Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is easily the most difficult to understand Biblical text, for people within today's broad Messianic community. Galatians has been historically interpreted, by much of Christianity, as delivering Believers a stark choice between God's Law and God's grace. Those who choose any obedience to the Law, according to this view of Paul, are unfaithful to the Messiah and the saving power of the gospel. Supposedly, Paul was desperately concerned for anyone who was trying to keep the Torah of Moses. Consequently, Galatians is a frequently-quoted text to today's Messianic people, many of whom are simply trying to live a life of holiness by obeying God's commandments, in accordance with the example modeled by Yeshua (Jesus).

Understanding Galatians in its original context, for its original audience, and for the original issues which it addressed—can be a severe challenge. Was the issue which the Galatians faced forced circumcision, followed by salvation—or was the issue ritual proselyte conversion to Judaism, for true inclusion among God's people? Likewise, who were those errantly influencing the Galatians? Were they authorized members of the assembly, or misguided outsiders with a an agenda?

In the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee takes a direct look at the issues of Paul's letter, as he rebuked the Galatians for errors which had crept into their midst. Engaging with contemporary scholarship on Galatians, critical questions regarding common conclusions of Paul's words are asked. Were Paul and Yeshua truly at odds when it came to the Torah? Were the Jerusalem leaders and Paul at constant odds with one another? How did Paul's Pharisaical background and views affect the composition of this letter? What were the spiritual dynamics present in Galatia? What did the term "works of law" really mean? These are only a few of the questions considered.

Also included in this commentary is an exposition on Acts 13:13-14:28: Paul's visit to Southern Galatia.

GALATIANS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. McKEE

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.blog

GALATIANS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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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: *Encylopaedia 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
MARV: Messianic Apologetics Revised Version[*]
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)

[*] This is a modified and adapted edition of the public domain World Messianic Bible (WMB).

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
OT: Old Testament
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

PROLOGUE

Among all the texts of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), Paul's letter to the Galatians often presents the most challenges to today's Messianic people. After a surface reading of the, most Christian readers of Galatians consider its six short chapters to be the "final word" on Believers' relationship to the Law of Moses. Paul apparently saw the Law as being something outdated and unnecessary for faith. Paul condemned anyone who claimed that the Law of Moses had any quantitative place in the life of a Messiah follower, and was seriously afraid for anyone giving it any kind of merit—perhaps even suggesting that such a person was on the verge of apostasy.

While some of these conclusions are a bit overstated, even among Christians who do not believe that following (any of) the commandments of the Torah is expected of God's people in the post-resurrection era—they do summarize a fair amount of the rhetoric we often encounter. Messianic people today widely advocate that the Lord is restoring a Torah foundation to His people. This is certainly seen by studying the Torah portions every week, and often by observing outward institutions such as the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, appointed times or *moedim* of Leviticus 23, and eating a kosher style of diet.

It should be our hope, that in most cases the desire to do such things is because a person is trying to grow in his or her faith and live a life like Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). The motives of a Spirit-led Messianic Believer should not be to try to rely on human actions to gain favor with God, but rather letting those actions come as a result of a vibrant relationship with Him. As this relationship grows, not only will one's heart be transformed—but mature Believers will have a mind focused on God and which is able to reason with complicated issues as they arise. In spite of their natural differences as people, Jewish and non-Jewish Believers should be one in the Messiah Yeshua (Galatians 3:28), serving one another via their obedience to God's Instruction as He modeled it (Galatians 6:2).

Galatians is one of those texts of Scripture, where a mind able to compute and fathom difficult concepts is needed. More commentaries and Bible studies have probably been conducted on Galatians and its emphasis on "freedom" than any other text. Much of the Protestant Reformation was spearheaded by Galatians, as Martin Luther appropriated its words on justification to refute Roman Catholicism's practice of selling indulgences. But, Galatians is sometimes used when presumed "legalists" enter the community of faith, and insist that a person live up to a standard of proper living. Some pastors and Bible teachers use Galatians to refute those who would believe that a disciplined life of faith is necessary—often taking Galatians out of its original First Century Mediterranean, mixed Jewish and Greco-

Roman, context. Messianic people who place a high emphasis on the Torah, are easy targets for being "legalists"—especially when Paul had so much to say about the misuse of the Law of Moses in his writing to the Galatians.

A coherent Messianic view of Galatians is needed in this hour, when a great deal of our theology and praxis are in a state of flux. This commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians has strived to offer careful attention to the text of the letter, consider the opinions of various examiners, ancient history, and significant Greek and Hebrew grammatical issues.

One of the biggest issues, by far, which needs to be factored into a Messianic person's examination of Galatians—is consideration for what has been termed the New Perspective of Paul (NPP), something which has been in development in academic circles since the 1970s. Even though it has existed in technical works for over four decades, Christian pastors and laypersons are just now having to consider some of its propositions—meaning that people within the broad Messianic community have largely only heard whispers about it.

The NPP began in the post-Holocaust environment of Christian scholars having to take the perspective of First Century Judaism much more seriously on its own terms. Krister Stendahl's work *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*[i] began some of the earliest discussions in the 1960s. More and more New Testament scholars had to be pointed to the important fact that First Century Judaism, was not the Medieval Catholicism which Martin Luther used texts such as Galatians (and also Romans) to protest. 1977 saw the release of the highly important book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by E.P. Sanders.[ii] Two-thirds of this massive treatise included a great deal of data from the various writings of Ancient Judaism (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrashim, Dead Sea Scrolls), and specifically examines its position on works and righteousness. This has widely culminated in the work and perspectives offered by the two major scholars who tend to be associated with the NPP, and have undoubtedly written the most on the issues of the Apostle Paul, First Century Judaism, and the Torah or Law: James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright.

The primary thrust, presented by the NPP, is that readers have to consider Paul's writings in the context of Second Temple Judaism. Modern readers cannot *first* subject their Twentieth or Twenty-First Century worldview onto those ancient times. Things such as "circumcision," "works of the law," and "righteousness" need to be considered, as best as readers can contemplate, from the perspective of the wider ancient Jewish world. While the conclusions of the NPP have shaken up a few evangelicals—and even a few Messianics for that matter—what it brings to the table cannot be easily discarded. We have to include the NPP in our conversation on texts such as Galatians, as it might help us realize things which have been so easily glossed over—possibly because they have been examined through too much of a "Lutheran" perspective. Undeniable in Paul's argument to the Galatians is how

[i] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).
[ii] E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

Believers from the nations were to be included in the covenant community of God with the Jewish people.

This resource on Galatians will be taking into account some of the proposals and suggestions of the NPP. I cannot call myself a complete advocate of the NPP, but you will find that I am informed from its proposals, and want to include some of its ideas on righteousness being corporate covenant inclusion—along with the more traditional view of righteousness being a personal, just standing before God. I do not believe the NPP can be ignored if we are to have an accurate First Century understanding of Galatians, which balances personal redemption with membership in God's community. Many of the proposals of the NPP can definitely aid the credibility of the Messianic movement in the future—and most especially help our interpretation of some difficult words in Galatians.

Looking back on the past several decades of Messianic theological development, it is clear to me that a more thorough and mature approach to Biblical Studies—particularly regarding Galatians—is required. Too many Messianic Believers when testifying of their Torah-positive related convictions to Christian family and friends, have Galatians quoted to them haphazardly. At the very least, this has caused some to become discouraged and confused. The worst case scenario is that some Messianics perceive that Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul contradict themselves on the matter of the Law of Moses, and thus one must be discarded in favor of the other.

I have heard permissive Messianic Jews, who counter claims from Galatians, by saying that they only follow the Torah to evangelize the Jewish community—but they do not consider it important to follow beyond that. Likewise, I have heard unstable Hebrew Roots people declare that Paul's letter to the Galatians must be a forgery, and that Paul's other works should also be considered suspicious. Somewhere in the middle are those who try to examine Galatians with integrity, but who hold to a high view of the Torah and its continued relevance for the post-resurrection era.

A responsible interpreter has much to weigh when considering a text like Galatians. I do not believe that it is difficult to reconcile the seeming differences between Yeshua's and Paul's words on the Torah—but in order to do this we must gain the proper perspective. What were the circumstances surrounding Paul's composition of Galatians? What issues were the Galatians suffering from? What were the spiritual dynamics at work? These are all important questions we should consider when examining any Biblical text—*but they are* ***imperative*** *to consider when interpreting Galatians*. We cannot simply interject what we think the text might mean, nor can we just throw our hands up into the air and ignore it, either. We have to do the difficult work of exegesis, being guided by a sound ideology rooted in the Torah and embodied in the worldview of Paul.

As you prepare to read this commentary on Galatians, what issues might today's Messianic movement be facing today, which are paralleled in this letter? What is our position on circumcision? (Have we even defined its Galatian meaning properly?) How does one become an accepted member of God's people? What is righteousness, and how do we receive

a proper standing before God? Perhaps most important, how do any of us avoid being placed in the position of the Galatians?

You will discover that Galatians' message and what it originally communicated, is as relevant for our times today as Messianic people as much as it was in the First Century. The challenge is whether or not we will actually heed its message. The obstacle to overcome is having the spiritual and reasoning capacities to compute what the ancient challenge actually was—and whether we are possibly facing it in our midst today. How can we be those who embody the essence of Paul's declaration, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14, NIV), while responding to some of the criticisms against that Law, commonly derived from passages in Galatians? How can we be men and women who strive to obey God as a *natural outworking* of our faith, rather than something which is required to precede faith?

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics
September 2006

Galatians for the Practical Messianic has been updated and fine tuned in some areas, for this 2012 release. On the whole, readers will not notice any significant differences between the previous spiral comb edition and this version. There has been some more information transplanted into this commentary from various articles and FAQ entries from the Messianic Apologetics website, and the paperback edition of *The New Testament Validates Torah*, in order to shore up the different passages and arguments considered. There have also been updates here and there to reflect some notable developments in the realm of Messianic theology, which have occurred since 2007. And of course, where necessary, some more engagement has been conducted with the Greek source text and other important issues.

August 2012

Many developments have taken place within the Messianic movement, and to our own family and ministry, since this commentary was originally released. This 2025 edition has smoothed over some of the discussions, offering important updates where necessary, and is reflective of our experiences over the past ten to twelve years. There has been some integration from further studies, notably the 2014 *Messianic Kosher Helper* and 2015 *Messianic Sabbath Helper*. It is my sincere hope and prayer that *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, continues to aid many people across our faith community!

January 2026

INTRODUCTION

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians[1] (Grk. *Pros Galatas*) is a very difficult text for most of today's Messianic people to understand. This is due to any number of factors, the foremost being that Galatians is often examined and interpreted from a perspective which is largely distanced from the First Century situation it was originally composed to address. Rather than considering the specific spiritual and social dynamics of a group of newly maturing Believers in Yeshua (Jesus), who were challenged that their ethnic condition was not enough for true faith, redemption, and inclusion among God's people—many interpreters and lay readers consider Galatians to be Paul's *magnum opus* on Christians' divorce from the Torah of Moses. Such Christian readers of Galatians are often ill-informed of the *actual situation* of the Galatians, and too many Messianics—who have pro-Torah convictions—are ill-equipped to be able to respond to the claims made against them from this letter.

An engagement with the text of Galatians alone is not sufficient for a pro-Torah understanding of Galatians which will support Messianic convictions and lifestyle practice. (And neither is it sufficient for understanding *any* Biblical text). Most of the examination of Galatians which occurs today among your average Christians *and* Messianics is often removed from its ancient context. Too much of it takes place on the basis of "this verse says this" and "but this verse says that," without consideration for the broader issues and discussions going on both in history and current academic study of Galatians. Furthermore, one must also keep in mind that Galatians was one of the earliest texts ever produced by the Messianic Jewish movement of the First Century C.E. (save some of the creedal formulas used in some of Paul's letters).[2] As a consequence, one has to temper his or her examination of Galatians, with the understanding that further clarification on various subjects may be given in some of Paul's additional letters and other Apostolic materials.

The message of Galatians, the exact audience of the Galatians, and some of the historical background surrounding Galatians, have all been debated by examiners in the past century.

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[1] Please note that in spite of the common reference to Galatians as "the Book of Galatians," I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Galatians or Paul's letter to the Galatians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text was a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

[2] Including, but not limited to: Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20.

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