writing the final verses in his own handwriting (6:11-18), as he has presumably used a secretary to compose his letter thus far (6:11). He expresses how the motives of the Influencers are not good. They want the Galatians to go through ritual proselyte circumcision “to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Messiah” (6:12b), either because they were receiving criticism from the Synagogue at large, or if the Influencers were and/or included recent converts to Judaism, from local practitioners of the Emperor cult in the province of Galatia.

Ironically enough, “Not even those who are circumcised”—the Influencers in Galatia themselves—“obey the law” they claim to be upholding (6:13a). Were they simply not concerned about weightier matters that dealt with justice and righteousness? Does it indicate that the Influencers were primarily non-Jewish, and that they were incapable of keeping the Torah, because they had yet to be really trained in its instruction? Were they a part of a fringe sect within Second Temple Judaism, which advocated mystical and proto-Gnostic views opposed to the Torah, yet were embedded in their “Torah observance”? What we know for certain is that the text tells us, “they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh” (6:13b). They did advocate things that took people off of the standard of holiness exemplified in God's Torah.

Paul's motivation, contrary to this, is “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14), as “what counts is a new creation” (6:15) of human beings in Him. This new creation is to have “Peace and mercy,” being considered “the Israel of God” (6:16; cf. Ephesians 2:11-12). The Apostle Paul's work among the nations to see this “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15b, NRSV/CJB) come forth is quite serious, as he testifies to the Galatians, “for I bear on my body the marks of Yeshua” (6:17; Acts 14:19). *The Influencers could testify to no such physical abuse.* Paul ends his letter with the closing word, “The grace of our Lord Yeshua the

Messiah be with your spirit, brothers. Amen” (6:18). He finishes with a recognition of the Galatians as his “brothers and sisters” (TNIV).

A view of Galatians as *not* being the Apostle Paul’s definitive treatise against following the Law of Moses—as is frequently concluded in today’s Christianity—and instead an admonition against the non-Jewish Galatians becoming Jewish proselytes, does engage with information in Biblical Studies that previous generations did not possess. *It places the letter in its ancient First Century context.* It addresses Paul’s usage of “works of law” as relating to the *halachah* of an ancient religious community or sect. It recognizes faith in Israel’s Messiah, and not the ritual of a proselyte, as *the* determining factor for entry among God’s people. It does better justice to what the later Jerusalem Council would rule about the inclusion of the new, non-Jewish Believers. More than anything else, it recognizes that Paul is not opposed to the Torah of Moses—**but he is very much opposed to its misuse.** One can actually be found violating the Torah if a person is not concerned with the gospel as originally proclaimed to Abraham, something *written down* and quite obvious to anyone who studies the Torah with zeal (3:8, 10b; Genesis 12:2-3).

A significant part of today’s Messianic community is struggling through the same issues faced in Galatians. The majority of today’s Messianics, including a sizeable part of mainstream Messianic Judaism, were not born or raised Jewish. In order to be recognized as equal brothers and sisters within the *ekklēsia*, is it necessary that these people go through some kind of a conversion procedure? **According to Paul, they do not need it**—as people of other nationalities *and* women were the equals of Jews and men in the Lord (3:28). It is by the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah (2:16) or His work for us at Golgotha (Calvary), that we are to all be considered a part of His people. We are to be united around this hope as the entryway for anyone wishing to be included. This faithfulness is something that *He has demonstrated for all of us*, versus any kind of human action or sectarian “works of law” that can be performed. Obedience to God is surely important—specifically adherence to the Torah as the Messiah demonstrated it (6:2)—but it comes as a result of “believ[ing] what you heard” (3:5) as we emulate Him.

It is difficult for many to make a shift in their thinking to recognizing: (1) “righteousness” or “justification” in Galatians can include a corporate status as being a member of God’s people; (2) “circumcision” in Galatians being not so much an emphasis on a physical operation, but instead is more of an emphasis on the ritual of becoming a proselyte to Judaism; and (3) “works of the law” do not concern obedience to God’s Torah, as much as they concern a specific way of following the Torah as determined by a sectarian Jewish group **These factors make the Epistle to the Galatians extremely significant for a developing and maturing Messianic movement that is struggling** with the issue of non-Jewish inclusion, and learning how it can fulfill the original mandate given to Israel (Genesis 12:2; Deuteronomy 4:6). If we substitute this Biblical mandate with our own “works of law,” do we run the risk of incurring penalties from the Lord (3:10; Deuteronomy 27:26)?

Many Christians who encounter this view of Galatians will have difficulty with it, because few laypersons attempt to read the text from its ancient First Century setting. They will still interpret Galatians as Paul being deathly afraid for his audience adopting a life of Torah observance, something that they believe today's Messianics have likewise errantly done. Keep in mind that regardless of how we interpret Galatians, that *they* will still probably be critical toward us. Let us do our best to not fall prey to the stereotypes that they hold of the foolish Galatians, and instead may we live as people who diligently fulfill "the Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds" (6:2, CJB). Let us love others (5:14), and make sure that we are always demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-25). If we can do this and demonstrate *that belief in Yeshua and obedience to God's Torah* are not polar opposites, then we can show ourselves to be children of the Jerusalem above (5:26), those who have the New Covenant enacted within their lives and are led by the Holy Spirit.