

FAQ

FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES (2000-2018)

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MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
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Frequently Asked Questions

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Abbreviations and Special Terms

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

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)
CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
ESV: *English Standard Version* (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: *Greek New Testament*
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: *King James Version*
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: *Septuagint*
m. Mishnah
MT: *Masoretic Text*
NASB: *New American Standard Bible* (1977)
NASU: *New American Standard Update* (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)
NJSB: *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1999)
NKJV: *New King James Version* (1982)
NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)
NLT: *New Living Translation* (1996)
NT: *New Testament*
OT: *Old Testament*
REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)
RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: *Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version* (2014)
TNIV: *Today's New International Version* (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: *United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition*
v(s). *verse(s)*
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: *Latin Vulgate*
YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)
WMB: *World Messianic Bible* (2020)

Works of the Law

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

This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*

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

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

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

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

¹ Cf. Daniel C. Harlow, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament: ‘Works of the Law,’” in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp 1578-1579.

² For an English translation: Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp 220-228; Florentino Garza Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English, Second Edition* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1994), pp 77-85; Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp 358-364.

³ Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 364.

⁴ James W. Thompson, “works,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1387.

⁵ T.R. Schreiner, “works of the law,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 977.

Works of the Law

It would certainly be irresponsible for readers to think that any time Paul used the term “works,” he was speaking of “works of law.”⁶ He most often used “works” as comparable to “deeds.” Likewise, when Paul used “works of law” or *ergōn nomou*, the Torah is somehow involved. The question is whether these “works of law” were simply “doing what the Law commanded” (Schreiner, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*),⁷ or alternatively, applying the Torah’s instructions in a particular way. If it was the latter, then it can reorient one’s interpretation of some of Paul’s words in Galatians and Romans. Paul’s argument would not be against “the Torah” per se, but rather its interpretation and misapplication by a particular sector of the ancient Jewish community.

Galatians 2:15, 16 provide some clues that *ergōn nomou* was likely Paul’s Greek equivalent of *ma’asei haTorah*, especially considering the way he addressed Peter. Galatians 2:15 he told Peter *hēmeis phusei Ioudaioi*, “we are Jews by nature,” continuing Galatians 2:16 with *eidotes de hoti ou dikaoutai anthrōpos ex ergōn nomou*, “nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law” (NASU). The verb *eidotes* is a plural participle, indicating that “we know” (NEB, NRSV, ESV). Paul was likely communicating to Peter as a fellow Jew here, and it can be deduced that as Jews they had some ideas as to what “works of law” meant as a technical phrase.

Christian commentators, recognizing the probable connection between *ma’asei haTorah* and *ergōn nomou*, have only so far been able to concede that “works of law” in the Pauline letters pertain to Jewish identity markers. So, while not being general obedience to the Mosaic Torah, per se, “works of the law” were those things which were intended to separate Israel from the Gentile world around it, namely things like the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, and circumcision.⁸ While this may prove discouraging to some Messianic people, the discussion of “works of law” being something other than general Torah obedience as a whole, certainly opens up some useful interpretational possibilities.

In the actual text of 4QMMT, one finds that “works of law” were not, actually, some kind of macro-Jewish identity markers such as the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, or circumcision. These appear to have been assigned somewhat arbitrarily by New Testament scholars.⁹ On the contrary, what readers of 4QMMT encounter, is a strict, sectarian style of *halachah*, not only focused on purity—but a praxis which will inevitably keep more people out of God’s community than welcome people into it. The “works of law” may be considered as some kind of micro-Jewish identity markers, specific to the group or sect which held them to be important. The issue in 4QMMT, in a manner of speaking, **was the club rules of the Qumran community**, which they felt were the proper interpretation and application of the Torah. James D.G. Dunn actually concurs,

“‘deeds of the law’ denote the interpretations of the Torah which marked out the Qumran community as distinctive, the obligations which members took upon themselves as members and by which they maintained their membership” (*The New Perspective on Paul*).¹⁰

N.T. Wright offers a further and more detailed explanation:

“The (sectarian) code of MMT is designed to say, ‘Do these particular “works of Torah,” and they will mark you out in the present as the true covenant people.’ These ‘works’ in question in MMT were not sabbath, food laws and circumcision...Rather, the particular and very specific codes in MMT include various aspects of ritual performance (the calendar, regulations about water, marriage laws and so on), some of which were markers against Gentiles, but most of which were markers designed to demonstrate membership of the particular sect, the

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

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

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

⁸ Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), pp 218-220.

⁹ M.J. Thomas, “Works of the Law,” in Scot McKnight, Lynn H. Cohick, and Nijay K. Gupta, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), pp 1146-1148 discusses how various ancient Christian discussions may have affected this selection.

¹⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 204.

people that believed itself to be the inauguration of God's new covenant people. What the author is saying is: these 'works of Torah' will bring upon you God's reckoning of righteousness' here and now, and that verdict will be repeated 'on the last day'" (*Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*).¹¹

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

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

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

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

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

¹² For a further discussion, consult the author's article "What Are 'Works of the Law?'" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).