

Galatians: Torah, Righteousness and the Messiah's death – Contradiction or Completion?

A Facebook 'friend' recently posted on his feed the following verse as an argument that the Law (Torah) has ended, and that grace is sufficient:

He posted this verse:

Galatians 2:21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness[a] were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." (ESV) Footnotes: Galatians 2:21 Or 'justification'

He sees this as an argument (paraphrasing) that *'Yeshua/Jesus did it all, therefore we don't need to do (and obey) anything, as 'obeying Torah is of no value', it's all about Grace and only Grace.'*

This is a very common refrain amongst Hellenistic Christians. In fact, many go further and denigrate those who see Torah observance as a natural consequence of accepting Yeshua as the Messiah and YHVH, as the only true God.

This verse (Gal 2:21) looks pretty cut and dried doesn't it?

The 'law' can't justify us or make us righteous; we can't be righteous; (supposedly) no-one can; therefore without the Cross and Grace we are all done for!

But ...

This is typical of the superficial and non-Hebraic approach that most take with the Bible, as well as why some will reject the Apostle Paul (Sha'ul) as well.

Wasn't the whole life and teaching of Yeshua about repenting and obeying God? Didn't Yeshua agree (Matt 23:23b) with Micah (Micah 6:6-8) that living and acting with grace and justice while being 'faithful' (read obedient) was at the core. Didn't the Apostle Paul agree with Moses when he wrote that those who love God, will love their neighbour (a shorthand for the 10 Words – see Lev 19:18 quoted in Gal 5:14).

Doesn't Ya'acov (James) state also that faith without works, faith without obedience to Torah is dead, is nothing, or of no value?

Another apparent contradiction perhaps?

But, as I have detailed at length (and Prof Mark Nanos at even more length, with a whole book on Galatians), this epistle is focussed primarily on Sha'ul's argument that Gentiles who come to accept Yeshua as the Messiah don't need to convert and become Jews.

It really doesn't need a whole book though – just go back a little to verse 15 and let's read on from there:

¹⁵We [Sha'ul speaking] ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;

¹⁶yet we know that a person is not justified by 'WORKS OF THE LAW' ..." [that is, being Jewish, though we actually know God, unlike the Gentiles, it still doesn't, in and of itself,

make us righteous or justify us].

Just pause here for a moment. In v21 referred to by Timothy and quoted above, the ESV states that this verse could be read as: ‘for if justification were through the law, then Christ (Messiah) died for no purpose.’”

Here, in this verse a few sentences earlier, Sha’ul makes the almost exact same statement yet uses the very special phrase ‘works of the law’ and then a few sentences later uses just ‘law’ – maybe he, or the translators shortened the phrase as they expected their listeners/readers to know the context (which starts way back at the beginning of Galatians 1; the context of Jewish proselytization).

One other possible pointer to this is that Papyri 46, the earliest extant Greek version of Galatians 2:21 does not have the definite article ‘the’ with ‘law’ (nomos). That is, it doesn’t have ‘the law’ which might be more suggestive of the Torah (the Greek work ‘nomos’ has a much broader, and in fact different meaning to the Hebrew word ‘Torah’. It does not always, when used by Sha’ul refer to Torah.)

So v21 is more like: “‘for if justification were through law, then Messiah died for no purpose”, and then ‘law’ could be any single individual ‘law’ or this case the topic in discussion namely ‘works of the law’ (meaning rites of Jewish proselytization).

Now continuing again from verse 16:

“¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by ‘WORKS OF THE LAW’ but through faith in Messiah Yeshua, so we also have believed in Messiah Yeshua, in order to be justified by faith in Messiah and not by ‘works of the law’, because by ‘works of the law’ no one will be justified.

¹⁷ But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Messiah, we too were found to be sinners, is Messiah then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

¹⁹ For through law I died to law, so that I might live to God [P46 has no definite article for ‘nomos’ here either].

²⁰ I have been crucified with Messiah. It is no longer I who live, but Messiah Yeshua who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through law, then Messiah died for no purpose.”

So I believe that Sha'ul is telling us here, as throughout the whole letter to the Galatians, that becoming Jewish ('works of the law') won't save anyone. No-one is made right with God simply by the being born a Jew or by converting and becoming a Jew.

Sha'ul is sharing that the Cross brought a 'new thing' because it was through the revelation of the Cross (see Isaiah 11:10) that the Gentiles came to know of the God of Israel and were then given the opportunity to learn what righteousness truly was and so be saved. To be at all convinced of this approach, I would suggest you need to read my article on 'works of the law' (see <http://goo.gl/BkyirU>) and then come back and re-read this short analysis.

I am sure many will still have questions, and most will not find this approach at all mainstream among Bible scholars, but I believe it at least demonstrates how a Torah observant Jew could argue that righteousness cannot come through 'law', because in reality being 'right' with God IS being obedient to Torah.

So unless Sha'ul lives in a world of contradictions or was a total fraud as some of my friends argue, the 'law' being referred to here, can't be Torah but rather 'works of the law' or to put it another way, the rules and regulations involved in becoming Jewish.

For a deeper look at 'Grace' please see my article 'Amazing Grace' - goo.gl/qK6vZ3

In response to the above, I have also been asked if, with Yeshua, there was a change in Torah, or is it just a 'repeat of Moses'?

Here's some further thoughts on this:

Yeshua was the goal of Torah (Romans 10:4) and Torah was the goal of Messiah - see goo.gl/ODIsT9

So there is a sense in which, until D'varim (Deut) 18:18 was fulfilled, the Torah was (and in fact still is) incomplete as the Olam Ha'Ba - The World to Come, has not yet arrived.

Also, there was a prophecy of a new priesthood (Ps 110, et al); which is also still future in the sense that it is only in the Coming Age that the 'Kohein from Yehudah' becomes Kohein HaGadol and Melekh (until Yeshua is fully inaugurated as High Priest and King).

In my 'Yeshua The High Priest' article that I wrote a few years ago (<http://goo.gl/zZkMG8>), I had not fully appreciated that under the existing Torah-Law, Yeshua can't yet be High Priest.

Uriel ben Mordechai's brilliant re-translation of Hebrews (from P46) clearly shows that the author of Hebrews was making the case that Yeshua would be the new High Priest in the Coming Age (see <http://above-and-beyond-ltd.com/store/books/if.html>).

So I would argue that these things are all part of Torah, and not really a 'change', but a further stage in the full Redemption of humanity.

I think it important to appreciate how the God of Israel has progressively dealt with humanity through a whole series of covenants or agreements, and that this process is clearly incomplete at this time.

I have written a brief outline of these covenants in my 'Righteousness Before Messiah' article – see <http://goo.gl/zfTIP4>

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