

'Works of the Law' - A Much Maligned and Misunderstood Phrase:

*"For by **works of the law** no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."* - Romans 3:20

This phrase has been, and continues to be so wrongly interpreted, that there is almost a universal consensus of error! That is, both those who see the Apostle Paul as a very important figure in the foundation of Christianity; and those who see him as a total fraud and counterfeit promoter of a pagan religion, see this phrase as referring to keeping or doing the commandments, that is, keeping Torah¹.

The famous and highly respected Christian scholar Dr James DG Dunn did eventually recognize to a large degree, what this phrase actually means and this was part of the introduction of a new appreciation of the Apostle Paul's Jewishness called the 'New Perspective on Paul' (this new movement and recognition amongst Christian scholars began in earnest around 1982). Why I think there are still some significant errors in the understanding of these 'New Perspective' scholars, I believe that they have appreciated and articulated the most significant issue of how it should NOT be interpreted².

Until this 'New Perspective' movement or James DG Dunn et al, most Christian scholars and preachers had thought that when the Apostle Paul uses this phrase he means 'the commandments of Torah' and that he speaks disparagingly about them when addressing Gentiles.

This is a very serious and crucial error of interpretation. It results in a totally false understanding of Galatians and of Paul's teaching in general.

While I detail this in my book 'Defending the Apostle Paul: Weighing the Evidence' I will discuss a little of the detail in this short article.

To repeat, the understanding of this phrase is vital to the perspective we take on the Apostle Paul. Here is a common (mis)-understanding of a well known Christian scholar:

*"In context, no reader of the Book of Galatians can reasonably conclude the definition of Paul's idea "works of the law" as meaning 'circumcision', once they have carefully read the first 3 chapters, this is a fact. ... **"works of the law" means "doing the righteous things of Torah"***

The phrase 'doing the righteous things of Torah' means obeying the Commandments, i.e. obeying Torah.

With such emphatic phrases such as 'this is a fact', many still clearly do not see the phrase 'works of the law' as referring to doing the Commandments. This also has very significant implications in terms of the whole argument regarding whether or not the Apostle Paul was 'pro-Torah', that is a Torah observant Jew, or whether he was a founder of a religion that was effectively anti-Torah, because it rejects the argument that obedience to the commandments of God is a necessary part of salvation.

If as this Christian scholar argues, this phrase does 'in fact' mean 'obeying Torah' or 'doing the commandments of Torah', then it is very strong evidence that the Apostle Paul was anti-Torah and clearly not a Torah observant Jew.

Can we demonstrate from a critical analysis of the use of this phrase (found only in the Romans and Galatians epistles) which meaning most properly fits the context?

I believe we can, and especially if we start with Romans 3:20 *"For by **works of the law** no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."*

¹ Greek versions of the Bible translated the Hebrew word meaning 'instructions' (Torah) as 'nomos' and in turn this was translated to 'law' in English. Neither word is a good choice as they both convey a much more limited and even legalistic meaning. It is also important to recognize that the word Torah can also have several meanings today as it is sometimes used to refer to the five books of Moses, or to the whole of the Tanakh (OT) or it may even be used to refer to the 'Oral Torah'. Frank Selch explains this well in his "Torah: Divine Instructions or Mosaic Law"

² The 'New Perspective' makes the mistake of expanding the 'rites of Jewish proselytization' such as circumcision to include other Biblical mandates such as the Sabbaths and Festivals which are not really 'rites of passage', but have a more universal application and relevance.

This phrase has the logical form:

“For <condition A>, since <cause B>”

or more clearly, “<Condition A> is true because of <Cause B>”.

That is, <Cause or Reason B> leads to the conclusion of <Condition or Statement A>.

So here we can see that Paul states that:

‘Because through knowing Torah (law), we know what sin is, that is, what it means to act un-righteously, therefore we can state that no-one can be made right before God (justified) by ‘works of the Torah/law’.”

Now we can analyse this passage by inserting our alternative understandings of **‘works of the law’** into this logical construct, and see whether either, or any actually make sense, that is, if the cause, or reason (the ‘because of’ or ‘since’ statement) can be seen to reasonably lead to our understanding of ‘works of the law’.

First, let’s insert the ‘rites required for Jewish proselytization’ in place of ‘works of the law’.

So Romans 3:20 now re-phrased reads:

“For we can state that no-one can be made right before God (justified) just by undertaking the rites required for Jewish proselytization, since through knowing Torah (law), we know what sin is, that is, what it means to act un-righteously.”

Romans 3:20 is then stating that just being a Jew, or becoming a proselytized Jew does not bring ‘justification’ (and by inference, salvation). Even a Jew can sin. The implication being that it is NOT enough to be a Jew; one must be obedient to Torah, just as Yeshua stated when asked what must one do to enter eternal life (remember, he was asked this question by those who were already Jewish and therefore knew God and Torah). I would think most Torah observant people would then agree with Paul and this statement.

The second use of this phrase in Romans, Romans 3:28 states: *“For we hold that one is justified by faith **apart from** ‘works of the law’.” (ESV).*

Here we see that Paul is effectively saying the same thing by stating ‘justification’ comes through the obedience of faith³ and therefore is separate or at least not dependent only on the ‘rites’ of Jewish identity. Again, this makes perfect sense.

Thus, using this understanding of the phrase, we have a logical, consistent and Torah-affirming statement.

Now let’s turn to the alternative view presented and assume ‘works of the law’ means ‘doing the commandments of Torah’, or ‘obeying Torah’ (not just the rites/rules of Jewish identity).

So let’s again re-word Romans 3:20 with this understanding and see what we get:

“For we can state that no-one can be made right before God (justified) by doing the commandments of Torah, since through knowing Torah (law), we know what sin is, that is, what it means to act un-righteously.”

Clearly the first section, the conclusion or ‘for’ part is incorrect. So if we didn’t have the ‘since’ section, the cause or reason, we could read the phrase and state, as some anti-Torah preachers do, that obeying God will not justify us (and they might even argue that that’s because of original sin).

But look closer, we need to arrive at this version via the cause or reason, the ‘since’ section. So this statement now simply reads: *‘Because Torah brings a knowledge of what is sin, we can not be justified by obeying Torah’!*

Read that again, meditate on it: *‘Because Torah brings a knowledge of what is sin, we can not be justified by obeying Torah’!* This is a nonsensical statement, only a fool, a very confused and totally illogical person could write such nonsense. Such nonsense would never have stood any test of time. The Apostle Paul, whatever he was, was not this foolish!

³ See my article on ‘The Faith of Jesus’ to appreciate what ‘faith’ really means. Also discussed in the Hebraic Mindset articles – see www.circumcisedheart.info

Consider in the same manner Gal 3:2 “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”.

Appreciate, that to a Hebrew, ‘hearing with faith’ means doing. To hear is to obey; the Sh’ma begins ‘Hear O’Israel, ...’, meaning OBEY. To ‘hear with faith’ means to ‘obey through trusting God’ or to ‘trust God and His Word and obey’, that is ‘to trust Torah and obey’.

So, again substitute ‘doing the commandments of Torah’ for ‘works of the law’ in Gal 3:2 and you get: *“Did you receive the Spirit by doing the commandments of Torah, or by trusting God and obeying (the Torah).”*

To put it even more simply, it would read: **‘Did you receive the Spirit by obeying Torah or by obeying Torah!’**. This is clearly wrong, as there is no contrast here. It makes no grammatical sense to say ‘Did you receive A by doing B or by doing B’.

Instead, replace ‘works of the law’ by ‘undertaking the rites required for Jewish proselytization’ in Gal 3:2 and you get: *“Did you receive the Spirit through ‘undertaking the rites required for Jewish proselytization’ or by obeying Torah”*.

This makes sense. Undertaking circumcision et al, whether at 8 days old or as a Gentile proselyte does not give anyone the Spirit of God; it is doing His will (obeying Torah) that bestows His favour and Spirit. So this version of Gal 3:2 gives us a phrase with a true contrast and real choice to make.

Therefore we again see that of the two alternative understandings for ‘works of the law’ contrasted, the understanding that it means “undertaking the rites required for Jewish proselytization’ fits both logically and biblically.

There are other alternative understandings for ‘works of the law’ such as David Stern’s version in the Complete Jewish Bible where he has translated it as ‘legalistic observance of Torah commands’.

Let’s try the same process with Stern’s interpretation and using Romans 3:20. To repeat, we have the logic structure:

<Cause or Reason B> leads to the conclusion of <Condition or Statement A>.

So here we would then have:

‘Because through knowing Torah we know what sin is, that is, what it means to act un-righteously, therefore we can state that no-one can be made right before God by “legalistic observance of Torah commands’.

Or perhaps even more clearly in Gal 3:2, we would have:

“Did you receive the Spirit by ‘legalistically observing the Torah commandments’, or by trusting God and obeying the Torah.”

This, if true would suggest you need to obey Torah but you must not do so legalistically, whatever that means in reality. It sounds like a challenging tightrope to walk.

You may also have serious difficulty determining the reality of what ‘legalistic’ means from an Hebraic perspective as well.

It is not and cannot be ‘legalistic observance of Torah’ but is instead, as the Greek makes clear ‘works of the law’ meaning Jewish rites of proselytization. Add to this the Hebraic understanding (from the Sh’ma, from ‘Hear O’Israel’ – Deut 6:4, etc.) that to ‘hear with faith’ means to heed the Torah and obey in actions.

So therefore we can see that Gal 3:2 “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” to mean: ‘Did you receive the Spirit of God through (just) becoming Jewish or by obeying Torah’.

The Apostle Paul then repeats the exact same message in verse 5-6:

“5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— 6 just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?”

Verse 6 shows that this is his intent. Abraham acted on his belief – he was righteous BEFORE he was circumcised and became the first Hebrew.

Abraham trusted and acted on that trust in his interactions with God and his neighbours. This was why and how Abraham was given the Spirit of God; this is how we are given the Spirit of God – not by rites of proselytization (including physical circumcision) but by our trusting actions (our faithfulness). So, Abraham’s circumcision was not the thing that gave him the spirit, etc. It was clearly an act of obedience to God, but he was already righteous before he and the males of his household undertook this act.

How do we tell if people have the Spirit of God and to what measure it is poured out in them? By their actions, by their obedience to Torah, exactly as the Apostle Paul is stating here.

It is also informative to consider one other place where the Apostle Paul uses this term and that is, its use in Galatians 3:10. There are some issues with the whole question of a ‘curse’. As I think I have previously indicated, Frank Selch addresses this in a number of places, but perhaps most comprehensively in his ‘Seed of Abraham’ article where he also shows that Gal 3:16 is clearly a redaction.

Consider Gal 3:10 though: *“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the (Book of the) Law”, and do them.”*

Based on the LXX and Masoretic text it should just be Torah, not Book of Torah.

“A curse on anyone who does not confirm the words of this Torah by putting them into practice.’ All the people are to say, ‘Amen!’” – Deut 26:27

But also consider that this quote is from the Mt Gerizim blessings and cursings covenant. Clearly the Jewish people were told here what curses would come their way for various infractions of the Torah. Thus if any Gentile’s undergo the ‘works of the law’ and become Jews, they too must naturally be under these same blessing and curses.

So consider, if ALL a Gentile was to do was the ‘rites of proselytization’ (works of the law), and he thought he could rely on this as sufficient for ‘justification’ before God, he is wrong, because as a Jew he must obey ALL of the Mt Gerizim covenant or be cursed.

What about the verses Gal 3:11-12 – they definitely appear problematic to me as they stand:

*“11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for The righteous shall live by faith.
12 But the law is not of faith, rather the one who does them shall live by them.”*

Verse 11 seems totally contradictory. To live by faith is to obey Torah! This is confirmed by Habakkuk 2:4 which the Apostle Paul actually quotes: *“Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.”* – KJV

To attain life through ‘trusting faithfulness’ is to trust God and be faithful to Torah; that is to obey Torah. So if we understand the statement that ‘no one is justified before God by the law’ to mean no one can find salvation by being obedient to Torah, then this is clearly wrong. If the Apostle Paul meant that the existence of the Torah did not justify anyone, then this could be correct as it needs to be enacted, it has no power to save if it just remains as written words on a page.

What I see as more likely though, is that the redactors (possibly Marcion himself) just removed 'erga' from the Greek phrase 'erga nomou' ('works of the law') and simply replaced it with 'nomos'.

Try replacing the full 'works of the law' phrase and then consider the understanding we get:

"11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the 'works of the law', for The righteous shall live by faith.

12 But the 'works of the law' is not of faith (it may be an act of faith, but in itself it is not obeying Torah), rather the one who does them (mitzvot of Torah) shall live by them."

These verses now seem in perfect harmony with the earlier statements regarding the limited efficacy of the 'works of the law'.

To repeat, in verses 11 & 12 there are two passages quoted from the Tanakh - Habakkuk 2:4 & Leviticus 18:5⁴. Both speak emphatically to the righteousness found through obeying Torah! If Paul did use the term 'Law' here (meaning Torah) then it appears he was attacking the efficacy of Torah obedience.

If so, then he was totally schizophrenic, as in trying to support such anti-Torah sentiments, he has used pro-Torah references from the Scriptures!

Sadly, this is not the only place where subtle redactions and interpolations have made it much more difficult to uncover the true Paul and his intended message.

Once we appreciate what the Apostle Paul meant in his use of the phrase translated 'works of the law', we can then recognize that the whole of Galatians is about the question of Jewish proselytization for these new Gentile believers in Yeshua.

Now we come to the very challenging v13-14:

"13 Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree—

14 so that in Messiah Yeshua the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

To quote Frank Selch here: *"To the best of my knowledge there is no evidence anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, which declares that a Jewish man or Messiah would have to become a curse so that '...the blessing of Abraham might come upon Gentiles...! There is no prophecy anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, which promises the Spirit of God to anyone, simply because the Messiah/Christ took on a curse that was supposed to rest on gentiles. On the contrary, it is written that the Gentiles would be blessed if they blessed Israel (Gen 12:1-3)— something for which Israel is still waiting."*⁵

The passage from the Tanakh referred to here: *"22 And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance."* (Deut 21:22-23), really does not seem to fit the context of this discussion regarding 'works of the law' at all. Thus it may well be a later interpolation.

Even if the Apostle Paul did add these verses himself, there is no Biblical mandate that one man can be cursed and so remove the potential curses from other men. The Tanakh clearly states that we are all responsible for our own sins. So this subtle introduction of the blood atonement doctrine here must surely be a redaction. Notice though that the Apostle Paul goes on to refer to Abraham again and to the Abrahamic covenant.

⁴ *"... But the righteous will live by his faithfulness" - Hab 2:4 "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord." - Lev 18:5*

⁵ See Seed of Abraham – available from <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/frank/The%20Seed%20of%20Abraham.pdf>

It seems to me that the Apostle Paul is arguing that Gentiles can come into fellowship through the Abrahamic covenant. In a similar way to how the Jewish people have a covenant because of what Abraham did (though this does not individually absolve them of the responsibility of Torah obedience), the Gentiles have a covenant with God because of what Yeshua did⁶.

Now we come to a clear redaction in Gal 3:16. As this does not significantly impact my thesis here and as Franks Selch has dealt with this verse much more comprehensively, I again refer those interested to his article 'The Seed of Abraham'.

Here we begin to see the hand of the redactors (the editors), as the phrase quoted as being from the Tanakh (the Old Testament), is not actually in the Tanakh. However, there is an instruction given through Moses, where God did tell the Jewish people that that needed to do ALL the commandments, not just some, not just the rites of Jewish identity for example, or they would face some curses.

"If you are not careful to do all the words of this Torah that are written in this Book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting." - Deut 28:58-59

I would recommend you again try the substitution approach we have been using and it should be very clear here as well, that it makes perfect sense to say that to JUST do the '*rites of Jewish identity*' rather than ALL the commandments (mitzvot) is not enough.

Now, the most vital thing to DO, if you are convinced that the understanding of '*works of the law*' I have put forward is correct, is to read all of Galatians in one sitting replacing '*works of the law*' by '*rites of Jewish identity*' as you read.

You will now, no longer see any real hint of an anti-Torah bias in this epistle. You should also now appreciate that this whole epistle focuses on this very question of 'should Gentiles who have come to believe in Yeshua as the Messiah become Jews?' and the Apostle Paul's answer, and the consequential answer of the Jerusalem Council was NO.

While I hope this logical analysis of competing understandings for the phrase '*works of the law*' has convinced you both of the helpfulness and validity of this approach and the conclusions we have arrived at, it is not all plain sailing.

There still remains a couple of significant issues with Galatians though, even once we remove the misunderstanding and application of '*works of the law*'.

For example Galatians 4:22-31 is very commonly misinterpreted.

Almost universally commentators and most readers would be easily led to believe that the two covenants contrasted here are the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant through Messiah Yeshua.

While this is a possible understanding, the issue is that it seems so at odds with so much of Paul's letters such as Romans and in particular Romans 9 where he speaks so strongly of Gentiles being grafted into the cultivated Olive Tree and becoming part of the Commonwealth of Israel.

Are we to read that here in Galatians, Paul has had a change of heart and now wants to denigrate the cultivated Olive Tree and equate it to Ishmael's son-ship? This seems highly unlikely!

⁶ I explain this in some depth in 'The Tripartite Salvation Paradigm' – <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/The%20Tripartite%20Salvation%20Paradigm%20first%20draft%20feb2012.pdf>

What some scholars instead argue is that this discussion is a comparison between 2 different groups of gentile proselytes and two different pathways or attempts to become sons of The Most High God.

Contextually, it is important to appreciate that the Apostle Paul in this letter, is primarily addressing Gentiles. Josephus [Antiquities, 16.62] testifies that many Jews resided in Ancyra in Galatia [but that] the majority in the Galatian churches were Gentiles.

A number of passages help establish this historical fact.

Gal 1:13-14 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

Here Paul appears to be informing his Galatian listeners regarding his previous state and in using terms like 'among my people' it seems clear he is speaking to others who are 'not my people', that is to Gentiles.

Gal 4:18-19 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Messiah is formed in you!

Note here also that Paul refers to his readers as 'my little children' – as apostle to the Gentiles, this also indicates that those he is addressing are Gentiles.

Gal 4:8-9 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

Again, the phrase 'formerly, when you did not know God' would also appear to indicate that his listeners were not Jews and had therefore previously been ignorant regarding Yahweh.

I recommend that you read the whole of Galatians in one sitting and see that the context both before and after the challenging section of Gal 4:22-31 is focused on circumcision and, as already indicated, is speaking to gentiles about the issue of circumcision which is representative of 'keeping the law' (not just the written Torah but the Oral Torah as well) and becoming a Jewish proselyte.

In Galatians 4:22–31, the Apostle Paul makes a commentary on the story of Ishmael and Isaac.

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar.

25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

27 For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband."

28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.

30 But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman."

31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Unfortunately, this Galatians passage is often misunderstood as a contrast between the new covenant and the old covenant, and even between Christians and Jews.

What I believe Paul is doing here is comparing Ishmael to the Galatian Gentiles who are accepting the dogma that they must undergo a ritual proselyte conversion through means of circumcision in order to be reckoned covenant members with Israel. Like Ishmael, Paul says that they are “born according to the flesh;” (Galatians 4:23) specifically, the circumcision of their flesh. That is, their entry into the Kingdom is via a ritual, via a work rather than via faith in the saving power and redemptive act of the Messiah.

According to the rabbinic dogma, a proselyte through ritual conversion is called a “son of Abraham.” Ishmael was indeed a son of Abraham, but he was not the promised son of Abraham. Instead, he was a son by nature and by law. Paul compares those Galatian proselytes to children birthed from the covenant at Mount Sinai, where the Torah (law) was given. They are sons of Hagar and “under the law” because they have predicated or based their salvation upon observing a “work of the law;” that is, circumcision and the associated rites of passage.

In this analogy, the Apostle Paul compares Isaac to the believing Gentiles who predicate or base their salvation and covenant status upon faith, that is trusting the Almighty and being obedient to His Torah, not just becoming Jewish. Isaac is the son of the promise and God’s chosen heir of Abraham. As such, these believing Gentiles are the sons of Isaac/Sarah, Abraham’s “son by the free woman through the promise.” (Galatians 4:23)

They are sons of Sarah in that they have based their salvation upon faith in the promise of God. What is that promise that they have faith in; that they now trust in. It is that ‘keeping the Commandments’ maintains covenantal relationship with God and brings salvation both in the here and now and in the Coming Age.

Therefore, the two covenants being contrasted are not the ‘New Covenant’ and the Mosaic Covenant⁷. They are the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant, both of which are parts of Torah.

Furthermore, the contrast is not between Jews and Christians, it is between Gentile believers who choose to undergo ritual conversion to Judaism and Gentile believers who do not.

Paul says of those who rely on faithfulness and do not become Jews, “And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.” (Galatians 4:28)

Note that most of the older manuscripts and even most of the newest translations read ‘these women are two covenants’, NOT ‘these women are the two covenants’. The difference here is that the addition of the word ‘the’ implies a contrast is being made between the Mosaic covenant and the Covenant through the Messiah.

Note also the reference in the quote *“Rejoice, o barren one ...”* is to Isaiah 54. This is a psalm about the great restoration of the Jewish people to their God and to their Land.

For Paul to use this reference to the future blessing of Israel and then proceed to denigrate Israel just doesn’t make any sense at all (if the traditional understanding is employed).

If rather, Paul is speaking of how Gentiles who are ‘children of promise’ will share in this great blessing of Israel’s, because they have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree, then it makes sense that Paul would quote this uplifting and encouraging passage, particularly to any believers facing persecution as the Philippians were and as the Galatians at this time were also, most likely in part from Jews of the mind and zeal that was in Paul before his recognition of the Messiah (Gal 1:23).

The further reference to Gen 21:10 and the ‘casting out’ of the slave woman also seems perhaps harsh and if directed at Jewish people most inconsistent with Paul’s other epistles.

⁷ There are actually many covenants in the Tanakh – I give some detail on these covenants in ‘Righteousness Before Messiah’ at circumcisedheart.info

Instead, look at Gen 21 from where this quote comes. Here we see that this quote is a statement of Sarah which Abraham struggled with, yet God vindicated Sarah's statement and also explained how He would still support and bless the son of the slave woman.

In the same manner, if this argument is valid, in quoting Genesis 21:10 and calling for the 'casting out' of those who call for circumcision, Paul is saying not to have fellowship with these people who would force both circumcision and the traditions of men onto these truth seekers and in so doing blind them from the freedom and love that ensures when the heart rather than the body; when the spirit rather than the flesh; is circumcised (or dedicated) to Yahweh.

In conclusion then we see that in Gal 4:22-31 the Apostle Paul is also speaking about whether Gentile followers of Yeshua should undertake the 'works of the law' and become Jewish or not. Thus, this passage is contextually relevant and also re-iterates the Apostle Paul's argument aimed at Gentiles, that they should remain Gentiles. This argument here does not address the Jewish people at all and thus does not speak either against, or in favour of, their commitment to Torah obedience.

If you would like to consider the pro-Torah message of the Apostle Paul a little more I would recommend you read my book 'Defending the Apostle Paul: Weighing the Evidence'⁸.

If you would like to consider further the implications of Gentile pro-Torah followers of Yeshua remaining Gentiles, I would recommend my article 'The Tripartite Salvation Paradigm' (see my website).

An Update on 'Works of the Law' and the Dead Sea Scroll 4QMMT

Some argue the Hebrew phrase 'Miqsat **Ma'ase ha-Torah**' found in the DSS's (Cave 4), and most commonly translated by leading scholars as 'some precepts of Torah' or 'some of the observances of the Law' (see 'The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English' by Geza Vermes, p229), is instead the same phrase that the Apostle Paul (Sha'ul) was using when he used the phrase 'works of the law'.

They argue that this phrase (actually just "ma'ase ha-Torah") can be translated into Greek as '*ergon nomou*' meaning 'works of the law', the phrase used in a very significant way by Sha'ul (especially in Galatians).

As this phrase, 'works of the law' is fairly unique to the Apostle Paul, and not found in other extant Jewish writings from the first century CE, the finding of this DSS scroll (dated sometime between early 1st century BCE and the early 1st century CE) with this phrase could be very significant.

However DSS scholars also concede that: "This scroll, apparently in the form of a letter, is unique in language, style, and content." -<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/scrolls/scr2.html>

Thus, it would seem we should not put too much stock in this relationship. This is also the view of NT Wright:

"Even if MMT is in some ways parallel to Paul, it will not necessarily be the case that it states exactly the sort of thing Paul had believed before his conversion, or the sort of beliefs or practices his converts were being pressed to accept (or which Paul thought they were being pressed to accept). It might be the case that MMT's doctrine of 'justification by works' (if that is what is being offered ...) corresponded to that held by a wider band within second-Temple Judaism, including the Pharisees but excluding Pauline Christians. ..."

Since there is no evidence that either MMT or its recipients represented a branch of second-Temple Judaism which Paul knew at first hand, we cannot assume without more ado, as some scholars seem to, that, just because this text speaks of justification by works of the law, it must mean the same thing as Paul means when he speaks of the same thing. -http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_4QMMT_Paul.pdf

Having now given a cautionary proviso on reading too much into this 4QMMT, what does it appear to tell us?

⁸ <http://www.amazon.com/Defending-Apostle-Paul-Weighing-ebook/dp/B009TLLK0U/>

This scroll contains a list of more than twenty rulings in religious law (called Halakhot, plural of halacha or halakha meaning a rule of behaviour), most of which are peculiar to the sect (the Yachad of Qumran – most likely the Essenes).

Some of these rulings involve separation from Gentiles.

For example:

- *Gentile grain should not be brought into the Temple.*
- *A fragmentary halakha about sacrifices by gentiles.*
- *And most are halakhot regarding 'purity' such as:*
 - *The purity of those preparing the red heifer.*
 - *Several halakhot concerning the purity of skins.*
 - *Banning the blind and deaf from the "purity of the Temple."*
 - *The purity of the streams of liquids poured from a pure vessel into an impure one*

It then deals with the separation of the sect from the multitude of the people, and attempts to persuade the addressee to adopt the sect's legal views. The 'halakhot' form the core of the letter. The author states that disagreement on these matters caused the sect to secede from Israel.

Therefore, I see this 'letter' as arguing for a set of 'rules' or actions through which this group separates themselves from Gentiles, as well as other Jewish sects such as the Pharisees, whom they appear to view as to some degree 'apostate'.

Thus, while the letter does not give an exhaustive list (only some 20 halakhot are listed and the scroll is fragmentary), the phrase '*Ma'ase ha-Torah*' could well be seen as indeed 'works of the law', **in the sense that these 'works', these rulings are what separates this group especially from the Gentile world around them.**

In this sense, this is very much in agreement with how Prof. Mark Nanos and I view the Apostle Paul's use of the phrase 'works of the law'. This is how Nanos summarises our definition of '*works of the law*':

"I understand "works of law" to function as a synonym for "circumcision," and both of these terms as metonyms in Paul's arguments to signify the role of proselyte conversion, by which non-Jews undertake the rite (hence, act or work) by which, according to the traditional interpretation of the Torah, they can become children of Abraham's covenant on the same standing with (male) Jews from birth, who are circumcised as children.

In my view, then, works of law = circumcision = proselyte conversion. Contra the traditional view, works of law does not refer to observing Torah, which non-Jews are not obliged to observe as if Jews, and contra Dunn's view, it does not include observance of special boundary marking behavior such as Sabbath and food laws, which are also for those already defined as Torah-people, that is Israelites, Jews, which Paul's addressees are not.

It is however, boundary marking in the sense of referring to the process of identity transformation, the behavior associated with completion of the rite of conversion (circumcision, in agreement with this point by Dunn), referring to the behavior that renders a non-Jew a Jew (a non-Israelite an Israelite), in keeping with the topic in view throughout Galatians, after all. But that is different from the behavioral requirements that follow conversion, when they are re-identified as Jews, and thus, as obliged to observe Torah fully, just like all other Jews (cf. Gal 5:3).

- <http://www.marknanos.com/Paul'sJudaism-5-14-08.pdf>

Thus this Dead Sea Scroll can be seen as potentially supporting our argument that '*works of the law*' does mean '*the rites of proselyte conversion*'.

Nowhere in this analysis is there any need to assume that the phrase "*ma'ase ha-Torah*" refers specifically to the Oral Torah' or what some argue are 'Rabbinic extensions of Mosaic Prescriptions'.

It seems that most who argue for an equivalence between Sha'ul's use of 'works of the law' and 'Oral Torah' are unaware that neither Yeshua nor Sha'ul condemned the Oral Torah or 'traditions of the fathers' outright. They certainly were strongly opposed to some of these rulings or traditions that, at times, both built a 'fence' around Torah and also made Torah observance almost impossible, but they both clearly also supported some of these traditions.

For example, there was a problematic conflict between the halakhot for Sabbath observance and the circumcision of a male child on the 8th day. Yeshua clearly supported the traditional approach in how they dealt with this conflict (see 'Circumcision: A Step of Obedience?' p7 - <http://goo.gl/LHCQ45>).

Sha'ul also clearly respected, honoured, and obeyed these '*traditions of the fathers*' as Luke records him stating in Acts 28:17:

"After three days Sha'ul called a meeting of the local Jewish leaders. When they had gathered, he said to them: "Brothers, although I have done nothing against either our people or the traditions of our fathers, I was made a prisoner in Yerushalayim and handed over to the Romans." – CJB

Further, some of the list or 'rules' or halakhot in 4QMMT are not actually 'Oral Torah' or 'the traditions of the fathers', but specific ordinances of the Written Torah.

So in conclusion, the phrase '*Ma'ase ha-Torah*' in the DSS 4QMMT could possibly be seen as the same phrase 'works of the law' that Sha'ul uses, in the sense that these 'works', these rulings, are what separates this group, especially from the Gentile world around them, and in fact makes them truly, in their eyes, Jewish.

To force any greater connection, such as the argument that '*Ma'ase ha-Torah*' and Sha'ul's '*works of the law*' refers to the Oral Torah or the 'traditions of the fathers', appears unwarranted.

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Notes:

"Because the word law is incorporated in the meaning of Torah, translators have opted for the simple solution to translate '*nomos*' indiscriminately as law both in the Old and New Covenant writings"

- Torah: Mosaic Law or Divine Instructions by Frank Selch p 71

"The misleading translation of Torah as Law entered Western thought through the Greek text (the Septuagint)" - Oxford Companion to the Bible Editors B.M Metzger & M.D Coogan, p421

For more on the problem of using a Greek version of the Tanakh see my book '***The New Testament: The Hebrew Behind The Greek***' - <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B009XO0NQU>