

Philippians 3:2-11

Pastor: Philippians 3:2-11: Righteousness is not derived by the Law.

“Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Messiah Yeshua and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the [assembly]; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Messiah, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Messiah, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

3:2 Paul opens up his warning in Philippians 3:2 by telling the Philippians, “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh” (RSV).¹ To call these people by the derogatory term “dogs” was very serious, and took on unique connotations in both Jewish and Roman society. Gordon D. Fee indicates that dogs were “generally detested by Greco-Roman society and considered unclean by Jews.”² Throughout the Bible we see some specific usages of the term “dog” (Heb. *kelev*, כֶּלֶב; Grk. *kuōn*, κύων) that are anything but positive.

In the Torah being called a “dog” was synonymous with being considered a prostitute:

“None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 23:17-18).

The Philistine giant Goliath taunted David, demeaning him, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” (1 Samuel 17:43). When being pursued by King Saul, David would ask him, “After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog, a single flea?” (1 Samuel 24:14). Proverbs 26:11 says, “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly” (cf. 2 Peter 2:22). Revelation 22:15 says of those who do not enter God’s Kingdom, “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.” Some commentators have equated the Bible’s usage of the term “dog” as being comparable to the modern term “bitch.”³

The Mishnah likewise reflects the Bible’s usage of the term “dog,” adding some additional sentiments about dogs that were likely present among Jews of the First Century:

“They cut up gourds before cattle, and carrion meat before dogs” (m.*Shabbat* 24:4).⁴

“Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, ‘Anything which the dog cannot scratch up [is deemed to have been legally removed]’” (m.*Pesachim* 2:3).⁵

“As to the unclean one: its soul belongs to Heaven, and its body belongs to him. For if he wants, lo, he can sell it to gentiles or feed it to dogs” (m.*Nedarim* 4:3).⁶

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic*.

² Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 295.

³ Cf. Leander E. Keck, “The Letter of Paul to the Philippians,” in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 853.

⁴ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 207.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

While the term “dog” certainly did not have positive implications among the Jews of the First Century and beyond, a few commentators such as Ralph P. Martin are content to view Paul’s usage of “dogs” to refer to these individuals’ “incessant, dog-like yelping.”⁷ This would concur with the Psalmist’s description, “They return at evening, they howl like a dog, and go around the city” (Psalm 59:6; cf. 14). The enemies of God speak as though they are dogs, causing a great deal of noise, and doing nothing more than stirring up trouble as a pack of wild animals. Yeshua the Messiah uses the term “dogs” to describe those who reject God’s truth, instructing His Disciples, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6).

There is disagreement as to whom these “dogs” represent in Paul’s letter. In spite of the varied opinions about who these people might be, most evangelical expositors conclude that they were Judaizers or Influencers, similar to those whom Paul spoke against in his letter to the Galatians. There are some who hold to the opinion that they were solely Jewish missionaries designed to make converts to Judaism, not misguided Jewish Believers.⁸

We need to often remember how in various places in the Apostolic Scriptures, “circumcision” (Grk. *peritomē*, περιτομή) includes more than just the removal of the foreskin of a male’s penis. “Circumcision” in the Apostolic Scriptures is a frequent reference to not only a physical operation, but more especially to the act of conversion to Judaism.⁹ In this framework, what can appear to be Paul speaking against a physical act is more a statement of him speaking against ritual proselyte conversion to Judaism being required for inclusion in the community of God.

In interpreting Philippians 3:2-11, many conclude that Paul is making derogatory statements about circumcision, the Torah, and Judaism in general. But is it impossible to maintain a high regard for the Torah and Judaism in reading Paul’s words in these verses? Perhaps what we need to understand is that Paul places his *ultimate trust* not in human achievements that can be practiced from the Torah, but in Yeshua the Messiah alone. Everything else pales in comparison to his Lord and what He has achieved for Paul.

While Paul warns against improper usage of physical circumcision, he nevertheless is seen to maintain a positive attitude about it throughout his letter to the Romans:

“For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (Romans 2:25).

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2).

“For I say that Messiah has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers” (Romans 15:8).

These statements are likely written to widely reassure Paul’s fellow Jewish Believers in Rome, who would have been circumcised from birth just as he (cf. Philippians 3:5). As a Biblical practice, Paul was not opposed to physical circumcision and saw value in it. Nevertheless, physical circumcision in the First Century became a major sign that one was converting to Judaism. It is right to say that Paul was infuriated by those who insisted that those uncircumcised were not full Believers or even true Believers, members of the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), as reconciliation with God is accomplished through His Son Yeshua—and not a physical or proselytic act. Robert P. Lightner summarizes,

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Vol 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 137.

⁸ Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 125.

⁹ Consult the author’s article “Is Circumcision for Everyone?”, appearing in *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*.

“Confused about the gospel, [these people] added works of the law to faith in Christ, both for salvation and for Christian living. The Old Testament rite of circumcision was of special concern to them. They insisted that it was necessary for salvation.”¹⁰

Not surprisingly, much of today’s Messianic movement tows a fine line between Torah obedience as a part of the sanctification process, and Torah obedience “for salvation.” **I believe that Torah obedience is to come as a part of one living more like Yeshua and maturing in holiness**, whereas there are extremists among us who advocate that it is absolutely required (often as *they* practice it) for one’s redemption.

Some have thought that these “dogs” could not have been Jewish Believers in Yeshua because of the miniscule Jewish population in Philippi. Instead, they would have solely been Jewish teachers wanting to make converts among the Gentiles.¹¹ Still, others have proposed that these individuals were “gnosticized Jews who had become Christians” (Leander E. Keck).¹² Regardless of who they specifically were, their foul intentions are proposed to have involved a gross misuse of circumcision, related to circumcision for salvation, circumcision for proselytism, circumcision for something aberrant and Gnostic, or possibly even some combination of these factors. Do we ever find things like these in today’s Messianic community? Will we ever find things like these in the future?

The key to properly understanding Paul’s words in Philippians 3:2 is to grasp the spiritual orientation that Paul wanted the Philippians to have. Gordon D. Fee points out the view that circumcision for becoming a Jewish proselyte is probably the best option to consider in our interpretation of these passages. He remarks,

“Among the better guesses is that which sees a relationship between the attractiveness of ‘becoming Jewish’ (*a religio licita*) and the Philippians’ present suffering at the hands of fellow Roman citizens, because they were followers of a *Kyrios* who had been executed as a state criminal. Perhaps by embracing the outward expressions of Jewish identity, they could still belong to Christ but ward off some of the opposition.”¹³

What we see here is that Paul is ultimately warning his Philippian friends that if anyone comes along and says that you must be circumcised and convert to Judaism, it is **not necessary** to be considered a member of God’s people. One’s inclusion in God’s people is totally contingent on whether one knows Him via the work of His Son, Yeshua the Messiah. Some Roman Philippians may have found conversion to Judaism as a means to avoid suffering, as the Messiah in whom they believed was condemned and crucified. Paul will later emphasize that having Yeshua at the center of one’s faith is imperative, and far exceeds what circumcision—or any human accomplishment—can bring.

Paul calls these Influencers *tous kakous ergatas* (τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας), “evil workers” or “evildoers” (ESV). Some have thought that this is a twist on words for what Paul usually uses to refer to missionaries: *tas kopiōsas* (τὰς κοπιώσας) in Romans 16:12. Peter T. O’Brien points out, “Presumably they called themselves ἐργάται [*ergatai*]; Paul styles them as κακοὶ [*kakoi*] because of their malicious intent.”¹⁴ The people he warns about may have been traveling the countryside, and Paul was letting his Philippian friends know what their motives were should they arrive in Macedonia. They had evil intentions that were not designed to help the Philippian Believers grow in their faith in Yeshua.

While rendered as “false circumcision” (NASU) in some Bibles, Paul employs a different term than the standard *peritomē* (περιτομή) for “circumcision.” *Katatomē* (κατατομή) means “*abscission, concision*” (LS)¹⁵ or “*mutilation, cutting in pieces*” (BDAG).¹⁶ This is rendered in the NIV as “those mutilators of the flesh,” and the NEB uses the paraphrased “mutilation—‘circumcision’ I will not call it.” F. Foulkes explains, “The rite that they advocated was no longer spiritually meaningful but a mere mutilation of the flesh.”¹⁷

¹⁰ Robert P. Lightner, “Philippians,” in *BKCNT*, 659.

¹¹ Cf. Keener, *IVPBB*, 562.

¹² Keck, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 852.

¹³ Fee, *Philippians*, 289.

¹⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 355.

¹⁵ LS, 417.

¹⁶ BDAG, 528.

¹⁷ F. Foulkes, “Philippians,” in *NBCR*, 1135.

3:3 Paul is making a play on the words *peritomē* and *katatomē*. In Philippians 3:3 he will explain, “For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (NIV). In his admonition to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul warns against those whose confidence in God is in their physical circumcision (or possibly even conversion to Judaism) and not in the Spirit. AMG defines *katatomē* as “A cutting away, mangling...*peritomē*, ordained by the Law of Moses, has a spiritual significance distinguishing God’s people (Israel in the OT) from the heathen. When this spiritual meaning is forgotten, then *peritomē*, circumcision, becomes *katatomē*, a mutilation, a butchering up, a mere cutting away flesh which in itself is of no value.”¹⁸ Paul’s admonition here places circumcision in its proper place: physical circumcision is meaningless without an appropriate heart attitude. **It certainly cannot be used to bring one redemption from sin!**

Paul is probably also linking improper circumcision with the pagans who cut up their bodies, something expressly prohibited throughout the Torah:

“You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:28).

“You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead” (Deuteronomy 14:1).

Of particular interest would be the reaction of the priests of Baal to the exploits that God was able to perform through Elijah:

“So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them” (1 Kings 18:28).

The Hebrew verb *gadad* (גָּדַד) appears in the Hitpael stem (intensive action, reflexive voice) and means “**inflict cuts on oneself**” (*CHALOT*).¹⁹ The LXX renders this with the verb form of *katatomē*, *katatemnō* (κατατέμνω), “to cut in pieces, cut up” (*LS*).²⁰ The warning Paul issues against these Influencers to his Philippian friends is that they can only cut up their faith in Yeshua. These people do not have Yeshua the Messiah at the center of their relationship with God as he does—and as they should have. We may see a parallel between v. 2 and what Paul previously wrote the Galatians, “I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves” (Galatians 5:12). This is because the “circumcision” they advocated could actually do more to separate one from God than bring one closer—to the extent of being compared with pagans who slice themselves up when their gods do not answer their prayers. Jeremiah 9:23-25 issues God’s desire that we might *boast in Him*, as He will judge both the circumcised and uncircumcised equally:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD. ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised.’”

A true circumcision, as Paul notes, is present in those “whose worship is spiritual, whose pride is in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in anything external” (Philippians 3:3, NEB) or “human qualifications” (CJB/CJSB). These are people who are fully oriented toward the Lord and in demonstrating His character to other people. Many Christian interpreters rightfully conclude that Paul is referring to one’s circumcision of the heart in Philippians 3:3—something accomplished by the Holy Spirit. However, a few forget that the command to circumcise one’s heart was a part of the Torah:

¹⁸ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, pp 846-847.

¹⁹ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 55.

²⁰ *LS*, 417.

“So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer...Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:16).

The Lord also says, “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 26:26).

It is important to note that while physical circumcision is an important part of the Law, the Tanach or Old Testament does indicate that physical circumcision is not enough for a true follower of God:

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else My wrath will go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds” (Jeremiah 4:4).

“You shall say to the rebellious ones, to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord GOD, “Enough of all your abominations, O house of Israel, when you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to profane it, *even* My house, when you offered My food, the fat and the blood; for they made My covenant void—*this* in addition to all your abominations”” (Ezekiel 44:6-7).

The Qumran community likewise emphasized that physical circumcision was not enough if a person were unable to quell the evil inclinations of the flesh:

“They shall practice truth and humility in common, and justice and uprightness and charity and modesty in all their ways. No man shall walk in the stubbornness of his heart so that he strays after his heart and eyes and evil inclination, but he shall circumcise in the Community the foreskin of his evil inclination” (1QS 5.4-5).²¹

Circumcision is never enough to bring one into God’s family, just along with any other physical act. This can only be brought about by the transforming work of Yeshua the Messiah. Homer A. Kent, Jr. validly indicates what every Believer should be looking for:

“Satisfaction comes from recognizing that [one’s] hope is found in Christ alone, not through meticulous conformity to the external demands of the Mosaic law. [One has] understood that Christ’s sacrifice has fulfilled the law for them.”²²

As Paul writes the Colossians, “in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions” (Colossians 2:11-13). Stephen told the Sanhedrin, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51, NIV), reflecting their rebellion in rejecting the gospel.

It is very notable to consider that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 did not require the new, non-Jewish Believers to be circumcised, either physically or to convert to Judaism, in order to fellowship with their fellow Jewish Believers and be considered full and welcome members of the assembly. Circumcision was the primary mark of the proselyte, and the imperative of the gospel message is to circumcise one’s heart—orienting him or her toward the Lord. The challenge with Christian and Messianic examinations of circumcision today is navigating the extremes of thinking that physical circumcision is now unnecessary or unimportant in any way, versus making it mandatory for one’s salvation.

In the First Century, a Greek or Roman undergoing circumcision was making a major action committing oneself in lifestyle and orientation toward the God of Israel. The Greeks and Romans considered circumcision to deface the human body, and unfortunately many Christians today have adopted the same view of a practice

²¹ Vermes, pp 103-104.

²² Homer A. Kent, “Philippians,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:139.

that God did ordain. No one should think that circumcision of males has exactly the same importance as it once did, prior to the sacrifice of Yeshua—but to say it is totally abolished and irrelevant, of no value and with nothing to teach us, is a most untenable position.

Fee summarizes the dilemma that would probably have been going on in Philippi, should the individuals Paul warned about, gain a presence:

“Most likely...at issue for them is Torah observance as evidence of Gentiles’ truly belonging to God’s people and therefore their genuine obedience to Christ. Nonetheless, even though their first interest is in making Jews out of Gentiles, in the sense of securing their place within the Abrahamic covenant, Paul clearly sees through to the ultimate theological consequences for those who would capitulate—that it has the effect of adding a plus factor to grace, and thus of eliminating grace altogether by exchanging it for boasting in ‘one’s flesh.’”²³

Lamentably, Fee has adequately summarized the motivation that is present in much of today’s Messianic movement regarding Torah observance, by many non-Jewish Believers. Torah observance *can be placed ahead of faith in Yeshua*, or at the very least is given more attention than having faith in Yeshua, among many. It frequently is not a matter of “Brethren, join in following my example” (Philippians 3:17) or “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah” (1 Corinthians 11:1), and obeying God’s commandments as Yeshua obeyed them. It is a matter of being “Torah observant” because one is unsure of his or her status before God, and must place trust in something else other than a supernatural experience with Him because of the completed work of His Son. **This is something that the Apostle Paul profoundly speaks against.**

3:4 For Paul, his redemption is secure in the completed work of Yeshua, and not in any human accomplishment—especially circumcision. He says in Philippians 3:4, “I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more” (RSV). Telling them, “I could make a stronger case for myself” (NEB), he proceeds to declare his credentials against the aims of those who are ruining the true message of circumcision from the Scriptures: one where we can be reminded of our need to be sensitive to God, having removed any barriers from ourselves. Paul declares himself to have been a faithful Jew with many achievements, but how these things are ultimately meaningless compared to what Yeshua the Messiah has done for him.

3:5 Philippians 3:5-7 give readers some critical autobiographical detail about the Apostle Paul, slightly paralleling his words in Acts 22:3, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.” Having just warned his Philippian friends to beware of the “false circumcision” or Judaizers/Influencers in Philippians 3:2, he lists his credentials as a Jewish Believer being qualified to speak against any errant teachings that they may bring, having just referred to them as “dogs.”

Paul first says that he was “circumcised the eighth day,” which was in full compliance with the Torah commandment to circumcise a male child on the eighth day after his birth (Leviticus 12:3), a practice that was firmly established with the Patriarch Isaac (Genesis 21:4). This runs contrary to Ishmael who was circumcised after his thirteenth year (Genesis 27:25; cf. Josephus’ *Antiquities* 1.213-214). Unlike some of the Influencers who were probably Jewish converts—and were hence circumcised as adults—Paul had more going for his circumcision than any proselyte could. Paul was circumcised from the time of his birth.

After this, Paul attests that he is “Israelite by race” (NEB), as *genos* (γένος) means “**ancestral stock, descendant**” (BDAG).²⁴ He and his family were able to trace their ancestry to the tribe of Benjamin, which was a subset of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It should not be considered any coincidence that this Apostle’s Hebrew name *Shaul* (שאול) was likely given for King Saul, who himself came from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Samuel 9:21).

Having expressed his physical pedigree, Paul is then able to say that he is “a Hebrew born and bred” (NEB) or “a Hebrew-speaker, with Hebrew-speaking parents” (CJB/CJSB). Many expositors interpret this as meaning that the Apostle Paul surely had the ability to speak the Hebrew language as something normal in

²³ Fee, *Philippians*, 297.

²⁴ BDAG, 194.

everyday affairs—as opposed to just a religious language—something he demonstrates in various interactions (Acts 6:1; 22:2). As David H. Stern points out, “In an age when 85% of the Jews in the world were living in the Diaspora, being a Hebrew-speaker would confer higher status as a Jew.”²⁵ This is certainly an intriguing statement, as many in today’s Messianic community often make the errant historical assumption that *all Jews* in the First Century spoke Hebrew.²⁶ On the contrary, the historical reality is that *most Jews in the First Century* lived in the Diaspora and *spoke anything but Hebrew* as a day-to-day language. Paul not only knew Hebrew as a religious language, but as a language he could speak fluently.²⁷

Perhaps most importantly among his credentials, Paul says “as to the Law, a Pharisee,” meaning that he identified with the broad party of the Pharisees and their application of the Torah. One of the thrusts of most Pharisaic observance would be requiring circumcision of proselytes. This was something that Paul at one point in his life probably advocated was necessary, but he was later shown that it was not necessary following his own conversion to faith in Yeshua. This is why he can write the Galatians, “But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished” (Galatians 5:11). For Paul, inclusion in God’s family comes through faith in Yeshua the Messiah’s atoning work—not the physical act of a proselyte.

The underlying Hebrew for the Greek *Pharisaios* (Φαρισαῖος) is *Parush* (פָּרוּשׁ), loosely meaning “*seceder*” (*Jastrow*).²⁸ Paul was certainly a separated person, yet was a member of the School of Hillel led by Gamaliel (cf. Acts 22:3), the more “liberal” of the two First Century Pharisaic groups that did go out and interact with others in the Diaspora. We know that Paul was very zealous (Galatians 1:14) to follow the instructions of his ancestors, leading him to unwarrantedly persecute many of the early Believers and overseeing their deaths. Paul had to be shown these misdeeds by a Divine revelation of Yeshua on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18). We see *both* bad and good things about Paul’s Pharisaism prior to his encounter with the Lord.

There is a great deal of discussion and debate not only in Christian scholarship today, but also in our own Messianic community, about the Pharisaism of the Apostle Paul. On the one side are those who believe that Paul totally abandoned all Pharisaical customs and beliefs, and others who insist that were Paul living today he would be an Orthodox Jew. Which is correct? Is either correct? Note that Paul does declare before the Sanhedrin—presumably before leaving to go to Rome—“Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” (Acts 23:6). Theologically speaking, even though Paul certainly would have changed some of his original Pharisaic beliefs for the new work of God among the nations via the spread of the gospel, his basic beliefs and teachings were still rooted in Pharisaic thought—teachings about the sovereignty of God and free will of humans, a belief in angels and demons, an afterlife, and the resurrection, as all were essential to First Century Jewish Pharisaism.²⁹

Those who would errantly influence the Philippians were probably from the theological party of the Pharisees, or some distant offshoot, possibly some of the same people mentioned in Acts 15:5: “some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses,’” making circumcision and Torah observance prerequisites for salvation. Paul, as one who was in attendance at the Jerusalem Council and a Pharisee, firmly believed that circumcision or conversion to Judaism was not necessary to be fully included and welcomed into the community of God. He was uniquely qualified to warn the Philippians about the Influencers’ excesses.

²⁵ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 600.

²⁶ For a further discussion on the involvement of Diaspora Judaism in First Century history, consult the articles: J.A. Sanders, “Dispersion,” in *IDB*, 1:854-856 (moderate-liberal); G.A. Van Alstine, “Dispersion,” in *ISBE*, 1:962-968 (conservative); Peder Borgen, “Judaism in Egypt,” in *ABD*, 3:1061-1072 (liberal); Shimon Appelbaum, “Jews in North Africa,” in *ABD*, 3:1072-1073 (liberal); Romano Penna, “Judaism in Rome,” in *ABD*, 3:1073-1076 (liberal); and “diaspora” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pp 165-166 (moderate-liberal).

²⁷ Note that this is not to say that Paul did not likewise know Greek and also speak it fluently, as we need not make the mistake of reading any Twenty-First Century American, monolingual bias into Philippians, or any other Biblical text.

²⁸ *Jastrow*, 1222.

²⁹ For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “You Want to be a Pharisee,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

3:6 Prior to his own salvation experience, Paul says “I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church” (Philippians 3:6, NLT). Should this be connected to Paul’s Pharisaism—or his own misguided intentions? Note that Paul actually received the approval of the chief priests (Acts 9:21; cf. 9:13) to carry the Believers in Damascus to Jerusalem, indicating that he had to cross party lines and actually receive *Saddusaical approval* to persecute these people. This action ran contrary to the policy of his mentor Gamaliel to the early Messianic Believers: “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown” (Acts 5:38).

Whereas Gamaliel advocated a “live and let live” policy to the early Messianic Believers, Paul originally wanted the Believers to be eradicated—seeing them as defectors from his “true Judaism.” It is quite notable that while forgiven of his previous sins by the Lord, Paul uses the present participle *diōkōn* (διώκων) for “persecutor,” to describe his actions as a still-current memory. He may see anyone wanting to mislead his Philippian friends as advocating some similar actions: “Those people are zealous to win you over” (Galatians 4:17, NIV). Paul finds himself uniquely able to warn the Philippians of what they might do to take them off course.

In spite of what Paul would later consider to be ungodly actions, in his daily affairs he testifies that “as to righteousness which is in the Law” he was “blameless.” There is no agreement on how to translate the phrase *kata dikaiosunēn tēn en nomō* (κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ) among major versions. The RSV/NRSV/ESV has “as to righteousness under the law,” which would more properly be rendered from *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμον) or “under Law,” than *en nomō* or “in Law.”³⁰ The NIV makes an interpretive decision and has “legalistic righteousness,” followed by the CJB/CJSB with “legalism.”

Using the Torah to obtain righteousness is something contrary to Paul’s view of the gospel. He writes in Romans 3:27-28, “Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (cf. Galatians 2:16), then listing Abraham as one whom God justifies by faith (Romans 4:1-5). Paul’s zealousness as a Pharisee made him blameless as to the human standard of righteousness found in his sect of Judaism—but his fleshly achievements were not enough. Martin points out, “There is evidence that some Rabbis held out the possibility of blamelessness through a strict observance of the law, provided the performance were punctilious and complete. Paul here claims to have qualified—by that standard.”³¹

3:7 In spite of Paul’s pedigree and human achievements, he is able to assert “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Philippians 3:7, NRSV), employing the plural *kerdē* (κέρδη) for “gains.” Kent indicates, “the previous listing was not exhaustive but illustrative,”³² as Paul could have presumably added many more things to his list of accomplishments that he has “written off because of Christ” (NEB). Employing a comparison between gain and loss was something that was Rabbinic (m.*Avot* 2:1).

Paul’s zealousness for his “ancestral traditions” (Galatians 1:14)—his mortal confidence in who he was as a Jew—is what ultimately led him to persecuting the saints. It took a Divine epiphany of the Lord for Paul to turn from his destructive course of action against the community of faith and believe in Yeshua (Acts 9:3-6). Paul now considers “the things that used to be advantages for me, I have, because of the Messiah, come to consider a disadvantage” (CJB/CJSB). He uses the verb form *hēgēmai* (ἡγήμαι) in the perfect tense for “consider,” to indicate that this is a decision that has been resolved in his mind. The debate among many interpreters is whether Paul has totally turned his back on Judaism and his heritage because of his actions against the early Messianic community—or is simply making a comparison between human pedigree and actions versus what can be found in Yeshua the Messiah. **The “loss” found in human pedigree is something that applies equally to non-Jews as much as Jews.**

In order to properly interpret Paul’s words in Philippians 3:7, we need to remember that the issue here is “confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3, NIV). As Jouette Basler remarks, it “alludes to circumcision here,

³⁰ Cf. Romans 6:14; 1 Corinthians 9:20; Galatians 3:23; 4:4, 21; 5:18.

³¹ Martin, *Philippians*, 144.

³² Kent, in *EXP*, 11:140.

but here, as well as elsewhere, it refers more broadly to reliance on weak and vulnerable human resources.”³³ Stern holds the Judaizers/Influencers that Paul warns the Philippians about to be primarily made up of non-Jewish converts who were overly zealous.³⁴ Paul counts his human upbringing as a natural Jew as being unimportant compared to the power of the Lord and His achievements for us in redeeming us. Gerald F. Hawthorne validly summarizes,

“[H]e has discovered through his encounter with the living Christ that nothing he received by way of heritage, or did by way of human achievement can be the means of life nor the grounds of his righteousness before God—only the redeeming significance of Christ’s death and resurrection can become these for him or anyone.”³⁵

Hearing that Paul holds his own achievements as a Jewish person to be nothing in lieu of the Messiah in his life was very important for the Philippian Romans to understand. Paul surely lived forth Yeshua’s credo, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). The Philippians would probably have had a great deal of pride in their Roman heritage or achievements—especially if they had been former members of Caesar’s legions. Paul may be paraphrased as telling them, “I know that my heritage and accomplishments as a Jew are nothing compared to Yeshua the Messiah. If my accomplishments are a loss compared to Him, how much more of a loss are your *Roman* ‘accomplishments?’”

Placing Paul’s words in this context can give us as Messianic Believers today a proper perspective for what we consider concerning our own selves and our own unique pedigrees. Paul mentioned his pedigree to the Philippians so he could warn them about possible problems that could arrive in their assembly. He said he was qualified to do this as a Jew who had sought many of the same things as the Influencers did. He recognized that any faith he put in his flesh or accomplishments as a human being were meaningless compared to the saving work of Yeshua. What do any of us have today that cause us to place Yeshua off to the side? Compared to Yeshua and His saving work for us, regardless of who we are and what our human achievements are—**these things are all going to ultimately mean nothing as they cannot provide us with eternal redemption.** They can be profitless if we are not careful, and Paul was reflecting how his faith in his own Jewishness led him down a path to persecute the assembly. While warning them, he asked his Philippian friends not to make the same mistake about their Romanness.

3:8 In Philippians 3:8, Paul expresses a secureness where it counts the most: in knowing Yeshua the Messiah as his Lord. He writes, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (NIV). Some who believe that the Torah was abolished will use this verse and claim that Paul no longer considers the Torah or Judaism to have any value, but this is not what he is saying. Keep in mind that Paul tells the Romans, “what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2). Paul is emphasizing, however, why his human achievements found in his Jewish heritage are meaningless compared to his Lord and in knowing Him.

Paul begins this remark by saying, “I count everything sheer loss, because all is far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I did in fact lose everything” (Philippians 3:8, NEB). Remember that he was writing this from an incarcerated state. Whatever Paul did previously was now nothing compared to the centrality of Yeshua in his life and what He has done for him by saving him from sin. His desire was to have a true “knowledge” (YLT) or *gnōsis* (γνῶσις) of Yeshua the Messiah, and be transformed by Him. This likely reflects the Hebrew meaning of *yada* (יָדָע) found throughout the Tanach, and which “is also used for the most intimate acquaintance” (*TWOT*).³⁶ This “knowing” Yeshua would have undoubtedly included Him as “our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30, RSV). It includes knowing

³³ Jouette Bassler, “Philippians, The Letter of Paul to the,” in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 2104.

³⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 598.

³⁵ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, pp 131-132.

³⁶ Jack P. Lewis, “יָדָע,” in *TWOT*, 1:366.

Yeshua as Master and Lord at a very serious level that would have involved severe dedication and obedience on Paul's part.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, knowing the Lord is evidenced by one's obedience to Him:

"The LORD said to Moses, 'I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name'" (Exodus 33:17).

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

"So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; and He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain watering the earth... They cry out to Me, "My God, we of Israel know You!"'" (Hosea 6:3; 8:2).

Truly knowing God via His Son Yeshua means recognizing that He has set a redeemed man or woman apart for a special task. In Paul's own case, it would be knowing the Lord via experiencing many of the same things that He experienced while on Earth (Philippians 3:10). Note that Paul's desire is not to "know Torah"; **his desire is to know Yeshua fully as His Lord and Savior**. But we cannot remove God's Instruction in the Torah from being important in one's spiritual walk with Him. Moses asked God in Exodus 33:13, "Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight." Likewise, the thrust of the New Covenant where God writes His Law onto the hearts of His people is that "they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).³⁷

Because of his desire to know Yeshua the Messiah in a very unique way, the Apostle Paul endured the loss of all things that made him something prior to his conversion of faith. Even if we consider Paul's theology to largely remain Pharisaical after his conversion, Paul certainly lost his position within the party of the Pharisees, and with it any prestige he once had. Anything he achieved in the flesh he now considered *skubalon* (σκύβαλον), "**useless or undesirable material that is subject to disposal, refuse, garbage**" (BDAG),³⁸ which can be rendered as either "dung" (KJV) or "trash" (LITV). This is not inconsistent with what the Prophets tell us about the level of human observance for righteousness compared to God's demands:

"For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isaiah 64:6).

"Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' Again he said to him, 'See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.' Then I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the LORD was standing by" (Zechariah 3:3-5).

Without the guidance of the Lord, the most that our human works can achieve is "filth" (New Jerusalem Bible). Whatever these may be, we must all put them aside in order to gain salvation in Messiah Yeshua. Fee offers many Messianics today a challenging statement:

"Circumcision—and all other forms of Torah observance—means to 'boast' in human achievement; and its 'blamelessness' is expressed in ways that count for nothing at all. One is thus neither righteous in the sense of being rightly related to God nor righteous in the sense of living rightly as an expression of that relationship."³⁹

³⁷ Cf. Keener, *IVPBBC*, 563.

³⁸ *BDAG*, 932.

³⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 323.

Fee is correct in asserting that the Apostle Paul would not think of his righteous status in Messiah Yeshua on any basis other than what He has done on the tree (Philippians 3:4); Fee is incorrect in asserting that Paul would disregard any kind of obedience to the Torah as meaningless or as only a means to boast, precisely because the Holy Spirit has been granted to the redeemed in order to compel them to conformity with God's Torah (cf. Romans 8:4). If he had stopped at saying that Paul's confidence in his human achievements/Torah observance as a non-Believer was insufficient for redemption, Messianic Believers would not have a problem. But, too many of today's Christian theologians are just too tempted to incorrectly conclude that proper living, in emulation of the Messiah, does not include any kind of obedience to Moses' Teaching. The sphere of one's relationship with the Creator is certainly to be the redemption provided by Yeshua; obedience to the Torah is, however, required by Yeshua of His followers (cf. Matthew 5:17-19).

The Source of Paul's righteousness and his central focus for living is *the Messiah*. Paul desires above all things to be identified with the Messiah in his life, and be identified with His sufferings. Like Paul, we should each desire to be identified with Yeshua as well, and it is for such a reason why we should follow the Torah. **But we should not be following the Torah for the sake of following the Torah.** Our obedience to God's Instruction should be principally evidenced *by our love for one another*, and by us being a positive testimony to those around us via deeds of kindness and service. People should see the strong spiritual fulfillment we have and wonder *why*—as good works usher forth from hearts which have been supernaturally transformed! People should see that we have true spiritual discernment and that we have the answers to difficult life questions, because we are grounded in an ethic that begins with God's Torah.

3:9 Philippians 3:9 demonstrates a dilemma that has confused many interpreters, both Christian and Messianic. Paul expresses a desire to be “found in Him [Messiah],” something that all Believers should eagerly seek. But he then says that this will be found “not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the Law*, but that which is through faith in Messiah.” The Greek *emēn dikaiosunēn tēn ek nomou* (ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου), “my own righteousness of Law” (LITV), begs the question of what Paul intends to find via the Messiah. Paul recognizes that he cannot have a righteousness of his own based in the Torah, but that he can only find his righteousness via the Messiah, *tēn dia pisteōs Christou* (τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ).

Recently in some theological discussion, the genitive clause *dia pisteōs Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ), has been argued to be better translated as “through the faithfulness of Christ,” rather than the more common “through faith in Christ.” This would draw the attention to Yeshua's sacrificial work, His “faithfulness” to the Father unto death for sinful humanity, being the source of a person's righteousness. O'Brien is a commentator who agrees that “faithfulness of Christ” is the better understanding of Philippians 3:9, concluding, “Jesus' obedience plays a central role in Paul's theology (Rom. 5:18-19), not least in Philippians (ὑπήκοος [*hupēkoos*], 2:8)...If this line of interpretation is correct, then the apostle is asserting that the righteousness he possesses is based on Christ's faithful obedience to the Father—clear proof that Paul's right relationship with God comes through sheer grace.”⁴⁰

Paul attests that his righteousness is found via faith in the Messiah, stated further in Philippians 3:9 to be “the righteousness of God on faith” (LITV), *tēn ek Theou dikaiosunēn epi tē pistei* (τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει). Paul's righteousness is not based in his observance of the Torah, as the Torah *cannot bring one a right relationship with God*. As Baruch 5:2 in the Apocrypha says, “Put on the robe of the righteousness from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting...For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.” But can the Torah be removed from the equation of faith in Yeshua? As Paul would ask the Romans, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law⁴¹” (Romans 3:31, RSV). Paul relies on his trust in Yeshua for his salvation, but recognizes that the Torah still has important value. By no means is Paul suggesting that because of his faith in Yeshua that the ethos of the Torah or the holiness of God contained in its commandments are meaningless.

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *Philippians*, pp 399-400.

⁴¹ Grk. *nomon histanomen* (νόμον ἵστανόμεν).

Our faith in Yeshua cannot be separated from any of us obeying God, but faith in Yeshua is primary to obedience—with obedience coming as a result of faith. Paul does not make any derogatory statements about the Torah, but he does specify that his righteousness comes from his **faith in what Yeshua has accomplished in securing redemption**, and not in his human observance of the Torah. He recognizes that reconciliation with God the Father comes via His Son, Yeshua—not the Torah.

What challenges do today's Messianics have at placing Yeshua at the center of their lives, allowing the Torah to play its proper role in the sanctification process? The issues that we often face today concerning Torah legalism regard those who have made the Torah the central focus of their lives, rather than Yeshua the Messiah and His atoning work. We should not be surprised when some in our midst ignore Paul's words to the Philippians, casting them aside or ignoring them altogether. How many Messianics think that they have entry into God's Kingdom because of their Torah observance—and not because of a life-changing experience that they had with Him via Yeshua? My life-changing experience is hopefully reflected in my obedience to God, as I know that I obey God because I love Him, *not because if I do not obey His commandments I will not be "righteous."*