

Titus 3:9

Pastor: Titus 3:9: We are not to be concerned about obedience to Jewish laws.

“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.”

3:9 While we are not told many of the specifics about what the Cretan troublemakers have done, what we can assess for certain from Paul’s letter to Titus is that whatever they were doing was associated with a considerable misuse of the Torah, and was a cause of ridiculous fights and conflicts in the assembly.¹ Paul’s word to Titus is clear: “But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile” (Titus 3:9, RSV). The main adjective pertaining to what the troublemakers have done is *mōros* (μωρός: “dull, sluggish, stupid” (LS)).² Titus 3:9 begins with *mōras de zētēseis* (μωρὰς δὲ ζητήσεις), “and foolish questions” (YLT), with *zētēsis* (ζήτησις) most likely regarding a “**matter for dispute, controversial question, controversy**” (BDAG).³

Many of today’s Christian Bible readers, who may be negative or antagonistic toward the Messianic movement, will see Paul’s word regarding “disputes about the Law”—and just assume that he does not really think that the Torah has that high a place for instructing God’s people any more. This would be an irresponsible reading of Titus 3:9, though; the Law of Moses or Pentateuch falls well within the parameters of how “all Scripture” needs to be studied and heeded by God’s people (2 Timothy 3:16). Foolish questions and speculations associated with the Torah are what are in view in Titus 3:9. In his writing to Timothy, Paul says that the main purpose of the Torah is to reveal and condemn sin (1 Timothy 1:8-11), not be used as a springboard for myths (1 Timothy 1:4, 7). Apparently, the Cretan troublemakers had fallen into some of the same errors as the Ephesian false teachers.

With foolish questions and speculations in view, William D. Mounce points out how in Titus 3:9 Paul “emphasizes the lack of substance in the opponents’ teaching,” which is precisely why “Paul does not address the heresy theologically. It is vacuous, a quibbling about words.”⁴ In Mounce’s estimation, whatever the troublemakers pushed “comprised fables, silly stories, and arguments about words that produced conflicts.”⁵ There is no worthwhile reason for Titus to get himself bogged down in whatever they were doing, as he was to simply warn them to stop (Titus 3:10).

The New Living Translation has actually done a serious disservice with its paraphrased rendering of Titus 3:9: “Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws.” First of all, its translators have inserted the proper adjective “Jewish,” when *Ioudaïkos* (Ἰουδαϊκός) does not at all appear in the source text, unlike Titus 1:14 preceding. Secondly, the issue in view is not obedience to the commandments of God, which would be expected within the context of the good works Titus is to exhort the Cretans to have (2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14), but various “commandments of men who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:14) and their associated false philosophies. There is no doubting that what the Cretan troublemakers were doing was associated with some Jewish opinions, myths, and exaggerations—but this cannot really be the mainline Judaism of Paul or most of the Jewish Believers. *Their false teachings are of human origin.* I. Howard Marshall & Philip H. Towner inform us,

“[That their false teaching is] basically Jewish and arising out of the Torah is confirmed by the reference to ‘legal disputes’ which is also best understood in terms of Judaism...They achieve nothing positive, by contrast with the activities commended in v. 8, and they lead to no solid conclusions.”⁶

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

² LS, 524.

³ BDAG, 429.

⁴ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 453.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marshall & Towner, 334.

This is hardly a summary of teaching on Torah figures like Abraham or Moses, who were chosen by God to perform critical acts within His salvation history plan, and legitimately discuss how their lives are to positively influence the conduct of Messiah followers. George W. Knight III reminds us to especially consider how the issue in view in Titus 3:9 is “a misuse of the law.”⁷

The disputes about the Torah involved *genealogias* (γενεαλογίας) or “genealogies.” Similar to 1 Timothy 1:4, commentators tend to favor these “genealogies” involving various strands of Jewish lore or mythology pertaining to Tanach figures that are only mentioned a few times, with very little information given to us in the canonical text. This would be especially easy to do with the various genealogical lists, particularly those seen in Genesis chs. 5&11. Knight indicates, “speculation about the origins and descendants of persons, which are erroneously thought to have religious significance,”⁸ is what is probably in view here. Marshall & Towner specify that this would have likely involved “idle speculations based on the genealogies and possibly other early material in Genesis.”⁹ Towner himself adds that this would have been “a Jewish type of interpretation based on OT and extra-canonical stories of the biblical heroes and speculation based on family trees.”¹⁰

Although the situation Timothy would have to see resolved in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3-7) has Jewish myths almost exclusively in view, what Titus faced on Crete may have been more than just things made up using the Torah as some kind of basis. Marshall & Towner are right to mention how “Genealogies occupied an important place in Judaism, both in early history and in the family trees of living individuals; e.g. a priest’s position depended on his having an appropriate genealogy that could be traced back.”¹¹ Certainly, fabricated stories about obscure Tanach characters would have featured prominently in the troublemakers’ talk, but given the reference to the troublemakers as those of the circumcision (Titus 1:10), the “genealogies” pushed in Crete could also have related to the pride associated with their Jewish pedigree, used to stir up divisions.

While we do not have enough specific information to determine *exactly* what the troublemakers were pushing, we have enough to know that a *misuse* of the Torah is the problem. *Machas nomikas* (μάχας νομικὰς) are “fights about the *Torah*” (CJB/CJSB), the first definition of *nomikos* (νομικός) provided by *BDAG* being “**pert. to matters relating to law, about law.**”¹² This is important to note as this term appears later in Titus 3:13 to describe Zenas. While such fights involved “genealogies,” they also doubtlessly involved whatever ascetic rituals or legalisms the troublemakers pushed as well (Titus 1:15-16). The thought of Gordon D. Fee is, “Apparently some Hellenistic Jews on Crete, who had ‘accepted Christ,’ were also promoting continuing connections with Judaism, especially in the form of speculative teaching and rigorous devotion to rules and regulations.”¹³ Again, this does not sound like the Torah observance emphasized by Yeshua the Messiah, which focuses on practicing love for God and neighbor as the foremost of good works (Matthew 5:16-19ff). *IVPBBC* actually states that the Torah-related disputes here might have involved “arguments of Jewish legal scholars over spellings or vocalizations of Hebrew words.”¹⁴

Towner is probably best in observing, “the whole picture must include the persistent attachment of these teachers to Cretan values that would hardly have sat easily with...Jewish-oriented views.”¹⁵ The fights that the troublemakers have caused are *anōpheleis kai mataioi* (ἀνωφελείς καὶ μάταιοι), “unprofitable and worthless.” It is most important that *mataios* (μάταιος), “*vain, empty, idle, trifling, frivolous*” (*LS*),¹⁶ elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures, describes a condition where one is separated from God or His will (1 Corinthians 3:20; James 1:26). The intention of God giving His people the Torah was to make them holy and separated,

⁷ Knight, 354.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹ Marshall & Towner, 334; cf. Hiebert, in *EXP*, 11:447.

¹⁰ Towner, 795.

¹¹ Marshall & Towner, 335.

¹² *BDAG*, 675.

¹³ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 211.

¹⁴ Keener, *IVPBBC*, 640; “Stay away from mindless, pointless quarreling over genealogies and fine print in the law code” (The Message).

¹⁵ Towner, 796.

¹⁶ *LS*, 489.

such as Numbers 15:40 summarizing, “so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God.” The intention of the Cretan troublemakers was to assume a position of so-called importance, using fabricated stories about genealogies, and likely also abuse their Jewish ethnicity as a means to act superior and elite. The “disputes about the Law” they instigated could cause nothing more than futile conflicts for the *ekklēsia*, as it would clearly take the attention of the Believers away from the good works the Heavenly Father desired of them.

Looking at Titus 3:9, Messianic Jewish commentator David H. Stern urges, “A congregation leader cannot tolerate divisiveness in a group with the task of ‘doing good deeds’ (v. 8) by the power of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (v. 6); the unity for which the Messiah prayed (Yn [John] 17:21) is essential if the group is serious and dedicated.”¹⁷

Gary W. Demarest makes a comparison between the ancient disputes of Titus 3:9 and common arguments present in the contemporary evangelical Church. Wanting to look for a common thread of what often divides Believers, he expresses the opinion, “Would that we could hasten the day when we would invest our financial and emotional resources in the production of good works rather than good arguments on good programs.”¹⁸ While the original Cretan circumstances pertained to false teaching and views brought in by outside troublemakers, most can probably all identify with how a huge number of today’s church fights and splits are often associated with who-gets-to-do-what with various programs. Not infrequently, such splits are fueled not only by who gets to be involved with such programs, but how much of a church’s financial resources or attention are allocated to them. Messianic congregations are certainly not immune to the problems of having divisions over their outreach programs as well.

¹⁷ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 657.

¹⁸ Demarest, 337.