

Galatian Judaizers Pinned Beneath Mt. Sinai: “Under the Law” in Paul¹

“for you are not under the law—a dispensation of terror and bondage” — John Wesley

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Paul and the Torah

Recent work on Paul and the Law/*Torah*² has been greatly advanced with a deeper appreciation of two formerly neglected aspects of Paul: religious practice and rhetorical style. A new understanding of Paul as a “writer of religious practice” and as “rhetorician” has been fueled by publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, now complete,³ and the new and further study of the Greco-Roman writing styles (rhetoric) in the past twenty years.⁴

My study has concentrated on Paul’s teaching on religious practice, which is often termed *halacha* from the Hebrew root “to walk.”⁵ Paul is now understood by many to be a “halachic writer” for Gentiles.⁶ The nuances of Paul’s arguments when writing on religious practice/*halacha* have often been missed by modern Christians simply because Gentile Christianity has not been familiar with Hebraic contexts for centuries.⁷

Under the Torah

One of these lost nuances may very well be the concept of living “under the Torah.” The Torah was typically understood as providing comfort and direction. Such an understanding is exemplified in the celebrated book *Fathers* (Hebrew, *Avot*) in the Mishnah, “He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah, from him will be removed the yoke of the government and of worldly care.”⁸ Nevertheless, it will be a goal of this paper to demonstrate how being “under the Torah” could be understood as heavy, coercive, and even frightening, and how Paul capitalized on this threatening meaning in his rhetorical letters.

The phrase “under the Law” does not turn up in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, or in ancient Jewish literature in Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic. The only place the phrase “under the Law” occurs is in Paul’s letters, most significantly in the rhetorically charged letter to the Galatians. The phrase appears a total of eight times: Galatians 3:23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18 and also in Romans 6:14, 15 and 1 Corinthians 9:20. Two examples from Galatians will suffice:

¹ This article is the first of a three-part series on Paul and the Law. Further articles will include Paul’s celebrated Torah, the “works of the Torah,” and an annotated bibliography.

² I will use Law and Torah interchangeably, because Paul generally meant Torah. See Alan F. Segal, “Torah and *nomos* in recent scholarly discussion,” *Sciences Religieuses / Studies in Religion* 13:1, (1984): 19-27; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993) pages 131-135, 305-312; Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 117

³ The official announcement of the completion of the official publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls was given in November 2001 at the Society of Biblical Studies annual meeting in Denver.

⁴ A few exemplars come to mind: Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994). Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2000).

⁵ Most specifically a seminar paper for Prof. Karl Donfried entitled, “The ‘Works of the Law’ in Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls” (1998). See footnote 1 above.

⁶ See for example Paul J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Assen/ Minneapolis: Van Gorcum/Fortress, 1990).

⁷ Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period until its disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988).

⁸ H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 1933), 450. The Mishnah is a body of Jewish literature collected in Zippori about 200CE which has traditions ranging from 200BCE-200CE. R. T. Herford comments on *Avot* 3:6, “The yoke is not the symbol of oppression but of obedience... if he breaks the yoke of the one, the yoke of the other is fastened to him.” *Pirke Aboth* (New York: Bloch, 1925), 70. See E.E. Urbach, “Acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven,” in *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1987).

The Benevolent Image of “Under the Mountain”: Sinai and Torah as the Window to God

In our Bible study, we read the expansive Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible (the *Targum*) which creatively interpreted “under the mountain” in Exodus 19:17 in a graphic manner:

And Moses brought all the people out of the camp to meet the Shekinah of the Lord, and immediately the Lord of the world uprooted the mountain and lifted it up in the air, and it was transparent like glass (thrkepxt, *ispaklarya*), and they stationed themselves under the mountain.¹⁴

By having a transparent glass-like mountain, Sinai functioned as a channel for the Torah to be received.¹⁵ This understanding of Sinai provides a democratized version of Exodus 24:9-11 in that it was a window into the heavenly world for all the people to see the God of Israel and participate.

Allow me a short excursus. The *Targum* to Exodus 19:17 quoted above has the people apprehending the Torah through a glass Mt. Sinai. The word *ispaklarya* (Latin *specularia*), translated “glass,” can also mean “mirror” as an ancient mirror was often think glass. The same complex metaphor of glass, seeing in/through, and Torah can be found in James 1:23-25:

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who *look* at themselves in a *glass/mirror*, for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect *law*, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Here James links forgetful hearers who look at the glass/mirror to see themselves (or fear for themselves if we put it in the context of literally “under the law”) rather than looking *into* the Law/Torah which empowers for doing. To bring it back around to Paul, we can find him using the same metaphor in 1 Corinthians 13:12—“For now we see in a mirror, dimly (NRSV) or “For now we see through a glass, darkly” (KJV). Note how the two translations have chosen two courses—seeing *through* a *glass* or seeing *into* a *mirror*. From the perspective of the Torah as glass, it seems that the KJV correctly conveys the ancients’ conception of *glass/ispaklarya* as a metaphor for prophetic vision. This excursus demonstrates the complexity of Law/Torah and the Christian tradition.

This benevolent image—of seeing God through a glass/mirror/transparent Mt. Sinai—was probably employed by the Galatian teachers and assumed by Paul. But Paul purposely drops this benevolent understanding of being under the Law in his rhetorically charged letter to the Galatians. He was trying to unequivocally demonstrate the Teachers’ error, hence he chose his arguments to drive home the point—the over-zealous Judaizers are wrong!

The Malevolent Image of “Under the Mountain”: Sinai as “Do or Die”

Another direction ancient Jewish interpreters took to understand the Israelites “under the mountain” can be found in the Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 88a:

“And they stood under the mountain (Ex 19:17). R. Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, *overturned* (Hebrew *kapah*, vpf) the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, here will be your grave.”¹⁶

41 (a midrashic work compiled in the seventh century CE but preserving early traditions as far back as the first century BCE), *Genesis Rabba* 68:12 (compiled in the late fourth century CE which seems to have early traditions to the first century CE), *Babylonian Talmud Aboda Zara* 2b, and *Midrash Tanbuma Noah* 3, early medieval commentaries on the Torah.

¹⁴ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Exodus 19:17. This textual tradition is generally thought to have originated in the late first or second century AD/CE. R. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See also R.J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹⁶ H. Freedman (trans.), *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed 1: Shabbat* (ed. I. Epstein; London: Soncino-Oxford, 1978), 417, modified.

Torah which was *antithetical* to his opponents' convictions—"go all the way (circumcise) with observance of the Law or die."

John Wesley asserted in his *Explanatory Notes*, "you are not under the law—a dispensation of terror and bondage, which only shows sin, without enabling you to conquer it" and God sent his Son "to redeem those under the law—from...that low servile state."²³ In a way, John Wesley properly understood the intensity of the phrase "under the Law"—characterized by terror, but he missed the specificity of the terror because he saw the terror as generally derived from the Law. Paul wrote to free the Galatian believers only from the *compulsion* and *fear* of the teachers' conception of the Torah, whereas most of Christianity has tried to free itself from the Law in general, because they were unaware of the Law's goodness in the first place.

"Do we then nullify the Torah by this faith? Don't even think that!
On the contrary, we uphold the Torah"—Paul, Romans 3:31

Christianity has struggled with the possibility of the Law/Torah being good, often equating the keeping of the Law/Torah with legalism. A fear of legalism is demonstrated in the following excerpt from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. "Christian," the protagonist, felt the need to go out of his way to Mr. Legality (=Moses) and was pointed to "that yonder high hill" (=Mt. Sinai) which weighted him down:

So Christian turned out of his way to go to Mr. Legality's house for help: but behold, when he was now close by the Hill, it seemed so high, and also that side of it that was next the way side, did hang so much over, that Christian was afraid to venture farther, lest the Hill should fall on his head; therefore, there he stood still, and didn't know what to do. Also his burden now seemed heavier to him than while he was in his way. There came also flashes of fire out of the hill that made Christian afraid that he should be burned (Exod. 19:16-18; Heb 12.21); here therefore, he did sweat and quake for fear...²⁴

John Bunyan's fear of the heaviness of the Law/Torah is similar to that image provided in the first part of this three part series on Paul and the Torah, "*Galatian Judaizers Pinned Beneath Mt. Sinai: 'Under the Law' in Paul*" (Jerusalem Center Journal, January 2002). There I demonstrated how "under the Torah" was a phrase most likely used by certain "teachers" to manipulate the Galatian followers of Jesus to believe that circumcision was required for salvation. Paul wrote Galatians to defend his audience from *over-zealous* Torah-keeping. But, the opposite situation exists in much of Christianity today: most Gentile Christians are *under-zealous* for the Torah, often asserting no need for it at all.²⁵ On the contrary, Paul's understanding of the Torah was good—it just depended on how people interacted with it!

Torah as Good

The first time I entered a synagogue when Jews were worshipping was on a festal day called *Simbat Torah*, "The Joy of the Law." People were dancing round and round with a grand covered scroll and singing heartily. I left, after having my fill of pastries and drink, wondering what had just happened. Over the following months, I began to realize that my perception of the Law/Torah was radically different from that of Jews.

Jewish and Christian perceptions diverge even the words used. *Torah* comes from the Hebrew root *yarab*, to shoot (an arrow)—hence a sense of directional instruction; whereas Law comes from the Latin *lex*, meaning law—hence a wrongful sense of legal binding. Paul did not limit the Greek *nomos* to codified statutes (law), but rather used it in a more expansive manner of sacred ordinances, Scripture, and instruction; thus, hereafter, I will use the word Torah for Paul's *nomos*.

²³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Vol. 4: Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, n.d.), p. 377 commenting on Romans 6:14 and p. 481 on Galatians 4:5.

²⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: Collins, 1940), 20-21. Italics mine, and slightly modernized.

²⁵ For a critique of supersessionist (replacement) theology see R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996). For a positive approach to integrating Biblical/Jewish roots into Christianity, see the popular book, some of which turned into a PBS special: Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Exploring the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Jews living in the Second Temple Period thought the Torah was a grace-filled gift for instruction and life.²⁶ E. P. Sanders in his monumental *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* demonstrated that early Judaism understood the giving and maintaining of the Covenant to be an expression of God's love and mercy, rather than a reward for righteous works.²⁷ An ancient commentary on Exodus called *Mekilta* illustrates this: when the Israelites “stood before Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, and they all determined in their hearts to *accept* the Kingdom of heaven with *joy*.”²⁸

To put it simply: ancient Jews were happy to receive the Torah because it was divine instruction to direct their lives. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, wrote, “Moses said: It is God who graces you with these commandments, using me as an interpreter...”²⁹ The Talmud reported that “God gave the Law gratis.”³⁰ Similarly Paul wrote in Galatians 3.19 that the Torah “was added for the sake of transgressions.” “For the sake of” is a translation of the preposition, *charin*, from *charis* (grace) and so strikes a very positive note.³¹ The Torah was added then, in order to (gracefully) deal with transgressions! If doubt lingers for Paul's positive view of the Torah, one only need to read Romans 7:7,12, “Is the law evil? Don't even think that!...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.”

Paul's Supposed Anti-Torah Language: 2 Corinthians 3:6

We only have space here to clarify one instance of Paul's supposed anti-Torah language. This one example will clarify how the Torah can be understood as “good” or “bad” depending on how people react to the Torah.

Some have suggested that the verse “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6) is conclusive proof that the letter (Torah) is bad—it kills! However surprising, just a few verses prior, the Gospel of Christ through people too can “kill” by executing judgment when it encounters those who are perishing as a result of hardened hearts (2 Cor. 2:15-16a):

For we are an aroma of Christ to God among those on the road to salvation—and among those on the road to ruin. Among those in the latter case [we are] a deadly fume that *leads to death*, but for those in the former a life-giving fragrance that leads to life.”³² For Paul, the Gospel led to death when it fell on hardened hearts—“those on the road to ruin.” Here the Gospel performs a similar function as the *letter* does in 3:6. Alone the letter leads to death, but the letter with the Spirit transforming hearts (3:3; Jer. 31:33)—to life! Other images in the New Covenant have a dual effect as well.³³

The Hebrew Bible itself contains this two-fold effect of the Torah. For example, Deuteronomy 30:15 and 19, “See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil...therefore choose life!”³⁴ This same logic—that something good can confer death—was used for the Torah throughout Jewish interpretation. Rabbi Joshua son of Levi understood from Deut 4:44, “‘And this is the Torah which Moses *set* [Hebrew *sam*, which sounds exactly like the word for drug] before the children of Israel.’ Joshua said, If a man be worthy, the Torah becomes for him a life-giving medicine; if not, a deadly poison.”³⁵ Martin rightly concluded:

²⁶ See the fine and accessible summary by Solomon Schechter, “The Joy of the Law,” in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998 [1909]), 148-169.

²⁷ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). See p. 231f.

²⁸ Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* (New York: JPS, 1983), *Yitro Debachodesh* 5 (Ex. 20:2), 2: 229.

²⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 3:87. *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999). Also Steve Mason, ed. *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary, 9 Vols* (Leiden-New York: Brill, 1999-2004).

³⁰ *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 4: 2. Translation from R.T. Herford, *Talmud and Apocrypha* (London: Soncino, 1933).

³¹ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 139.

³² Translation by Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1986), 44. Literally 2:16a is “death into death and life into life.” Compare with Soph. *Ant.* 412, “*you will be convicted (or tested) by the odor (whether you have been corrupted or not [the odor coming from the corpse])*” in W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Ed (BDAG)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2000), 728-729.

³³ “Light,” “Law” and “Christ” reveal truth, judgment and evil in John 3:20 Jam. 2:9 and Eph. 5:13-14. All three passages use the same verb מל • מל יסו מן □ used in conjunction with □ • □ used in Soph. *Ant.* 412 cited above.

³⁴ Compare Ezek. 20:5-26, especially vv. 11, 13, 21.

³⁵ *Yoma* 72b. The same word-play was employed for Deut 11:18 in the *Shema*. For the Torah as an elixir of life or poison for death see the assessable C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New

“the Torah is often called a medicine or drug, which may bring benefit or harm according to the circumstances of its use. In fact, the medicine is unchanged—it is the Torah; but those who come into contact with it find it to be either an elixir of life (ohhhj ox *sam hayyim*) or a deadly poison (unv ox, *sam ha-mawet*)...Paul is taking this twofold effect of the Torah and is applying it to his Gospel [in 2 Cor. 2:16]...³⁶

With our new understanding of the capability of the Torah to bring life or death (as medicine) we can understand Romans 8:2 afresh: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (NRSV). What this may mean is that the Torah now can bring through the Spirit a changed heart and thus life, which otherwise would have brought a judgment of sin and death. Such a reading dovetails with writings of the first-century Jewish theologian—Philo. He exegeted Lev 18:5, “The true life is the life of him who walks in the judgments and ordinances of God, so that the practices of the godless must be death.”³⁷

Hence, when Paul speaks of the Torah in a seemingly negative light, we must be sensitive to the dual effect of the Torah on people—confirming life or death. Paul wrote negatively of the Torah only when either: a) he thought his audience had been misguided to follow the Torah *as the basis for their relationship with God*, e.g. Galatians; or b) he wrote of the intrinsic inability of the Torah (or the Gospel for that matter) to single-handedly transform lives—the transformation required peoples hearts and the Spirit. Rather than opposing the Torah, Paul wrote, “we uphold the Torah” (Rom 3:31). Paul tried to nip in the bud any Gentile-Christian pride by reminding them of their Jewish root—the heritage of Israel—which included the Torah: “but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you” (Rom. 11:18).

The Celebrated Torah

Two Festivals in the Jewish calendar specifically *celebrate* the giving of the Torah. One festival is a Biblical festival called Pentecost (Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* in Hebrew). Although Pentecost was originally a harvest festival celebrated fifty days after Passover, sometime around Paul’s time or soon after, Pentecost was associated with the giving of the Torah from Mt. Sinai and covenant renewal.³⁸ The second festival (mentioned above) is “Joy of the Torah” (Hebrew, *Simbat Torah*) which originated in the late middle ages to coincide with the end of the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) and the annual completion of the reading of the Torah.

Jews dance with the Torah scroll and in a sense cry, “someone (God) cared enough to instruct us how to live!” Many people pay counselors, doctors, psychologists, and preachers to counsel, guide, direct, and instruct. The Torah, in contrast, is free! In sum, the Torah is only heavy and negative when it comes in contact with hard hearts. Thus, the Jewish (and Pauline) conception of Torah is not one of burdensome *law*, but rather one of joyfully received *instruction* for life.³⁹

York: Schocken, 1974), 125-126, 277, 295-296 and 673-674. Detailed discussion in T. W. Manson, “2 Cor 2:14-17: Suggestions Towards and Exegesis,” in *Studia Paulina (de Zwaan FS)*, ed. J. Sevenster & W.C. van Unnik (Haarlem: E. F. Bohn, 1953), 155-162.

³⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1986). 48.

³⁷ *Cong.* 86-87.

³⁸ For an early association see Jubilees 6:17-19 and Moshe Weinfeld, “Pentecost as Festival of the Giving of the Law,” *Immanuel* 8 (1978): 7-18. Published by ETRFI, ecu_frat@netvision.net.il

³⁹ For a further introduction which asserts Paul’s positive conception of the Torah see Brad H. Young, *Paul the Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998).