

# What Are “Works of the Law”?

by J.K. McKee posted 11 May, 2009 www.tnnonline.net

I remember the first time I ever heard the possibility that “works of the Law” in the Pauline Epistles could be anything *other than* just keeping the Mosaic Torah. I disregarded it immediately. Why? Because I heard this from someone, who read an article, whose author had read an article in a theological journal, an article that had likely been misinterpreted and misrepresented. Like the game of telephone—one person gave a message, and then it had been passed down to four or five people—sounding nothing like what had originally been said by the Biblical scholar who made the original proposal. Hearing things fourth or fifth-hand can make it pretty easy to disregard what has been said, especially if the person passing on the information is not a part of the theological conversation, who is able to go to the source, seeing what was originally proposed, and engage on any kind of reasonable level.

Anyone who enters into Pauline theology today will easily encounter the fact that there are scholars and exegetes who think that the clause “works of law” or *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου)—appearing first in Galatians (2:16[3x]; 3:2, 5, 10), and then appearing again in Romans (3:20, 28)—actually does designate something other than “works required by the Mosaic Law,” or at least something a bit more specific than just “observing the law” (NIV) in general. These proposals, though, have been met with a great deal of criticism, and even some hostility, by those of particular theological traditions. Alternatives to the customary meaning of “works of law” have been proposed more frequently, as New Testament theologians, over the past fifty years or so, have had greater access to ancient Jewish literature and resources, and this information has had to be considered in their exegesis. Their thoughts, suggestions, and conclusions are just now late in this decade being discussed by normal lay people in the evangelical Church.

Does the Apostle Paul use *ergōn nomou* as a polemic against Jewish observance of the Torah, against a kind of salvation-by-works doctrine? Or does he use it in reference to something like ancient *halachic* matters that affected a faith community, which should have been welcoming of non-Jewish Believers in the Messiah, but were not?

Today’s Messianic movement has grown in leaps and bounds significantly because Believers want to know more about the First Century place and setting of the Apostolic Scriptures. While this has certainly affected much of how we view the teaching style of Yeshua the Messiah as a First Century rabbi, it has unfortunately not affected as much of how we view the Pauline letters. The Pauline letters are a part of the Bible that too many of us do not deal with, either because we just do not know what to do with them, *or* because entering into the world of contemporary Pauline scholarship is too much of a minefield and a hassle for us to do. Too few of our congregational leaders and teachers are aware of the considerable progress that has been made in the past few decades within Pauline theology, and how it opens up parts of Galatians and Romans—that have traditionally been interpreted as being anti-Torah—to really not be anti-Torah at all. They include, rather, specific critiques of practices and attitudes that impeded the work of the gospel among the nations in the First Century.

In this article, we will discuss some of the various proposals made regarding “works of the Law,” and see how they play out. Are “works of the Law” just observing the Mosaic Torah? Are “works of the Law” some kind of legalism? Or, are “works of the Law” the identity barriers set by an ancient sect of Judaism? How might knowing about these things bring greater clarity to passages in Galatians and Romans? What kind of contemporary application might help us to be a vibrant Messianic faith community, which can positively impact society at large?

## Joining the Conversation

The first time *ergōn nomou* appears in the Apostolic Scriptures is in Galatians 2:16. Paul rebukes Peter in Antioch, telling him,

nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified (NASU).

If you are like most Bible readers, you have interpreted Paul’s words here as meaning that justification—often meaning forgiveness and reconciliation before God provided by Messiah Yeshua—cannot be accomplished via observing the Mosaic Law. Peter was in error for separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers (Galatians 2:11-14), because he could not eat with them as a good Jew who observed the kosher dietary laws. But if you think about it for a moment, why would Paul rebuke Peter with justification language for what he was doing? Was the scene in Antioch one of the Believers being forgiven of sin and brought into God’s salvation? Or, was the issue really how the Believers, regardless of if they were Jewish or non-Jewish, were supposed to all be getting along at fellowship gatherings? If you have ever read this text closely—seeing Paul’s usage of “works of law” and “justification” together—thinking that there is probably more at work, **you will not have any difficulty** joining into the conversation we are about to have. You may have recognized, based only on an English reading of the verses where “works of law” appears, that there might be contextual and historical issues worthy of some more investigation.

Over the past twenty to thirty years, there has been a great renaissance in Pauline scholarship, particularly as Paul’s letters have been re-examined with more ancient Jewish resources to consider. It would be downright impossible to examine all of the academic discussion and publications in a single article, but there are some trends you need to be made aware of. Much of what we are preparing to consider regarding “works of law” can find its origins in E.P. Sanders’ book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). This publication was monumental in analyzing as to whether or not ancient Judaism really was a legalistic, works-righteousness religion, as it had been stereotyped by a great deal of prior prejudices that had consistently failed to examine quotations from ancient Jewish literature such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Midrashim, and by the time of Sanders’ writing, the Dead Sea Scrolls. While many scholars who followed after Sanders may not have agreed with all of his conclusions on Paul himself, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* certainly did stimulate an interest in Pauline scholars to investigate more into the Jewish background and setting of his letters.

While traditional perspectives on Paul’s view of Judaism, the Law of Moses, and whatever “works of law” were continued through the 1980s and 1990s, what is now called the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) also grew considerably. The “New Perspective of Paul” was a title given by British scholar James D.G. Dunn in a 1983 article by this same title,<sup>1</sup> where aside from the various aspects of Paul and “works of Law” that Dunn wanted readers to consider, he specifically wanted to remove “a misunderstanding of Paul, based on the standard Protestant (mis)reading of Paul through Reformation spectacles.”<sup>2</sup> While he was clear to state how he was not trying to deconstruct foundational doctrines such as justification by faith, he did want people to reconsider the scene in Antioch in Galatians 2, with Peter separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers, and what the issue regarding “works of law” actually was. In his words, *ergōn nomou* can be specifically classified “as *badges*: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people; given by God for precisely that reason, they serve to demonstrate covenant status.”<sup>3</sup> Dunn opened an important door for Bible readers to see that a targeted issue regarding “works of law” was present in Antioch, and likely also in the other places where “works of law” appears in both Galatians and Romans.

Since this time in the 1980s, with Dunn writing a considerable number of articles on the NPP, and his own commentaries on Galatians and Romans, a number of scholars have come to agree with him that “works of law” is not just rote observance of Mosaic rituals, and a number of scholars have been quite pessimistic of such a proposal. Almost every Galatians or Romans commentary, written at the technical level, has had to take into consideration the suggestion that *ergōn nomou* is not just following the Mosaic Law, with sides both in favor and against proposed.

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<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp 99-120.

Note how he is often referred to as Jimmy by colleagues and other scholars.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

The full release of the Qumran document 4QMMT (4Q394-5)<sup>4</sup> by 1994, includes the only outside attestation of something similar to Paul’s usage of “works of law,” appearing as the Hebrew *ma’asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה). A possible connection between 4QMMT in the DSS, and how “works of law” is used in Galatians and Romans, also spurred a great deal of academic discussion. And today, in various entries on “works” in general Bible encyclopedias and dictionaries, “works of law” being something other than just rote observance of the Mosaic Law is discussed to some degree.<sup>5</sup>

Into the early 1990s, Dunn was the main voice in New Testament theology credited with proposing that “works of law” regarded identity barriers that defined the ancient Jewish people, and not just rote observance of the Mosaic Law. But very few outside of New Testament theology, other than those teaching at the academic level, or new students acquiring a seminary degree, would be aware of these proposals. Even though books were written in favor in the NPP, and books were written against it, the discussion would simply not affect your average Protestant church—much less any fledgling congregation in the then-young Messianic Jewish movement. Unless various lay people were amateur theologians in their spare time, reading big fat books with a lot of Hebrew, Greek, and references to scholarly journals and conversations—your average evangelical Believer well into the 1990s would not even be aware of proposals made about “works of law,” ancient Judaism, and Pauline theology.

This began to change because of the writings of Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright,<sup>6</sup> sometimes considered to be “the C.S. Lewis of the Twenty-First Century.” Wright, similar to Dunn, is of the British academic tradition, but he is much more theologically conservative and evangelical—and more than anything else is much easier to read! Because Wright is much more of a popular writer, he has a much larger audience than Dunn. In his 1997 book *What Saint Paul Really Said*, he summarized his view of how “works of the law” were “the works...which marked [the Jewish people] out as covenant-keepers,” labeling such works as “sabbath, food-laws, circumcision.”<sup>7</sup> This conclusion was no different than Dunn’s proposals, even though normal lay people would have to now be considering it. So while Dunn may have been the first to use the actual description “New Perspective of Paul,” and has probably written the most about it, Wright’s publications have probably been the most read and influential at the popular level. And indeed, for a relatively easy-to-read analysis of the relevant issues to the NPP, I would recommend Wright’s book *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

There has been no significant level of Messianic engagement with the NPP at the present time in 2009. Most notable to be considered of the engagement that has actually been conducted would be Tim Hegg’s book *The Letter Writer* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2002). Although he does not significantly discuss “works of law” in this publication, he does consider it in his Galatians and Romans commentaries, and believes that the NPP can better aid Messianic interpreters to consider and define what the actual issues are addressed by these two letters.

Due to space limitations for this article, we will only be discussing what the NPP has proposed regarding what *ergōn nomou* might mean in the Pauline Epistles. Yet, we can be thankful for the NPP opening up the discussion on Paul’s First Century Jewish background. It is undeniable that in the future we will be engaging more with the proposals made by scholars such as Dunn, Wright, and others who see “works of law” as being something more specific than just rote Law-keeping.

<sup>4</sup> For an English translation, consult Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp 220-228; Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp 358-364.

<sup>5</sup> 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), pp 975-979; James W. Thompson, “Works,” David Noel Friedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1387; “deeds, works,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Note how he is often referred to as Tom by colleagues and other scholars.

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 132.

## The Current Array of Opinions on “Works of Law”

It is quite easy, especially if one is outside the current conversation in Pauline theology, to just casually disregard or summarily reject the idea that “works of law” might be something other than rote observance of the Mosaic Law. One has to be willing to realize that letters like Galatians and Romans were not originally written to people living in the Twenty-First Century, and to break out of some old, incomplete viewpoints. Yet, even while there has been scholastic resistance to the idea that “works of law” is something more specific than just following the Mosaic Law, we really cannot disagree with scholars such as Douglas J. Moo, who argue that:

“‘Works of the law’...is a subset of the more general category ‘works.’ The Reformers and their heirs were quite right to use these verses to deny that human beings could be justified before God by anything that they might do.”<sup>8</sup>

If we were to use the broad definition of “works of law” as being any human activity associated with the Mosaic Torah, and that such activity will not bring justification, I would not be in substantial disagreement. Yet the issue we have to address is why “works of law” and “justification” are connected in passages like Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20. Are these intended to just amplify the fact that people are not saved by their actions or works (Ephesians 2:8-9), or were these statements targeted for a specific reason for ancient First Century circumstances? If the latter is the case, then the principle that people cannot be justified by their actions can surely be *supplemented* by Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20, but these verses were delivered in an ancient setting that must first be considered and cannot at all be casually disregarded.

Wrapping one’s brain around the idea that “works of law” might be something specific to the First Century can be very difficult for today’s evangelical Christians, who often hear sermon after sermon with passages like Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:20 quoted as to why human activities will not bring salvation. It is difficult to acclimate such people to an ancient First Century religious world, where Judaism is quite diverse, and the gospel message is going out to God-fearers and total pagans. It is easier for newer pastors—even those who have heard current proposals made about “works of law” and the NPP in their seminary studies—to simply fall back into the old view that it just means “observing the law” (NIV). The thought is that lay people should not be informed about discussions that are likely to remain constrained to the academic level, and that it is best to keep preaching on Sunday morning rather simplistically.

A significant reason why many of today’s Messianic Believers *are Messianic* is because they want to know more. They want to know what the ancient First Century setting of letters like Galatians and Romans actually were, and what “works of law” really meant to the Apostle Paul. Unfortunately, though, some Messianic teachers are not often willing to investigate such topics thoroughly enough, consulting the thoughts of the scholars who originally made connections between *ergōn nomou*, *ma’asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT. The Messianic movement has already witnessed various teachers make proposals about “works of law” not necessarily being rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, but these teachers are not at all engaged with contemporary discussions present within the New Perspective of Paul.<sup>9</sup> *Things have been made a bit too simplistic.* We need to move beyond this, and not only engage with the various NPP proposals on

<sup>8</sup> Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 327.

<sup>9</sup> This most notably includes Avi ben Mordechai (a/k/a Brad Marcus) in his *Galatians: A Torah-Based Commentary in First-Century Hebraic Context* (Jerusalem: Millennium 7000 Communications, 2005), pp 80-96. Marcus haphazardly concludes that “works of law” means following all of the Oral Torah of the Pharisees. He specifically targets his publication against Messianic Believers who follow *any* of the traditions of mainline Judaism, and not the *halachah* of the non-traditional Karaites, tying it in with various conclusions drawn from the so-called Hebrew Gospel of Matthew.

Even though his publication may be 500 pages *and* expensive, there is not a single reference to the proposals of theologians like Dunn, Wright, or even those who have made other suggestions about “works of law” like C.E.B Cranfield. While claiming to be something that engages with a First Century context, Marcus’ rantings fail to do this to any considerable degree, sitting far outside the actual conversation presently going on in Galatians and Romans scholarship. His so-called commentary has an agenda that must be avoided.

“works of law,” but develop realistic interpretations *and* applications of the relevant Pauline texts for the current mission and focus of our emerging Messianic movement.

The current array of opinions regarding what “works of law”—*ergōn nomou* in Paul’s actual letters—actually are in today’s Biblical Studies, can be divided into three broad categories:

1. “Works of Law” as **Keeping the Law**
2. “Works of Law” as **Legalism**
3. “Works of Law” as **Identity Markers**

The following is a chart with some quotations of various scholars to consider, relevant to our examination of what “works of law” actually are. This will give you a good idea about where various streams of thought have led, when you engage any of these individuals’ writings:

What Are “Works of the Law” in Contemporary Theology?	
<b>Keeping the Law</b>	<p>...when Paul used the phrase “works of Law” he referred to <i>doing what the Law commanded</i>. . . “works” (<i>erga</i>) in Paul refers to “deeds that are performed,” and that “works of Law” signifies the “deeds” or “actions” demanded by the Mosaic Law.<sup>10</sup> T.R. Schreiner, in <i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i></p> <p>It would seem clear from the fact that Paul uses the phrase ‘works of the Law’ interchangeably with just the word ‘works’ to speak about the same subject. . . and from the fact that ἐργον is regularly used of actions rather than attitudes. . .<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III, <i>Grace in Galatia</i></p> <p>“Works of the law” . . . as most interpreters have recognized, refers simply to “things that are done in obedience to the law.” . . . “Works of the law” are inadequate not because they are “works of <i>the law</i>” but, ultimately, because they are “works.”<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. Moo, <i>NICNT: Romans</i></p>
<b>Legalism</b>	<p>...the Greek language of Paul’s day possessed no word-group corresponding to our ‘legalism’, ‘legalist’ and ‘legalistic’. This means that he lacked a convenient terminology for expressing a vital distinction, and so was surely seriously hampered in the work of clarifying the Christian position with regard to the law. In view of this, we should always, we think, be ready to reckon with the possibility that Pauline statements, which at first sight seem to disparage the law, were really not directed against the law itself but against that misunderstanding and misuse of it for which we now have a convenient terminology.<sup>13</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, <i>ICC: Romans</i></p> <p>We agree with C.E.B. Cranfield that Paul had no separate word-group to denote “legalism,” “legalist,” and “legalistic.” Consequently some of the passages translated “law” are incorrect, for what he is opposing is the quest for a righteousness obtained as a result of one’s own efforts and works.<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, <i>Toward Old Testament Ethics</i></p>

<sup>10</sup> Schreiner, “Works of the Law,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 975, 977.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 176.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp 209, 217.

<sup>13</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 853.

<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 309.

<b>Identity Markers</b>	<p>We may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by 'works of law' Paul intended his readers to think of <i>particular observances of the law like circumcision and the food laws</i>. . . .we know that <i>just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish</i>.<sup>15</sup> James D.G. Dunn, <i>Jesus, Paul and the Law</i></p> <p>... 'works of Torah' here is not about the works some might think you have to perform in order to <i>become</i> a member of God's people, but the works you have to perform to <i>demonstrate that you are</i> a member of God's people...works of Torah would simply create a family which was at best an extension of ethnic Judaism...<sup>16</sup> N.T. Wright, <i>Paul in Fresh Perspective</i></p> <p>"works of Law" ...refers not to meritorious deeds in general but specifically to those practices that stand as outward symbols of Jewish ethnic distinctiveness: circumcision, dietary observances, and sabbath keeping.<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Hays, <i>NIB: Galatians</i></p>
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Some theologians fall into some combination of the categories listed above, perhaps altering a previous position they held, to account for new proposals made in New Testament scholarship. F.F. Bruce says that "The ἔργα νόμου are the actions prescribed by the law. They are not depreciated in themselves, for the law of God is 'holy and just and good' (Rom. 7:12)... What is depreciated is the performing of them in a spirit of legalism."<sup>18</sup> Bruce sits between the traditional view that holds "works of law" as rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, and C.E.B. Cranfield who argues that "works of law" was a Torah-based legalism. Richard N. Longenecker issues a synthesis together of all three views, recognizing that "works of law" could be some kind of ancient Jewish identity markers, yet having to conclude,

"Paul here in [Galatians] 2:16 uses ἔργων νόμου not just to refer to 'the badges of Jewish covenantal nomism'...but a catch phrase to signal the whole legalistic complex of ideas having to do with winning God's favor by a merit-amassing observance of Torah."<sup>19</sup>

Among contemporary scholars, perhaps the most significant that will affect our examination, is how Walter C. Kaiser slightly alters his position between "works of law" just being legalism, seen in his 1983 *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, and now including some kind of sectarian Jewish observances. In his 2008 book *The Promise-Plan of God*, he indicates, "It would appear that in light of the Qumran document called the *Misqat Ma'ase ha-Torah* [4QMMT], which uses the same phrase Paul used...that this phrase is used at Qumran and later Rabbinic Judaism to refer to what was known as the *halakah*." Kaiser goes on to define "The *halakah* [as] an interpretation of the law of Moses that demanded obedience to the law as a basis for acceptance into membership of the people of God."<sup>20</sup> Kaiser is notably an Old Testament theologian who is known for having a very high view of the moral law of the Torah, something concurrent with the Reformed theological tradition.

The alternative position to believing that "works of law" is just rote observance of the Mosaic Torah, that many of today's Messianics are likely familiar with, is the proposal that "works of law" is some kind of legalism. This is the view that has been advocated by Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern, following Cranfield, in both his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*

<sup>15</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 191.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 239.

<sup>18</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137.

<sup>19</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 259.

and Complete Jewish Bible. Stern remarks, "I submit that in every instance '*erga nomou*' means not deeds done in virtue of following the *Torah* the way God intended, but deeds done in consequence of perverting the *Torah* into a set of rules which, it is presumed, can be obeyed mechanically, automatically, *legalistically*, without having faith, without having trust in God, without having love for God or man, and without being empowered by the Holy Spirit."<sup>21</sup> A verse like Romans 3:20 appears in the CJB as, "For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because what *Torah* really does is show people how sinful they are." Outside of these two publications, Stern has written very little, and so we do not know what position he might take regarding 4QMMT and proposals made by the NPP, which became more significant to engage with in the 2000s, after the release of the CJB.

One cannot avoid the fact that the view of "works of law" in Galatians, and to a lesser extent Romans, being some kind of ancient Jewish identity markers, has not been entirely met with a great deal of enthusiasm among some evangelical Christian writers. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo suggest in their New Testament introduction, that Paul only wanting things like "circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath...dropped because he wants to build a unified church composed of Jew and Gentile alike...is too narrow."<sup>22</sup> They cannot accept the NPP proposal that only *part* of the *Torah* could be in view, because their view of Pauline theology requires them to advocate that he only taught Believers to follow a "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), something entirely independent from God's *Torah*. One of the most significant reasons why such theologians oppose the idea of "works of law" in Paul being something specific—and not just general observance of the Mosaic *Torah*—is that it would require them to similarly reevaluate the justification language frequently associated with it (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20, 28). As Dunn describes,

"Paul...prefaces his first mention of 'being justified' with a deliberate appeal to the standard Jewish belief, shared also by his fellow Jewish Christians, that the Jews as a race are God's covenant people. Almost certainly, then, his concept of righteousness, both noun and verb (to be made or counted righteous, to be justified), is thoroughly Jewish too, with the same strong covenant overtones...God's justification is God's recognition of Israel as his people, his verdict in favour of Israel on grounds of his covenant with Israel."<sup>23</sup>

Some evangelical theologians believe that the NPP proposals on "works of law" and "justification" are deliberately trying to dismantle the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. *This is actually not the case*, as the issue regarding "justification" as inclusion among God's covenant people is limited to only a handful of passages in Galatians and Romans where ancient issues are in specific view. The NPP has never argued against the overall Biblical doctrine of justification by faith—only that something *more specific to First Century Judaism* is present in passages like Galatians 2:16-17 or Romans 3:20-21. Dunn clarifies how for him,

"My concern has not been to attack or deny the classical Christian doctrine of justification by faith. My concern has always been that the doctrine of justification, as rediscovered (or reasserted) by Luther and as consistently expounded within Protestantism, has neglected important aspects particularly of Paul's original formulation in the context of his mission."<sup>24</sup>

I believe that today's Messianics can safely engage with the various proposals of the NPP, and theologians like Dunn and Wright, realizing that their intention—as ours should be—is to understand "works of law" in the context that the Apostle Paul used the phrase. What were the issues confronted in letters like Galatians and Romans, and how were "works of law" an unnecessary impediment to the work of the gospel?

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<sup>21</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 537.

<sup>22</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 466.

<sup>23</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

## “Works of Law” as Identity Markers

While it can be encouraging for various Messianics to hear that contemporary New Testament scholars have proposed that “works of law” are not just rote keeping of the Mosaic Torah, it can then be quite discouraging to hear that the same scholars often consider “works of law” to be identity markers—construed as barriers—such as: the Sabbath, appointed times, kosher dietary laws, and circumcision. These are, after all, important aspects of Torah observance that many of today’s Messianics believe God is restoring to His people. How, and or why, did various proponents of the NPP classify “works of law” as being these specific areas of Torah observance? Before we can analyze the connection between *ergōn nomou*, *ma’asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT, we need to trace some of the arguments that are made by the NPP.

That “works of law” were something that negatively affected the First Century Body of Messiah is difficult to argue against. In Galatians 2:12, Paul records how Peter, “prior to the coming of certain men from James...used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.” The “works of law” evidenced by Peter disrupted the unity that was supposed to be occurring among the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Antioch at their common fellowship meals. Previously, it is thought that Peter would have eaten whatever he wanted with the non-Jewish Believers, but once some highly conservative Jewish Believers from Jerusalem arrived, Peter immediately had to start eating kosher again. This caused a ruckus that forced Paul to rebuke Peter in public (Galatians 2:14)

The main proposal made by advocates of the NPP is that “works of law” are things purposefully intended to separate people. This idea is supported by sentiments seen in ancient Jewish literature, such as *Jubilees* 22:16: “Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs.”<sup>25</sup> Philo discusses how Israel “will never mingle with any other nation so as to depart from their national and ancestral ways” (*Life of Moses* 1.278).<sup>26</sup> For Dunn, it must have been the Maccabean crisis of a century and a half earlier, where the Jewish people were threatened with significant cultural assimilation by the Greek Seleucids, that the “works of law” became more or less defined. 1 Maccabees 1:60-63 summarizes how

“According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks. But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die.”

Dunn observes how “these demands of the law had become a principal target of Syrian persecution,” and how easily they would have become “a way of marking off the entity of Jewish self-identity from a Hellenism that had swamped and threatened to obliterate such national distinctiveness.”<sup>27</sup> So by the First Century, the NPP asserts that distinctively Jewish observances like circumcision, the kosher dietary laws, and the Sabbath had swelled to such a degree of national pride for Judaism—that they would deliberately impede the mission of Paul among the nations. The “works of law” separated the Jewish Believers from the non-Jewish Believers, and they would need to at least be minimized, or eliminated altogether in some cases. Dunn claims that “in Paul’s view, making these works a requirement additional to faith”<sup>28</sup> was totally unnecessary for membership within the people of God.

What is revolutionary about the NPP claim that “works of law” were only those things that marked out Jews as members of God’s covenant people, is **that Paul is not speaking against the Law of Moses in total** when he uses the term *ergōn nomou*. Paul is still free to recognize God’s

<sup>25</sup> O.S. Wintermute, trans. “Jubilees,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 98.

<sup>26</sup> Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 485.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 15-16.

Torah as having continued ethical and moral validity for all of His people, including the new, non-Jewish Believers. In Wright’s assessment, “The new covenant work of the Spirit, transform[s] the heart so as to enable it to keep the commandments of the Torah.”<sup>29</sup> He also comments, “much of what Paul says he can draw upon the Torah for outline guidance.”<sup>30</sup> The greater aspects of the Torah, summarized best by Yeshua in His Sermon on the Mount, were the kinds of things that the Apostle Paul wanted *all* of the Believers to focus on. We can be thankful that the NPP has helped many Christians to see that Paul was not at all anti-Torah, instead claiming that he was only opposed to various Jewish “works of law” that disrupted unity and cohesiveness in the ancient Body of Messiah.

What can be very upsetting about the NPP conclusions about “works of law” is that today’s Messianics largely do not believe that things like the dietary laws or the Sabbath were abolished in the New Testament. Was an institution like *Shabbat* only intended for the Jewish people? The Ten Commandments state that the Sabbath was not only for the native Israelite, but also “your sojourner who stays with you” (Exodus 20:10). Some of the NPP conclusions can work against those of the One Law perspective in the Messianic movement—those of us who believe that the Torah’s word “There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you” (Numbers 15:16) applies to all of God’s people today. Indeed, likely applying some of the conclusions of the NPP on “works of law,” one Messianic Jewish teacher says,

“[B]eing a leader in Messianic Judaism, I believe that Torah has identity markers never required of Gentiles in the days of Moses and still not in the days of Peter, James, and Paul. I don’t believe Sabbath, dietary law[s], circumcision, or fringes, for example, are something Christians must do.”<sup>31</sup>

From this faulty point of view, “works of law” unnecessarily separate God’s people. Messianic Jews are free to observe the Sabbath, eat kosher, remember the Passover, etc.—but non-Jewish Believers are not required by God to do so. This limited viewpoint can lead us to conclude that today’s Messianic movement should really only be perceived as a movement of Jewish Believers expressing their Jewishness in a Yeshua-focused context—but not at all a movement living out God’s intention to bring Israel into its fullness, as the “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB) of all people united in God’s Messiah, following His Instruction. This is an Israel where non-Jewish Believers are “fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise” (Ephesians 3:6).

So what is to be done about this predicament?

## “Works of Law” and 4QMMT

Are “works of law” in the Pauline letters really intended to be things like the Sabbath, kosher dietary laws, or other outward observances of the Torah? **Only a further investigation will determine this for sure.** In the past two decades, various New Testament scholars have recognized that there is a likely connection between Paul’s usage of the Greek *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου), and the Hebrew *ma’asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה). Up until the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Qumran document 4QMMT, there had been no significant extant Jewish literature that ever used the phrase “works of law.” Martin G. Abegg summarizes his view of how:

“Although it would be rather too bold to propose that Paul knew of 4QMMT, or that zealous members of the Qumran community had been the perpetrators of the problems in Galatia, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Paul consciously reflected the term ‘works

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 146.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Derek Leman. (2008). *FFOZ and Messianic Judaism. Messianic Jewish Musings*. Retrieved 07 May, 2009, from <<http://derek4messiah.wordpress.com/>>.

of law’ which was used by the author of 4QMMT...[I]t appears highly likely that Paul was reacting to a position that was espoused in 4QMMT by the Qumran covenanters.”<sup>32</sup>

In order for one to know the possible orientation of Paul in employing the phrase “works of law,” and its background from the ancient Judaism, it is important to be familiar with how “works of law” is seen in the document 4QMMT, and the religious attitudes expressed by the Qumran community. The fact that the Qumran community was exclusivist—seeing themselves as the only true Israel of God—is difficult to avoid encountering in the DSS. Their literature expresses how “This is the rule for all the congregation of Israel in the Last Days,” which included only “the men appointed to the society of the *Yahad*” (1QSa 1.1, 28)<sup>33</sup>—their own initiates. To what extent was this comparable to the Influencers that Paul warned the Galatians about? The Influencers upsetting the Galatians argued that in order for the new, non-Jewish Believers to be accepted among God’s people, they needed to undergo a ritual proselyte circumcision that only they could provide.

Paul told Peter, “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16a, NRSV). The plural participle *eidotes* (εἰδότες) or “[we] knowing,” would indicate that “works of law” was a term known and used by ancient Judaism—people like Paul and Peter—to describe something. When Paul uses it to rebuke Peter, he is rebuking Peter for doing something that caused unnecessary division among all the Believers in Antioch. This is where we need to understand what the Qumran document 4QMMT actually summarized by defining various “works of law.” Are these “works of law” really specific things like the Sabbath or dietary laws, or are they more specific practices, ideas, and attitudes that would identify one as a member of a particular Jewish sect? This can only be decided by us actually reading what 4QMMT has to say, and then making a value judgment on what *ma’asei haTorah* defines.

Below, I have reproduced an English edition of 4QMMT from the Wise, Abegg, and Cook translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>34</sup> While lengthy, this will certainly help those of you who have heard second- or third-hand references to this document, or “works of law” being a term used by the Qumran community, but have never seen nor read it before:

<b>4QMMT – <i>Miqzat Ma’asei haTorah</i></b>
<p><b><i>I. Legal Body: Do not mix the holy with the profane.</i></b></p> <p>These are some of our pronouncements [concerning the law of Go]d. Specifically, s[ome of pronouncements] concerning works of the law that w[e have determined...and all] of them concern [defiling mixtures] and the purity of [the sanctuary...]</p> <p>1. <i>Ban on offerings using Gentile grain.</i>                      [Concerning the offering of Gentile gr]ain [which they are...] and allowing their [...] to touch it and def[ile] it. No one should eat] from [Gent]ile grain [nor] bring it into the sanctuary [...]</p> <p>2. <i>Ban on sin offerings boiled in (Gentile?/copper?) vessels.</i>                      [Concerning the] sacrific[ice of the sin offering] which they are boiling in vessels of [bronze and thus defiling] the flesh of their sacrifices as well as [boil]ing them in the [Temple] court [and defiling] it with the broth of their sacrifice.</p> <p>3. <i>Ban on sacrifices by Gentiles</i>                      Concerning the Gentile sacrifice, [we have determined that they are] sacrificing to the [...] which [...] to him</p> <p>4. <i>Ban on eating peace offerings on fourth day (Leviticus 7:11-18)</i></p>

<sup>32</sup> Martin G. Abegg, Jr. (1999). 4QMMT C 27, 31 and “Works Righteousness.” *Dead Sea Discoveries*. Retrieved 29 December, 2008, from <<http://jstor.org>>.

<sup>33</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, pp 144, 146.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp 359-364.

[Concerning the cereal offering of the] sacrifice of well-b[eing,] they are being put aside from one day for the next. Indeed [it is written...] that the cereal off[er]ing is to be e[aten] with the fat and the flesh on the day that [they] are sacrifi[ced]. For the priest[s] are responsible to take care of this matter so as not [to] bring guilt upon the people.

5. *Ruling on the purity of those who prepare the red heifer (Numbers 19:2-10)*

Concerning the purity of the heifer of the sin offering, the one who slaughters it, the one who burns it, the one who gathers its ashes, and the one who sprinkles the [water of] purification—for all of these, the sun must se[t] for them to be pure—so that the pure might sprinkle the water of purification on the unclean. For the sons of Aaron are responsible to [care for this matter...]

6. *Ban on bringing skins of cattle and sheep into the Temple*

[Concerning] the hides of cat[tle] and sheep which they are...and fashioning from] their [hide]s vessel[s...no one is allowed to] [bring] them into the sanctu[ary...] [...]

7. *Ruling on the skins and bones of unclean animals*

Concerning the hid[es] and bones of unclean animals, no one is allowed to make] handles for ve[ssels from the bones] or h[ide...]

8. *Ban on Temple entrance after contact with skins of a carcass (Leviticus 11:25, 29)*

[Concerning the h]ide from the carcass of a clean [animal], the one who carries this carcass [must not] touch the h[oly] food [...]

9. *Ruling on who is fit to eat of the holy gifts (Leviticus 22:10-16)*

[Conc]erning the [...] which ar[e...] [...For it is] the responsibility of the pri[ests] [to c]a[re for] all [these] matters [so as not to] bring guilt upon the people.

10. *Ruling on place of sacrifice (Leviticus 17:3-9)*

[Concer]ning that which it is written: [anyone who slaughters in the camp or] outside the camp an ox, [a lam]b, or a goat, that [...to the n]orth of the camp. We have determined that the sanctuary is [the "tabernacle of the tent of meeting," that Je]rusalem is the "camp," and that outside the camp [is "outside of Jerusalem," in other words the "camp of their citie[s]."] Outside the c[amp...the sin offe]ring, [and] they take out the ashes of [the] altar and bur[n the sin offering there. For Jerusalem] is the place which [He chose] from all the tr[ibes] of Israel to make His name to dwell...] [...] [...] which] they [are no]t sacrificing in the sanctuary.

11. *Ruling on the sacrifice of pregnant animals (Leviticus 22:27-28)*

[Concerning pregnant animals,] we have deter[m]ined that one must not sacrifice] the mother and the fetus on the same day [...]

12. *Ruling on the eating of a fetus (Leviticus 22:27-28)*

[Concerning] one who eats [of the fetus, w]e have determined that a person might eat the fetus [which is found in the womb of its mother after it has been sacrificed as well. You know that thi]s is correct, for the matter is written concerning the pregnant animal.

13. *Ban on the inclusion of unfit into the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1-4)*

[Concerning the Ammon]ite, the Moabite, the bastard, the one whose testicles are cru]shed, [or whose] penis is [cut of]f who enter the congregation [...] and] take [wives], that they might become one flesh [and entering the sanctuary...] [...] unclean. We have also determined [that there is not...one must not have intercour]se with them [...]one] must not unite with them so as to make them [one bone...one must not brin]g them [into the sanctuary And you know that so]me of the people [and...are uni]ting. [For all the sons of Israel are responsible to guard themselves] against any defiling union and to show reverence for the sanctuary.

14. *Ban on the entrance of the blind into the Temple (Leviticus 21:17-23)*

[Concern]ing the blind, who since they cannot see, are not able to guard themselves from any defiling mix[ture]. They cannot see the defilement of the [g]uilt offering.

15. *Ban on the entrance of the deaf into the Temple (Leviticus 21:17-23)*

[Co]ncerning the deaf, who had not heard the statute, the judgment, and the purity ruling, who have not heard the commandments belonging to Israel. For the one who has not seen or has not heard does not [k]now how to perform according to the law. They may, however, par[ticipate] in the pu[re] food of the sanctuary.

16. *Ruling on poured liquids (Leviticus 11:34-38)*

[Co]ncerning streams of liquid, we have determined that they are not intrinsically [p]ure. Indeed, streams of liquid do not form a barrier between the impure and the pure. For the liquid of the stream and that in its receptacle become as one liquid.

17. *Ban on dogs in the Temple*

Concerning dogs, one may not bring dogs into the holy camp because they may eat some of the bones from the sanc[tuary and] the meat which is still on them. For Jerusalem is the holy camp. It is the place which He chose from all the tribes of Israel, for [Jer]usalem is the foremost of the c[a]mps of Israel.

18. *Ruling on offerings assigned to the priest (Leviticus 19:23-24; 27:32)*

Concerning the planting of fruit trees which are planted in the land of Israel, their produce is to be considered as first fruits belonging to the priests. Also the tith of the cattle and sheep belong to the priest.

19. *Ruling on the cleansing of lepers; intentional and unintentional sins (Leviticus 14:2-9; Numbers 15:30)*

Concerning lepers, we have de[termined that] they [may not] enter any place containing the sacred pure food, for they shall be kept apart, [outside the camp (?).] Indeed it is written that from the time that he shaves and washes he must dwell outside [the camp for seven d]ays. But now, while they are still unclean, le[pers must not enter] inside [any place wi]th sacred pure food. And you know [that the one who unknowingly breaks a command] because the matter escaped his notice, he must bring a sin offering. But as for [the one who intentionally sins, it is writ]ten that he depiser and a blasphemer. [Indeed, while th[e]y are yet] lepro[us], they may not eat from the holy food until sunset on the eighth day.

20. *Ruling on what constitutes contact with the dead (Numbers 19:16-19)*

Concerning [the uncleanness] [of the dead,] we have determined that every bone, whether [a piece] or whole, is considered according to the commanded of the dead or the slain.

21. *Ruling on unlawful sexual unions: any Israelite, even one of an improper union—priest and laity—is holy (Numbers 36:6?)*

Concerning the fornication which has been done in the midst of the people, their ch[ildren] are holy. As it is written, Israel is holy.

22. *Ruling on crossbreeding animals (Leviticus 19:19)*

Concerning [a clean] ani[mal of an Israelite,] it is written that it is not lawful to breed it with another species.

23. *Ruling on the intermarriage of the priests and the people (Leviticus 19:19; 21:7?; Numbers 36:6)*

Concerning the clothes [of an Israelite, it is written that] they must [not] be of mixed substances. Nor is it lawful for him to sow his field or [his orchard with two species of plants.] Because they are holy and the sons of Aaron are [most] h[oly]. [But] you know that some of the priests [and the people are intermarrying.] [They are] uniting and defiling the [hol]ly seed [as well as] their [own] with forbidden marriage partners. Fo[r the sons of Aaron must...]

[...] [...] that [they] shall come [...] Who will [...] he will [...]

24. *Ban on polygamous priestly marriages (?) (Deuteronomy 17:17; 21:15-16)*  
Concerning the wom[en...the violen]ce and the unfaithfulness [...]

**II. First Warning**

1. *Transgression of these rulings brings destruction (Deuteronomy 7:6)*

For in these [matters (?)]...because of] the violence and the fornication, [some] places have been destroyed. [Indeed,] it is writt[en in the book of Moses that] you shall [not] bring an abomination in[to your house. For] an abomination is hated by God.

2. *Thus we have separated ourselves from the violators.*

[But you know that] we have separated ourselves from the majority of the peo[ple (or council of the con]gregation) and from all their uncleanness] [and] from being party to or going along wi[th them] in these matters. And you k[now that no] unfaithfulness, deception, or evil are found in our hands, for we have given [some thought (?)] to [these issues.]

**III. First Exhortation: Separate yourself for judgment is sure (Deuteronomy 31:29)**

[Indeed,] we [have written] to you so that you might understand the book of Moses, the book[s of the Pr]ophets, and Davi[d...] [...]all] the generations. In the book of Moses it is written [...] not [to] you and days of old [...] It is also written that you ["will turn] from the pa[t]h and evil will befall you" (Deut. 31:29). And it is writ[ten] "that when [al]l these thing[s happ]en to you in the Last Days, the blessing [and] the curse, [that you call them] to m[ind] and return to Him with all your heart and with [al]l [your] soul" (Deut. 30:1-2), [...] at the end of [the age,] then [you] shall [live...]

**IV. First Illustration: The blessings and the curses**

1. *Solomon obeyed and Israel received the blessings.*

[It is also written in the book of] Moses and in the [books of the prophet]s that [the blessings and curses] shall come [upon you...some of] [the bles]sin[gs] came on [...]and] in the days of Solomon the son of David.

2. *Jeroboam disobeyed and Israel received the curses.*

Indeed the curses which came in the days of [Jer]oboam the son of Nebat until the exile of Jerusalem and Zedekiah the king of Juda[h] when He sent them to [Babylon...] And so we see that some of the blessings and curses have already come that are written in the b[ook of Mo]ses.

**V. Second Warning**

Now this is the Last Days: when those of Isra[e]l shall return to the L[aw of Moses with all their heart] and will never turn away again. But the wicked will incr[ease in wicked]ness and [...] And the [...]

**VI. Second Illustration: The blessings and the curses.**

1. *Remember the kings of Israel.*

[Now] remember the kings of Israe[l] and consider their works carefully. For he who feared [the la]w was delivered from his troubles. These were the se[ek]ers of the law, those whose sins [were forgive]n.

2. *Remember David.*

Remember David, he was a pious man, and indeed he was delivered from many troubles and forgiven.

**VII. Second Exhortation: Keep away from the counsel of Belial.**

Now we have written to you some of the works of the Law, 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. Understand all these things and beseech Him to set your counsel straight and so keep you away from evil thoughts and the counsel of Belial. Then you shall rejoice at the end time when you find the essence of our words to be true. And it will be reckoned to you as righteousness, in that you have done what is right and good before Him, to your own benefit, and to that of Israel.

The final stanza of 4QMMT says that “we have written to you some of the works of the Law,” or *miqzat ma’asei haTorah* (מִקְצַת מַעֲשֵׂי הַתּוֹרָה). How does 4QMMT inform us as to what “works of law” or *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου) could have meant in the Pauline Epistles? When reading through this document, what we see are some of the principles that defined the Qumran community. They thought that when you performed these “works of law”—as defined by them—that you would be blessed and considered righteous by God.

What we specifically see are community regulations regarding ritual purity, what they considered to be the right course of action on any number of diverse subjects, and most importantly **what separated them from the other people**. M.O. Wise observes how “4QMMT seems to prove that the Qumran movement split with greater Judaism primarily over legal issues, not matters of philosophy or the legitimacy of the high priest.”<sup>35</sup> He further notes that a major feature of 4QMMT was that “[T]he authors oppose allowing Gentiles to make offerings on the grounds that such promotes idolatry. The assumption was that, regardless of outward procedures, in their hearts Gentiles would be honoring their own gods, not the God of Israel.”<sup>36</sup>

In reading the complete text of 4QMMT, we find that “works of law” were not, actually, 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. On the contrary, what we see is a strict, sectarian style of *halachah*, not only focused on purity—but a praxis that will inevitably keep more people out of God’s community than welcome people into it. The “works of law” may be considered micro-Jewish identity markers, specific to the group or sect that held them to be important. The issue in 4QMMT, in a manner of speaking, **is the club rules of the Qumran community**, which they felt were the proper interpretation and application of the Torah. Dunn concurs,

“[D]eeds 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.”<sup>37</sup>

Traditionalists argue that “works of law” simply means obeying the Mosaic Torah by rote. NPP advocates, in light of the evidence that 4QMMT provides, would argue that *ma’asei haTorah* employed here is “simply a sectarian and more particularist expression”<sup>38</sup> than how Paul would have used *ergōn nomou* in a more general sense to concern broad Jewish identity markers. Messianic teachers like Tim Hegg, understanding the connection between *ergōn nomou* and *ma’asei haTorah*, would instead conclude,

“What we now understand is that the phrase ‘works of the Law/Torah’ was used in Paul’s day to refer [to] specific sets of rules or *halachah* which a group required for its self-definition. Simply put, such a list of ‘works of the Torah’ constituted the entrance requirements into the group... ‘Works of the Torah,’ then, refers to *halachah* required for entrance into the covenant community (as required by each sect), not personal obedience to God’s word.”<sup>39</sup>

I agree with Hegg’s point of view, which is quite concurrent with the tenor of what we see in 4QMMT. From this vantage point, when Paul uses *ergōn nomou* or “works of law” in

<sup>35</sup> M.O. Wise, “Dead Sea Scrolls: General Introduction,” in Craig E. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 261.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>37</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), 100.

Galatians and Romans, he is referring to the specialized *halachah* that defined a particular sect of ancient Judaism. In his letters of Galatians and Romans, “works of law” would have been a style of Torah observance that likely impeded or made more difficult the spread of the gospel, and the Lord’s plan of bringing salvation to the larger world. In 4QMMT, we see extra-Biblical rulings that are to restrict interactions between the Qumran community and outsiders.

Similarly in the Pauline letters, a major area of contention was how the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers were to all get along *as one in the Lord*, not only being united in Him—but also **overcoming any ungodly social prejudices**. Various “works of law” practiced by some of the Jewish Believers, deterred the apostolic mission among the nations that he had been Divinely commissioned to accomplish (cf. Acts 26:17-18).

If “works of law” in the Epistles of Galatians and Romans might be considered a negative, sectarian style of Torah observance—one which would impede the Torah’s mandate to Israel to be a blessing to all (i.e., Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 4:6)—then how does it affect our reading of specific passages that have been traditionally read from a grid of Paul refuting a salvation-by-works doctrine? We can only know this by considering Paul’s uses of *ergōn nomou*, and what he is trying to teach in the letters where this phrase appears.

### “Works of Law” and Galatians

The terminology “works of law” plays a very distinct role in what Paul wrote to the Galatians, who were being led astray by outside Influencers. These were individuals who had come into the Galatian assemblies after Paul had left (Galatians 1:6-7), and who advocated “circumcision.” While there are some legitimate questions to be asked about the Influencers’ identity, who they might have been, and why Paul would say “those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves” (Galatians 6:13)—what did Paul mean when chastising the non-Jewish Galatians for adopting “works of law”? Were the Galatians, as is traditionally interpreted, adopting a lifestyle in obedience to the Mosaic Law? Or, were they adopting a sectarian form of Judaism—advocated by the Influencers—that was contrary not only to the thrusts of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:27), but would bring them back into bondage to ungodly principles that they should have left behind in paganism (Galatians 4:9)?<sup>40</sup>

If “works of law” may be considered the *halachah* of a sect of ancient Judaism, how might it change our approach to how it is used in Paul’s letter to the Galatians?

#### *Galatians 2:15-16*

“We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law [*ou dikaioutai anthrōpos ex ergōn nomou*, οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου] but through faith in Messiah Yeshua, even we have believed in Messiah Yeshua, so that we may be justified by faith in Messiah and not by the works of the Law [*ouk ex ergōn nomou*, οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου]; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified [*ex ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthēsetai pasa sarx*, ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιοθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ].”

The first time “works of law” appears in the Apostolic Scriptures is in a very complex series of arguments. Paul relays to the Galatians a situation that took place when Peter had visited Antioch, and how he saw it necessary to rebuke Peter for some inappropriate actions. Paul mentions how “prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:12a), which many interpreters conclude means that Peter ate non-kosher meals along with them. When the (hyper-)conservative Jewish Believers arrived, “he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:12b). It is thought that word might get back to the Jewish Believers in Jerusalem that Peter was not eating kosher, and so Peter found it necessary to eat kosher food with these conservative Jewish Believers now visiting

<sup>40</sup> Consult the FAQ on the TNN website “Elements of the World (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 20).”

Antioch. All of the Jewish Believers in Antioch followed similar suit (Galatians 2:13), something which would inevitably cause divisions.

The NPP advocates that when Paul uses “works of law” he is referring to a major Jewish identity marker such as kosher eating. This is something that would cause inappropriate divisions between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and so Paul wanted it removed. It is good that the NPP recognizes that the Torah as a whole—especially its ethical and moral instructions—was not the issue in Antioch. But in light of the specific background of *ergōn nomou*, *ma’asei haTorah*, and 4QMMT, was the issue in Antioch really Peter reasserting some kind of kosher diet? Or, might it be an *halachic* issue regarding diet and/or table fellowship?

A highly controversial view, as indicated by Richard B. Hays, is that while “It is possible that the food at the common meals [in Antioch] was not kosher...it seems unlikely that such flagrant violations of Jewish norms would have been practiced at Antioch, particularly if the Gentile converts [to the gospel] were drawn primarily from the ranks of the ‘godfearers’ [in the local synagogue]...[who] would have already assimilated to Jewish dietary practices.”<sup>41</sup> This may have not been a very high level of *kashrut*, but certainly one that avoided pork, shellfish, blood, etc. The First Century historian Josephus records,

“The Jewish race, densely interspersed among the native populations of every portion of the world, is particularly numerous in Syria, where intermingling is due to the proximity of the two countries. But it was at Antioch that they especially congregated....Moreover, they were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks, and these had in some measure incorporated with themselves” (*Jewish War* 7.43, 45).<sup>42</sup>

Due to how the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch were likely to have already integrated into the Jewish community to some degree, it is improbable that the issue regarding “works of law” was related to what was being eaten at these meals. Instead, the issue was that Peter withdrew himself to *only eating* with the Jewish Believers, breaking table fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers. Even while the Pentateuch itself contains no specific prohibition against eating with outsiders, ancient Jewish *halachah* was far from united on the issue, with many opinions strongly opposed to it (m.*Avodah Zera* 5:5; m.*Ohalot* 18:7). In his vision of the sheet Peter was revealed, “God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (Acts 10:28), and then he left to share a table with the Roman centurion Cornelius. Having been shown by God Himself that non-Jews were not unclean, and then to renege on this by separating himself to the Jewish Believers in Antioch, Peter was clearly guilty of “hypocrisy” (Galatians 2:13). **On the contrary, Peter should have been encouraging the Jewish Believers from Jerusalem to fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch.**

The result of this occurring is that Peter had adopted the exact kind of attitude that the Gentiles at large held of the Jews, perhaps similar to what the Roman historian Tacitus claimed: “The...practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness” (*The Histories* 5.5.1-2).<sup>43</sup> Paul publicly rebukes him, “you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews” (Galatians 2:14a). By separating himself to the Jewish Believers in Antioch—and not sharing table fellowship with the non-Jewish Believers—a big gulf between them would be created. And this is why Paul asks Peter the pertinent question: “how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:14b).

The significance of this question can only be appreciated from the original Greek: *pōs ta ethnē agagkazeis Ioudaizein* (πὼς τὰ ἔθνη ἀναγκάζεις ἰουδαΐζειν), literally rendered as “how the nations you compel to Judaize?” V. 14 is the text of Scripture where the common designation “the Judaizers” comes from, yet via his usage of the verb *Ioudaizō* (ἰουδαίζω), Paul is making an important point to the Jewish Believers in Antioch that need not be overlooked. *BDAG* defines this verb as to “live as one bound by Mosaic ordinances or traditions, *live in Judean or Jewish*

<sup>41</sup> Hays, in *NIB*, 11:232.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 11:231-232.

<sup>43</sup> Cornelius Tacitus: *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 273.

*fashion*.<sup>44</sup> But what one considers to be Jewish customs or traditions has considerable variance among the First Century Judaisms.

Perhaps the most significant usage of the verb *Ioudaizō* outside of Galatians is seen in the Septuagint rendering of Esther 8:17, where we see that “in every city and province wherever the ordinance was published: wherever the proclamation took place, the Jews had joy and gladness, feasting and mirth: and many of the Gentiles were circumcised, and became Jews [*Ioudaizon*, *ιουδαίζουσι*], for fear of the Jews” (LXE). The Greek verb *Ioudaizō* renders the Hebrew *yahad* (יָהַד), meaning “to pose as a Jew” or “to embrace Judaism” (*HALOT*).<sup>45</sup> As Longenecker renders v. 14, “If you, a Jewish believer, can live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentile believers to become Jews?” (*WBC*).<sup>46</sup> Hans Dieter Betz well summarizes the issue of v. 14: “In Paul’s view...it describes forcing one to becoming a Jewish convert...”<sup>47</sup>

The answer to the problem caused by Peter separating himself from the non-Jewish Believers to the Jewish Believers, was **that the non-Jewish Believers would have to become Jewish proselytes** in order for unity to be restored. This is something that Paul would have nothing to do with, as unity among God’s people was not something to be achieved by one’s ethnicity, economic status, or even gender (Galatians 3:28). Peter is scolded by Paul, “We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:15), and so having God’s Torah and what it mandates about Israel being a blessing to all, the Jewish Believers should not be adopting attitudes toward the non-Jewish Believers *that the pagans have of the Jews*. And with this in mind, Paul says that people are not to be justified by “works of law”:

“[W]e know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (ESV).

Galatians 2:16 includes three usages of the phrase *ex ergōn nomou*. Paul has just said that the non-Jewish Believers do not have to be Judaized, meaning go through proselyte conversion, in order to be considered full and equal members of God’s people. Their justification—their identity of being a part of God’s people—is not to be derived via “works of law.” Dunn reminds us, “As in MMT, the phrase seems to be first used (in Gal. 2.16) as a summary reference to a series of legal/halakhic rulings/practices which have been at the centre of the previous paragraphs” regarding “table-fellowship with Gentiles.”<sup>48</sup> In the case of Peter and the other Jewish Believers rebuked in Antioch, their “works of law” involved ritual proselyte circumcision being required for one to be justified, or made a full member of God’s covenant people.

Paul asserts to Peter that such justification, being reckoned a member of God’s covenant people, does not come *ex ergōn nomou*—their human rulings and subsequent activity misusing His Law. Quite contrary to this, being justified comes *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). While traditionally rendered as “through faith in Jesus Christ,” this genitive clause (indicating possession) should actually be rendered as “through [the] faith(fullness) of Jesus Christ.” In stark difference to human activity, “works of law” or *halachah* being one’s primary source of justification and spiritual identity—the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah, His obedient work to His Father on humanity’s behalf unto death, **is to be the primary source of justification and spiritual identity**. As Paul put it, in order for Jewish Believers like Peter to be “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14, NIV), they would need to recognize that the atoning sacrifice of Yeshua is what saves *all people*, uniting all Believers as equal members of His covenant community.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 478.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:393.

<sup>46</sup> Longenecker, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 112.

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 343.

<sup>49</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah.”

**Galatians 3:2, 5**

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law [*ex ergōn nomou to pneuma elabete*, ἐξ ἔργων νόμου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐλάβετε], or by hearing with faith?...So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law [*ex ergōn nomou*, ἐξ ἔργων νόμου], or by hearing with faith?”

Having just associated “works of law” with how the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch would have to “Judaize” (Galatians 2:14)—undergo ritual proselyte circumcision—the Apostle Paul can now ask some rhetorical questions of the Galatians and how they have been affected by the Influencers. Paul asks the Galatians whether or not they received the Spirit via “works of law”—the *halachah* of those who had led them astray. This would be most unlikely, because these are people that Paul labels as those who “bewitched you” (Galatians 3:1), the last description one would expect to use for those who were operating by the Spirit of God!

Did the Holy Spirit and the subsequent miracles come to the Galatians as a result of following the Influencers’ *halachah*? Or, did it come by hearing the gospel message of Yeshua and responding accordingly as Paul had previously taught them? F.F. Bruce rightly summarizes, “here [Paul] makes an...appeal to the Galatians’ experience: their acceptance of the gospel as Paul preached it was in fact followed by miraculous signs, whereas presumably nothing of that sort accompanied the activity of the agitators.”<sup>50</sup> Galatians is not an epistle depicting a duel between God’s grace and God’s Law, as it is so frequently viewed—but it represents a clash between Paul’s *halachah* that focused on the Torah’s outward mission of Israel being a blessing to the nations, and the Influencers’ *halachah* that focused on communal isolationism.

The Holy Spirit did not come to the Galatians via the Influencers’ “works of law,” but instead via “hearing with faith,” *ex akoēs pisteōs* (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). This is another genitive clause, perhaps better translated as “the hearing of faith” (YLT). Far be it from the Galatians’ required faith just being some random set of beliefs, Paul uses “hearing” not just in the sense of audibly hearing the gospel, but also properly acting upon it and fulfilling all that it represents. The term *akoē* (ἀκοή) simply means “the act of hearing” (LS).<sup>51</sup> With a likely Semitic background in mind, the corresponding Hebrew verb *shama* (שמע) should cause us to think of the call to not only love God and one’s neighbors, but also pursue Him with a diligent obedience:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 6:4-8).

While Paul did not at all approve of the Influencers’ “works of law”—something which would have done very little for the spiritual maturity of the Galatians—he did emphasize “the hearing of faith.” **This involved acceptance of the gospel, the transforming activity of the Holy Spirit, and then the obedience to God that would follow.** It is foolish to argue that the Apostle Paul did not at all expect the new, non-Jewish Believers to obey God’s commandments. Yeshua Himself called Paul to the nations so “that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20). Likewise, Paul himself attests how his “apostleship [was] to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (Romans 1:5), and they are people who benefitted from the New Covenant promise of having God’s Torah written on their hearts (Romans 11:27).

The Influencers’ “works or law” or *halachah*, requiring ritual proselyte circumcision of the non-Jewish Galatians, would not bring the miracles that the Holy Spirit had provided. Paul’s

<sup>50</sup> Bruce, 151.

<sup>51</sup> H.G. Lidell, and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 28.

emphasis was on "the hearing of faith," which involved an obedience to God brought about by the Holy Spirit. It would not only be accompanied by miracles, but it would always remind the Galatians of the sacrifice the Lord Yeshua had endured on their behalf (Galatians 3:1b).

**Galatians 3:10**

"For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse [*Hosoi gar ex ergōn nomou eisin, hupo kataran eisin*, "Ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσὶν, ὑπὸ κατάρων εἰσὶν"]; for it is written, 'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM' [Deuteronomy 27:26]."

When viewed from the traditional perspective, and coupled Paul's quotation of Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 3:10 can be a very difficult passage to interpret. Yet when understood from the vantage point that "works of law" relates to sectarian Jewish *halachah*, the Apostle Paul's quotation from the Torah is quite poignant. Those who are "of the works of the Law are under a curse," meaning that they will suffer some kind of penalties. This is not because they are obeying God—because obeying God's Torah will actually keep people from being penalized by Him—as the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy chs. 27 and 28 say! Paul refers to Deuteronomy 27:26, in the listing of blessings and curses upon Ancient Israel, where the people were to declare "Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'" Those who break God's Torah are those who will be punished by Him.

The Apostle Paul, not doing something irregular to his epistles, has slightly adapted Deuteronomy 27:26 to make an important point. He says that those who are of "works of law" are cursed because they do not "obey all the things written in the book of the law" (NRSV). What would be one of the most obvious things written in the Torah, that even a relative new person to reading it would easily encounter? Paul has previously stated what it is in Galatians 3:8: "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU' [Genesis 12:3]." For the Apostle Paul, those who are of "works of law," will inevitably be cursed or penalized by the Torah because their *halachah* will overlook and exclude the important and quite obvious things that it teaches. For the Influencers, **they failed to follow the Torah's mandate of God's people being a blessing.**

In requiring proselyte circumcision for the Galatians' primary acceptance among God's people, *not recognizing their faith in Messiah Yeshua*, they will find themselves cursed by the Torah by failing to follow one of its most foundational instructions. Dunn remarks how an "insistence on 'works of the law' [is] itself failure to observe *all* that is written in the Torah (notably the Genesis promise of blessing to the nations)."<sup>52</sup> The Influencers are those who have forgotten the example of Abraham—"those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (Galatians 3:9)—one whose relationship with God began by his steadfast trust in Him. The non-Jewish Galatians' were to be reckoned as members of God's covenant people because of their faith, the same as with the Jewish Believers (cf. Acts 15:11), and they were to move forward in obedience to God emulating Abraham.<sup>53</sup>

**"Works of Law" and Romans**

The terminology "works of law" does not play the same role in Paul's letter to the Romans, like it does in his previous letter to the Galatians. Much of what Paul writes to the Romans is the form of sermon-like vignettes, as Romans was an epistle composed to a group of Believers whom Paul had never met before in person. Because of this, what he writes in this letter basically presents what his ministry service is all about, and some of the major things that he teaches. Phoebe was responsible for carrying the letter to Rome (Romans 16:1-2), and with it was

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<sup>52</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> For a further examination of the relevant issues, consult the editor's commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, and his article "The Message of Galatians."

likely able to answer any questions that the Roman Believers would have had.<sup>54</sup> Within Romans “works of law” only appears within ch. 3. This is a section where Paul teaches against any prideful attitudes Jewish people may have for possessing God’s Torah, thinking that they will face a less stringent judgment than the pagans who do not have it.

If “works of law” may be considered the *halachah* of a sect of ancient Judaism, how might it change our approach to how it is used in Paul’s letter to the Romans?

**Romans 3:19-20**

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law [*tois en tō nomō lalei*, τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ λαλεῖ], so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified [*dioti ex ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthēsetai pasa sarx*, διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ] in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.”

Because of Jewish possession of the Torah, over and against the nations at large that did not possess the Torah, there was a great deal of pride expressed by many of the Jews of Paul’s day, as somehow the Jewish people were privileged and they would be shown special favors by God on judgment day. In Paul’s writing to the Romans, while he agrees that the nations at large are sinners (see esp. Romans 1), he does ask, “Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin [*hup’ hamartian*, ὑφ’ ἁμαρτίαν]” (Romans 3:9), substantiating this with a litany of references from the Tanach (Romans 3:10-18; cf. Psalm 14:1-4; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1). On the contrary, Jewish possession of God’s Torah will make His chosen people *even more accountable* should they fail to follow its mandate for them.

While Romans 3:19a is rendered in most Bibles as “we know whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law,” the clause *en tō nomō* (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ) should actually be rendered as “in the law” (YLT). Those who are in the sphere of God’s Torah will be spoken to by its righteous instructions. And the reason for this is not difficult to see: in order (Grk. *hina*, ἵνα) “that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God” (Romans 3:19b). The Torah’s standard of holiness speaks to the Jewish people that possess it, in order for them to understand that the whole world stands as sinners before the Almighty. The original intention of God giving the Torah to Israel was for it to be “a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth” (Romans 2:20) of the Lord. The Torah was to be taught to the nations, so that they would come to the same truth of God as the Jewish people. But by the First Century, this is not something that had been done. Wright observes,

“Paul’s critique is not that the Torah was a bad thing that the Jews should not have followed, nor that their Torah-observance was done in order to stake a claim on God that God had not already granted in the covenant. His point, rather, was that all who attempted to legitimate their covenant status by appealing to possession of Torah would find that the Torah itself accused them of sin.”<sup>55</sup>

This is why Paul must clarify, *dioti ex ergōn nomou* (διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου), “For by works of the law shall no flesh be justified before him” (Romans 3:20a, WBC).<sup>56</sup> If the main purpose of the Torah is to define God’s standard of right and wrong, and what He expected of His people—

<sup>54</sup> As Philip F. Esler summarizes,

“[I]t is probable that Phoebe herself was the lector... As a patroness of the congregation in Cenchreae she must have been a woman of considerable wealth and was therefore probably literate. She would have been the most suitable person on whom Paul might safely devolve the task of reading the letter around Rome. He had probably gone over it with her...” (*Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], pp 117-118).

<sup>55</sup> N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 461.

<sup>56</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 38a. (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 145.

then all the Jews of Paul’s generation should have known that their justification and identification as His people is found via their faith in Him. But for many, this purpose of the Torah was instead supplanted by “works of law,” sectarian *halachot* that would have directly interfered with the mission of teaching the Torah’s standard of God’s holiness to the nations. (Looking back at Galatians, immediately requiring circumcision of new recipients of the gospel would have done this.)

The purpose of the Torah, according to the Apostle Paul, was not to turn it into man-made “works of law” where different Jewish sects found their identity; it was instead to understand “for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b), pointing sinful human beings to the Redeemer who had arrived in the person of Messiah Yeshua (Romans 10:4, Grk.).

**Romans 3:27-28**

“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? [*dia poiou nomou? tōn ergōn? Ouchi, διὰ ποίου νόμου; τῶν ἔργων; οὐχι*] No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law [*dikaiousthai pistei, anthrōpou chōris ergōn nomou, δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου*].”

The Apostle Paul has just stated one of the most foundational Biblical principles that we as Twenty-First Century Believers often take for granted: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Writing to Jewish Believers in the First Century, the attestation *pantes gar hēmarton* (πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον) could have been met with a great deal of hostility. If all human beings stand as condemned sinners by God, then there is nothing *anyone* can boast about, even ancient Jews who possessed God’s Torah.

Paul asks the Jewish Believers in Rome, “Where then is boasting? It is excluded” (Romans 3:27a). He then asks why such a boasting would be excluded. “By what kind of law” (Romans 3:27b) would boasting be excluded? Is it a law “of works,” *tōn ergōn* (τῶν ἔργων)—a likely reworking of *ergōn nomou*—that excludes boasting? No, because “works of law” is a likely *cause of boasting*. Paul says that instead what excludes boasting is by “a law of faith” (Romans 3:27c), *dia nomou pisteōs* (διὰ νόμου πίστεως). The first is how the Torah for many had turned into “works of law,” but the second is what God intended the Torah to be.

When one has his priorities straight, then trust in God will enable His Torah to accomplish its function of revealing human sin, defining His holiness, and it will point to the Redeemer. A “law of faith” reveals sin, and forces a person to be shown his fallen humanity. Contrary to this, when the Torah is turned into sectarian “works of law,” the original function of the Torah can be totally lost, or at least skewed. Wright further remarks,

“Paul is thus distinguishing, not for the last time in his letter, between the Torah seen in two different ways. On the one hand, there is ‘the Torah of works’—this is Torah seen as that which defines Israel over against the nations... On the other hand, there is the new category Paul is forging here: ‘the Torah of faith,’...[which] gives the indication of where the true, renewed people of God are to be found.”<sup>57</sup>

And from this point, the Apostle Paul reaffirms his teachings on what identification among God’s covenant people is to be marked by: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28). One’s trust in God, and now in His Messiah, was to reckon both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as full and equal members of His people (Romans 3:29-30). Yet interestingly enough, against any conclusion that someone might draw in thinking that Paul is opposed to anyone following the Torah in any capacity, he is clear to say, “Do we then

<sup>57</sup> Wright, in *NIB*, 10:480-481.

overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31, RSV).<sup>58</sup>

### Some Clarification on Works

Conducting a root search on the Pauline Epistles, we find that the term *ergon* (ἔργον), “work” or “deed,” is used a total of sixty-three times.<sup>59</sup> It would be entirely irresponsible of any interpreter to conclude that every time “works” are referred to by the Apostle Paul that “works of law” are being talked about. Most of the time *ergon* is employed, it is used to refer to either good works or bad works. The Apostle’s Paul’s specialized usage of *ergōn nomou*, appearing in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, is a unique case. Interestingly enough, *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου) in Galatians could very well be paralleled with *ta erga tēs sarkos* (τὰ ἔργα τῆς σαρκός) or “the works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19 (RSV)—with the Influencers’ *halachah* actually being considered some level of sin—a reflection of their bad character.

While Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10, and also Romans 3:20, 28, include a highly specialized usage of *ergon*, and are targeted words pertaining to ancient First Century Jewish issues—the whole of usages within the Pauline corpus do regard how works in general cannot provide a person with redemption. There is perhaps no better passage that lays this out than Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Salvation comes to sinful human beings solely because of the grace of God; it is “not from works” (HCSB), *ouk ex ergōn* (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων), that people can perform to merit God’s favor. Even though the Pauline usages of “works of law” would specifically regard inclusion among His covenant people, and not principally doing works to earn salvation—the **Biblical reality that trying to earn one’s salvation via deeds should not be denied** when the rest of Paul’s words are tallied together.

At the same time, though, let it never be said that the Apostle Paul thought that works were completely out of the equation of a person’s life. The seldom-quoted Ephesians 2:10 continues, saying, “For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” Born again Believers are God’s workmanship, molded by Him *epi ergois agathois* (ἐπὶ ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς) or “to do good works” (NIV). Good works evidenced by someone who claims faith in Messiah Yeshua will testify of the spiritual transformation enacted within the heart. The good works are not what provides the transformation, **but rather are to come as a result of it**. If any of you have wondered what the proper place for Torah observance is in the life of a Messianic Believer, Ephesians 2:8-10 lays it out perfectly.<sup>60</sup>

### Are there any “works of law” present in today’s Messianic movement?

If our conclusions about “works of law” relating to sectarian *halachah* of an ancient Jewish sect can be considered accurate, then how might this apply to religious people today—or even today’s Messianic movement? None of Paul’s usages of “works of law” may be considered positive; he uses “works of law” to chastise problems that impeded the spread of the gospel among the nations. In Galatians 3:10, he says that those who derive their identity from “works of the law” will actually be cursed (Deuteronomy 27:26), because they will forget the imperatives of the Abrahamic mission of God’s people being a blessing to the world (Galatians 3:8; cf. Genesis 12:3).

<sup>58</sup> For a further examination of the relevant issues, consult the editor’s article “The Message of Romans.” For a good Messianic commentary on Romans, engaged with the various proposals made by the NPP, consult Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: Chapters 1-8* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> This figure was determined using a Lemma search of BGT in BibleWorks 7.0.

Romans 2:6f, 15; 3:20, 27f; 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 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; 5:19; 6:4; Ephesians 2:9f; 4:12; 5:11; Philippians 1:6, 22; 2:30; Colossians 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.

<sup>60</sup> For a further discussion, consult the editor’s commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

An excellent ancient example that would constitute *halachah* that would impede God’s mandate of Israel being a blessing can be found in the Qumran literature. In His Sermon on the Mount, Messiah Yeshua taught “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy’” (Matthew 5:43; cf. Leviticus 19:18). Of course **nowhere in the Torah or Tanach** will we find a verse that actually instructs people to hate their enemies! Yet those in the Qumran community were specifically commanded to love only the members of one’s covenant community, and have hatred for the outsider: “He is to teach them both to love all the Children of Light—each commensurate with his rightful place in the council of God—and to hate all the Children of Darkness, each commensurate with his guilt and the vengeance due him from God” (1QS 1.9-11).<sup>61</sup> Just like failing to fulfill the Abrahamic mission of being a blessing, so would hating others as a form of “works of law” or *halachah*—**actually merit the Torah’s curse**. Let us never be found doing something like this!

Do today’s Messianics ever establish their own “works of law” that can deliberately impede what the Lord wants to actually accomplish through us? Will any of us ever find ourselves penalized by forms of *halachah* that miss the mark—things that Paul specifies are our own fault and not that of the Lord (cf. Galatians 2:17)? In seeking to apply some of the proposals that he makes about “works of law” within a more contemporary Christian setting, Dunn indicates,

“Replace ‘halakhoth’ with such terms as ‘inerrancy’, ‘six-day creation’, ‘Papal-infallibility’, ‘Sabbath observance’, ‘penal substitution’, ‘male headship’ and the same could be said of not a few factions/groups/traditionalists within Christianity. Yes indeed, in each case there is a danger that the pureness of divine grace is being compromised, that zeal for God and for God’s law/word has exalted secondary issues/adiapohora, to the status of essentials/fundamentals. Sadly, fundamentalists of all sorts fail to appreciate that justification by faith alone stands opposed to all such fundamentalism: *justification is by faith alone and not by reference to factional shibboleths!*”<sup>62</sup>

Dunn is entirely correct in that contrary to “works of law,” possessing faith in God’s Messiah is the common denominator of what should bond all of His people together. To the list of divisive issues seen in today’s Christianity (Dunn could have, of course, included a reference to the abuses of the charismatic movement), today’s Messianics could add things like: the populist Two-House teaching, the Sacred Name Only agenda, end-of-the-world hype/datesetting/conspiracy theories, the Karaite calendar, insistence on wearing headcoverings at all times, insistence on men wearing long and unkempt beards, an over-emphasis placed on Davidic dance, and utter infatuation with Jewish mysticism. To varying degrees, no different than contemporary Christianity, today’s Messianic community has allowed various side issues to take our attention off of being unified around faith in God and Yeshua the Messiah. Entry and acceptance into God’s covenant people (“justification”) **should occur because a person believes in God, and believes in His Messiah**—not because one is of this faction or that faction. While all the issues listed are worthy of being addressed as one matures in faith and studies Scripture, *regardless of what position you may hold to*, what binds us all together is Yeshua the Messiah. If we fail to do this, then Dunn’s following observations have the unfortunate capacity to manifest:

“[T]o see others [of a particular faction] as essential a threat to my own or my people’s status (or rights/privileges), will always cripple and destroy mutual acceptance and community; to insist that others can be respected and accepted only if they share the same tribal loyalty, only if they formulate their faith in the words that we recognise, only if they act in ways that we approve, narrows the grace of God and the truth of the gospel in ways that would cause Paul the same anguish and anger as he experienced in Antioch.”<sup>63</sup>

What is portrayed here is the classic problem of the man marooned on a desert island. When rescued, he is asked what the three buildings he had constructed were for. One is his house. One is the church (or synagogue) he attends. The other is the church (or synagogue) *he does not*

<sup>61</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 127.

<sup>62</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 70.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

*attend*. The lesson is one that is well learned. We too often define ourselves *by what we are not*, a negative affect of factionalism.

Modern manifestations of “works of law” are seen when we elevate secondary and tertiary issues to the level of salvation issues. Believe me when I say this: I would not be a Bible teacher if I did not have positions on secondary or tertiary issues. I definitely have some opinions on the issues listed above. Yet, what should bind us together is that “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:4-5). When we can learn to understand those common elements of faith that should bind us all together, then those other issues can be worked through in a very civil and constructive manner. **To do anything else would be to erect unnecessary barriers between God and the work He wants to accomplish through us.**

Today’s Messianic community—not too dissimilar than any other religious movement that has preceded it—has a great deal of factionalism. It has allowed not only secondary or tertiary issues to divide it, *but also a great deal of sideshow issues*. We have a great deal of potential to become not only a movement of God’s holiness and righteousness, **but a force**. How we learn to do this properly will only come when we allow faith in the Creator, and trust in Yeshua the Messiah, to be placed at the center of who we are. From this, approaching various other spiritual and theological issues should then be able to take place in a reasonable and responsible way. Yet as we have seen too much in the recent past, other things have largely taken the place of the agenda of the gospel. Various “works of law,” human *halachot*, or a skewed praxis, have all taken the place of the message of Yeshua. The choice to change this, and heed the message seen in what “works of the law” meant in an ancient First Century context, is entirely up to us.

I believe that our emerging Messianic movement—one which still does not know what it will *emerge into* in the future—will make the right decisions in the long term. But in order to make the right and proper decisions, we may face some painful opposition in the short term no different than the good Apostle Paul did. Rather than our focus being on any man-made “works of law,” we need to instead focus on “the hearing of faith” that can only come from placing Yeshua the Messiah at the center of all we do.

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