

Jesus and Paul on the Torah Spectrum

GRANT TESTUT

grant.testut@oc.edu

Oklahoma Christian University

The author makes the argument for a more nuanced reading of the opinions of Jesus and Paul vis-à-vis the Jewish Law (or *Torah*)—opinions that ought to be interpreted neither as complete endorsement for all of its parts nor as denouncement of the Law for Jews or (Jewish) Christians. Rather, the article presents Jesus and Paul as voices within the larger spectrum of Judaism who, like other Jews before and after them, have contributed to the ever-changing nature of Torah. Lastly, the author suggests a new hermeneutic for how modern Christians can better view and talk about the Law and their relationship to it.

Keywords: Jesus, Paul, Law, Torah, Judaism, Jewish, Christian

Introduction

In the preface to his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, the rabbinic scholar Jacob Neusner says:

I write this book to shed some light on why, while Christians believe in Jesus Christ and the good news of his rule in the kingdom of Heaven, Jews believe in the Torah of Moses and form on earth and in their own flesh God's kingdom of priests and the holy people. And that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teaching of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah.¹

This idea of a dichotomy between Jesus and Torah is not just Neusner's pet thesis—reflected in writings throughout his career—but speaks for the sentiment of many Gentile Christians² as well. In a chapter titled “A Lack of Intimacy—Christian Understandings of the Torah,” Johanna van Wijk-Bos writes:

Christian attitudes toward *torah* and the Torah are . . . more complex than a simple absence of attention. From early on the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, between Christians and Jews, was fraught with tension, a tension that in the centuries after the birth of Christianity resulted in Christian persecution of the Jews, especially in

¹ Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), xi-xii.

² Messianic Jews largely affirm a positive stance with regard to both Jesus and Torah.

Western Europe. Within Christianity there arose a “teaching of contempt” toward the Jews and their beliefs and practices. Such contempt focused especially on the issue of so-called Jewish “legalism.”³

Telling examples of this attitude can be found in various statements of the Westminster Confession:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. . . .

God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly of divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament.

To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.⁴

These findings suggest that many Gentile Christians would essentially agree with Neusner’s position that to believe in Jesus is not to believe in Torah.

The fallacy of Neusner’s thesis is a result of two assumptions it makes that have largely gone unchallenged by Jews and Christians alike: (1) that the Torah is a univocal entity that presents its audience with only two options—“believe” it or “contradict” it; and (2) that “faithful Jews” do not have the option both to “believe in the Torah of Moses” while also pushing back against it on certain points. In what follows, I will argue that the

³ Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 7. Discussion in this essay is also informed by other related, important works, including: Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975); Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Classical Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: Comparing Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Bruce Chilton, Craig A. Evans, and Jacob Neusner, *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2002); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990); James D. G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); William R. Herzog II, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); William R. Herzog II, *Jesus’ Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); William Loader, *Jesus and the Fundamentalism of His Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Geza Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); and Brad H. Young, *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

⁴ Westminster Confession, 7.2, 19.3, 19.4.

text and the idea of Torah—as viewed through historical and source critical methods—is not homogenous but diverse and, at times, self-contradictory. This diversity, furthermore, is a result of diverse Israelite, Judahite, and Jewish voices that contributed to the shaping of Torah into what it is now, voices that include those of Jesus of Nazareth and Saul/Paul of Tarsus. I will also lay out a hermeneutic for today’s Christian churches that affirms the Law while also, on occasion, pushing back against it in formative conversation.

Torah Various Defined

Torah as Lexeme

Our first task is to specify what we mean by “Torah.” The trouble that comes with defining Torah is that this word is so versatile in the Hebrew language and in the history of Judaism. Coming from the root ירה, *Torah* (תורה) generally means “instruction.” Though the idea of instruction can be taken as “advice,”⁵ even then it is usually with some implied sense of authority and therefore lends itself to the notion of “law” and “command” (often paired with synonyms such as מצוה, חק, and משפט). In this sense, the word Torah was a natural choice as a descriptor for those expectations Yahweh delivers to his people at Sinai in the Mosaic traditions, though the word *berit* (ברית) or “covenant” better encompasses the fuller idea of the pact between Yahweh and Israel that takes place at Sinai, a pact that includes—but does not consist solely of—law. For our purposes here, Torah will designate this covenant, its legal codes, and the Pentateuch that contains it within its narrative.

In the development of Rabbinic Judaism, Torah would come to stand not only for the Mosaic covenant and the first five books of the canon, but the scriptures as a whole and the teachings of the rabbis. Within this tradition, Torah could signify both the specific written laws delivered to Moses at Sinai (known as “written Torah” or תורה שבכתב) as well as later instruction received by the prophets and, later still, the rabbis (known as “oral Torah” or תורה שבעל פה). Understood in this derived sense, Torah would come to signify that broad concept of general “revelation” made by the Lord God to his people Israel. Torah is therefore a celebrated term in Judaism, filled with a richness that cannot be captured by the label “Law” alone.

Torah in Composition

Whether by “Torah” one means the collection of legal codes or the larger narrative that frames them, one is dealing with literature that was written over many generations (likely a few centuries). This is not the place to rehash the many contributions of scholars

⁵ Cf. Prov. 1:8, 3:1, 4:2.

in the field of Source Criticism.⁶ Let it suffice here to note that the earliest portions of the five books of Torah are reflective of a dialect of Hebrew (Archaic Biblical Hebrew) more likely spoken in Iron Age I or during Israel's early monarchical period, whereas the latest portions suggest an exilic or post-exilic date. This means that even if the Moses traditions began in the Bronze Age, they continued to be shaped and expanded well into the Persian period. Needless to say, Torah is best understood as a diverse body of literature drawn together by a number of authors over an extended period of Israel's history. This diversity can be seen in the sometimes contradictory laws set forth within the legal codes. A few examples should serve to illustrate:

Regarding the altar(s) and place(s) of worship

You shall make for me an altar of earth, sacrificing upon it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your flocks and your cattle. In every place where I memorialize my name I will come to you and bless you. If you make for me an altar of stones, you shall not make them out of hewn material. Otherwise, you will have swung your blade against it and made it common (Exod. 20:24-25).⁷

You shall make the altar out of acacia wood—five cubits in length and five cubits in width; the altar shall be a square. Its height shall be three cubits (Exod. 27:1).

You shall say to them: any man from the household of Israel, or from the immigrants who reside among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the opening of the Tent of Meeting to render it to Yahweh, that man will be cut off from his people (Lev. 17:8-9).

Be careful that you do not offer your burnt offerings in any place that you see. Rather, the place that Yahweh chooses in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings; there you shall do all that I command you (Deut. 12:13-14).

Regarding slavery

If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years. But in the seventh year he shall go free, at no cost (Exod. 21:2).

If your brother is brought low and is sold to you, you shall not make him do a slave's work. He shall be to you like a hired worker, like a tenant. He shall work for you until the year of

⁶ An excellent introductory study and survey of the history of Source Criticism is R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987).

⁷ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of primary texts are the author's own. Verses from the Hebrew Bible are numbered according to the Masoretic Text (MT).

Jubilee For they are my slaves, whom I brought up from the land of Egypt. They may not be sold as a slave purchase (Lev. 25:39-40, 42).

Regarding the tithe and whose it is

Every tithe of the land—from the seeds of the land and from the fruit of the trees—belongs to Yahweh. It is the consecrated property of Yahweh. If a man buys back some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth of its value to it. Every tithe of cattle and flocks—everything that passes under the staff—the tenth part shall become the consecrated property of Yahweh (Lev. 27:30-32).

But notice how I have given to the children of Levi every tithe in Israel as an inheritance in exchange for their service that they are performing, the service of the Tent of Meeting (Num. 18:21).

You shall eat the tithe of your raw grain, your new wine, and your fresh oil, and the firstborn of your cattle and your flock before Yahweh, your God, in the place where he chooses to make his name reside so that you may learn to fear Yahweh, your God, always. But if the trip is too much for you, such that you are unable to bear it, because the place where Yahweh, your God, chooses to place his name is too far from you—for Yahweh, your God, will bless you—then you shall pay with silver. You shall take the silver in your hand and go to the place that Yahweh, your God, chooses. You shall pay the silver for whatever your appetite desires—cattle, flocks, wine, beer; whatever your appetite might want—and you shall eat it there before Yahweh, your God, while you and your household celebrate. But the Levite who is in your gates you must not neglect. For he does not have territory or an inheritance among you. At the end of three years you shall bring out the entire tithe of your produce, in that very year. And you shall lay it out at your gates. And the Levite shall come—for he does not have territory or an inheritance among you—as well as the immigrant, and the orphan, and the widow who are in your gates. They shall eat and be full so that Yahweh, your God, may bless you in all the work of your hand that you perform (Deut. 14:23-29).

What should be clear from the examples above is that some of these differences in Torah reflect different expressions of Israel's *cultus* (opinions on the appropriate place and manner of worship), while others represent the changing landscape of Israel's ethic over time (whether it is acceptable to own one's fellow countryman as a slave or not; whether one's contribution is intended to go into the coffers of the sanctuary or to be shared in liberally by God's people). As such, Torah represents not a static set of rules delivered at one point in time, but a continuing conversation over what it means for Israelites (and later, Jews) to live ethically as God's covenant people. And the conversation is not limited to the pages of Pentateuch but spills into the rest of the canon and the lives of Second Temple Period Jews.

Torah in Various Jewish Hands

It is surprising that generations of Jews and Christians have so unequivocally accepted the notion that Jesus and Paul cut ties with Judaism and Torah without likewise questioning Jeremiah's position within Judaism or his stance on Torah. For this is the prophet who says regarding Torah: "How can you say, 'We are wise; Yahweh's Torah is with us'? But look, the scribes' lying stylus has made it a lie!"⁸ Even if one dismisses what Jeremiah here calls "Torah" as some counterfeit to what would become Torah in the later canon (an unverifiable claim), particular sayings of the prophet clearly contradict ideas found in canonical Torah: "But I did not order your ancestors, nor did I command them in the time when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning matters of burnt offering and sacrifice."⁹ As this one example should illustrate, Jeremiah takes up an argument that is in opposition to what would become the received Torah. The traditions reflected in Exodus and Leviticus present a very different take on the nature of Israel's God and what he commands when he leads them out of Egypt.¹⁰

Yet for all that Jeremiah does to undermine some of the stronger voices of canonical Torah, he also chastises his audience for their failure to observe Yahweh's Torah and its ethic of exclusive worship of Yahweh and care for the poor, immigrants, widows, and orphans.¹¹ And Jeremiah is not alone in his complex relationship to Torah. Over a century before his career, prophets like Amos and Isaiah were similarly decrying formal worship (pushing back against the very traditions that would give us the Priestly texts) and advocating justice and compassion. If we go roughly a century after Jeremiah's time, we find Haggai, a prophet who is very much in favor of what he sees as the neglected temple and its cultus. Even Jeremiah's contemporary Ezekiel, who likewise has much to say about justice, perceives a renewed temple and cultus as key—and not hindrance—to a change in Judah's social ethic.¹² What we see taking shape within Torah and here in the other biblical voices outside of Torah is the very process that will be formative for later rabbinic Judaism: *the conversation*. Here, there is no sole party line to profess but multiple Jewish voices who contribute to an understanding of what Torah ought to be. Let me refer to this diversity of Jewish thought that contributed to the framing of and continuing discussion about divine law as the "Torah spectrum."

If we maintain the particular topic of cultus as a case study, rabbinic literature shows no less than the biblical literature how variegated the Torah spectrum can be.

⁸ Jer. 8:8

⁹ Jer. 7:22.

¹⁰ Cf. any number of commands that mention burnt offering (עולה), sacrifice (זבח), or their cognate verbs, such as Exod. 8:23, 12:27, 20:24, 29:18, or Lev. 1-7 for examples of the opposite position in Torah.

¹¹ Cf. Jer. 6:19, 9:12, 16:11, 26:4, 31:33, 32:23, 44:10, 23 for positive mentions of Torah; as for examples of aniconic monotheism and concern for the disadvantaged, these are ubiquitous in Jeremiah.

¹² Cf. Ezek. 40-48.

Especially in its earlier stages, rabbinic literature has much to say in affirming the centrality of the sacrificial system found in Torah:

Roughly speaking, about a quarter of early rabbinic (Tannaitic) literature consists of elaborate instructions, discussions, and descriptions concerning the temple and the sacrificial cult, and much of this Tannaitic material continues to be debated and elaborated in later rabbinic (Amoraic) compilations, primarily in the Babylonian Talmud. The rabbinic sacrificial corpus . . . does not treat sacrifices as metaphors or as placeholders of the forlorn past: rather, sacrifices are construed in this corpus as integral parts of the greater picture rabbinic texts aim to construct, a picture of life in accordance with the rabbis' interpretation of the Torah's law.¹³

However, as Balberg states in the introduction of her book, her aim is “to understand the rabbinic sacrificial vision by tracing the junctures at which the rabbis, in reworking the biblical material that forms the basis of their legislation regarding sacrifices and temple cult, significantly depart from the biblical texts and present revolutionary perspectives.”¹⁴

Such “revolutionary perspectives” that represent a departure from earlier *Torah* would include the following Amoraic (Talmudic) teaching:

“In every place burnt sacrifice is brought for my name...” (Mal. 1:11). “In every place”—the mind boggles! Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani said, “Rabbi Jonathan said: these are the students of the sages who are engaged in *Torah* ‘in every place’. [God is saying:] I credit it to them as though they were making sacrifices and offerings for my name. “. . .and pure offering” (Mal. 1:11). This is the one who learns *Torah* in purity. [Namely,] he takes a wife, and after this he learns *Torah*.¹⁵

What we see in this excerpt is an example of rabbinic thought that takes the original principle of sacrificial cultus and revolutionizes it by reframing its meaning as metaphor for an ethic centered on Torah study. It is intended by its authors both to honor Torah as well as to expand upon and deviate from some of its earlier traditions.

The Law in Jesus' Hands

Having glanced at the diversity of voices that make up written Torah, as well as the diverse voices of “faithful Jews” who have both upheld and pushed back against Torah, we now turn to the question of whether Jesus of Nazareth can reasonably be said to fit

¹³ Mira Balberg, *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 4. See also William Loader, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

¹⁴ Balberg, *Blood for Thought*, 6.

¹⁵ BT *Menahot* 110a.

somewhere on this Torah spectrum. Here I will lean on the depictions of Jesus that are found in the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁶ Of first importance is to isolate definitive statements of Jesus concerning Torah (referred to as *ὁ νόμος* “the Law” in the gospels). Statements about Torah that are attributed to Jesus in the Synoptics include:

“Do not suppose that I came to undo (*καταλῦσαι*) the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to undo but to fulfill. For truly I say to you: until heaven and earth pass, not one *yod* (*ἰῶτα*) or one stroke (*κεραία*) will in any way pass (*οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ*) from the Law, until all things come to be. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches people [to do] likewise will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches [them], this person will be called ‘great’ in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17-19).

“Whatever things you would like people to do for you, do these things yourselves for them. For this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

“Indeed, all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John” (Matt. 11:13).

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, posers, because you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, but you abandon the weightier matters of the Law: judgment and mercy and faith. You ought to have practiced the latter, while not abandoning the former” (Matt. 23:23).

“It would be easier for heaven and earth to pass than for one stroke (*κεραίαν*) of the Law to fall away” (Luke 16:17).

The great majority of Jesus’ encompassing statements about Torah come from Matthew’s Gospel, which is no surprise. All of them reflect a high view of Torah, which Jesus treats as enduring, immutable, and inviolable. Conceptually, therefore, the Jesus of the gospels appears to honor Torah when he speaks about it in the abstract.

Where then does Jesus deviate from or push back against the particulars of Torah? Once again, a few noteworthy examples should suffice:

Regarding Sabbath

“Or have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are innocent? I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have

¹⁶ I am omitting the Gospel according to John for the following reasons: it was written later than the other canonical gospels; it shows signs of increasing tension and schism between followers of Jesus and “the Jews” (e.g. the oppositional nature of those labeled *οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι* “the Jews” with respect to Jesus in the Gospel), and is, for this reason, less reliable as a witness to Jesus in his original Jewish context; it deserves its own treatment, which cannot be afforded here.

condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:5-8; cf. Luke 6:1-5).

He said to them, “What person will there be among you who, if he has a sheep, and this sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not grab it and lift it up? How much more important, then, is a person than a sheep? Therefore, it is permissible on the Sabbath to do good” (Matt. 12:11-12; cf. Luke 14:5).

And he said to them, “The Sabbath came to exist for the sake of man, and not man for the sake of the Sabbath. Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28).

And he said to them, “Is it permissible on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? To save life or to kill?” They were silent (Mark 3:4; cf. Luke 6:9, 14:3).

The Lord answered him and said, “Posers! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall, lead it out, and give it something to drink? Was it not necessary for this woman, being a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound these eighteen years, to be untied from this chain on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13:15-16).

Regarding unclean foods

“It is not that which enters the mouth that defiles the person. Rather, it is that which comes out of the mouth that defiles the person” (Matt. 15:11).

“There is nothing outside the person that, upon entering him, is able to defile him. Rather, those things that come out of a person are what defile the person” (Mark 7:15).

Then he said to them, “Are you yourselves also so ignorant?! You understand, do you not, that everything that enters the person is unable to defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach and goes out into the latrine?” (thus cleansing all foods). But he said, “That which comes out of the person is what defiles the person. For out of the inner part of people’s heart come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, guile, self-indulgence, stinginess, slander, pride, foolishness; all these evil things come out of the inner part and defile the person” (Mark 7:18-23).

How do these statements oppose directives found in Torah? Jesus’ statements about Sabbath rest upon an ethic that the Sabbath was made for the wellbeing of humans. As such, Jesus in his self-proclaimed role as “Son of Man” claims to have authority over Sabbath, since Sabbath was made in the interest of “man” (i.e., humans). This position does push back against certain voices within Torah that sound especially prohibitive and

argue for a death penalty for any who do not properly honor the Sabbath.¹⁷ At the same time, Jesus' ethic is in harmony with other voices—likewise found within Torah and the greater biblical and later Jewish traditions—that view the purpose of Sabbath not as prohibitive but liberating.¹⁸ Where Jesus appears flippant about Sabbath—when he does not deny that he or his disciples are working on Sabbath—one can argue that this is no different than those prophetic voices who belittle Sabbath in the interests of highlighting another, neglected ethic.¹⁹

Jesus' statements about unclean foods sound like a bold contradiction of the Priestly traditions, not least the entirety of Leviticus 11, which argues that what enters a person can very much render that person unclean. Given that each of these passages cited above involves a teaching about evil thoughts that come *out* of a person, we could just as well say that Jesus' statements are a form of dramatic hyperbole. This would be comparable to the Deuteronomist or Jeremiah in their respective petitions for circumcision not merely of male foreskins but of human hearts.²⁰ Such rhetoric emphasizes that the cultus is not enough, and a moral commitment is necessary. We should also note here that the gospels bear no witness to Jesus eschewing Jewish dietary laws in actual practice.²¹

The Law in Paul's Hands

What can we say about the relationship between Paul of Tarsus and Torah? Concerning Torah as a whole, Paul has the following to say:²²

“So then, let it be known to you, men, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Everyone who believes in this man will be justified from all [those sins] from which you were unable to be justified by the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

“But I do confess this to you: that according to the Way, which they call a ‘sect,’ do I so serve the God of our fathers, believing all the things written throughout the Law and in the

¹⁷ Exod. 31:13-15, 35:2-3; Num. 17:32-36.

¹⁸ Exod. 20:8-11, 23:12; Deut. 5:12-15; cf. Isa. 58, where “Sabbath” and “fasting” are a part of the same conversation regarding the emptiness of cultus without social responsibility.

¹⁹ See Matt. 12:1-12; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-10, 14:1-6 in light of Isa. 1:13-17; Hosea 2:13.

²⁰ Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4, 9:25-26.

²¹ Peter's statement in Acts 10:14 would also suggest that Jesus had not effectively taught his disciples to abandon the dietary laws.

²² Here I draw on both the undisputed and disputed Pauline Epistles as well as Acts. Even acknowledging that some of these texts are written by authors other than Paul, I would argue that their views on and use of Torah are consistent enough to be generally representative of Paul. Let others parse out any further nuance they might see.

Prophets, having a hope in God, which even they themselves hold, that there is going to be a resurrection of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:14-15).

Paul answered, “Neither against the Law of the Jews nor against the temple nor against Caesar have I sinned in any way” (Acts 25:8).

We know that whatever the Law says it says to those who are in the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and that the entire world may become accountable to God; because no flesh will be justified before him by works of the Law, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from the Law, the justification of God has been revealed, being witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets; namely, the justification from God for all who believe through faith in Jesus Christ. For there is no difference (Rom. 3:19-22).

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it not be! Rather, we establish the Law (Rom. 3:31).

For sin will not rule you. For you are not under Law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

So then, the Law is holy, and the command is holy and just and good. Did that which was to be good for me then become death? May it not be! Rather, sin became death, so that sin might become evident, through that which was good for me, as that which produces death, so that sin might be surpassingly sinful through the command. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I myself am fleshly, sold to be a slave under sin (Rom. 7:12-14).

Love does not perform evil against a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fullness of the Law (Rom. 13:10).

So then, the Law has become our tutor [to lead us] to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24).

For the entire Law is summed up in one statement: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14).

For [Christ] himself is our peace, who made both [circumcised and uncircumcised] into one and undid the dividing wall, the hostility, in his flesh, by rendering useless the Law of commands with decrees, that he might form the two into one new person in himself by making peace (Eph. 2:14-15).

Many more statements about Torah could be drawn from Paul, but these must serve as representative of his central concepts. Even after becoming a follower of Christ, Paul presents himself as a “Jew” who faithfully observes Torah.²³ In his letters, Paul

²³ Cf. Acts 16:3, 18:18, 21:20-26 for narrative examples of Paul’s continuing observance of Jewish Law.

affirms the holiness of Torah as something given by God. If Paul is ever perceived as disparaging Torah, this surely comes from a misreading of his arguments about the inability of Torah to justify God's people. But this inability is not so much meant to suggest a defect in Torah as it is meant to elevate the saving role of Jesus as God's Messiah.

Paul, like Jesus, sums up Torah under the banner of the Golden Rule. This too indicates a high view of Torah as consisting of more than rules about Israel's cultus. And the breaking of Torah, according to Paul, is an infraction against both God and humankind.²⁴ Therefore, the many times that Paul refers to not being "under Law," we are to understand him not as departing from Torah but as signifying that followers of Jesus—both Jews and Gentiles—are no longer condemned by Torah, which rightly found fault with their actions, because they have found justification "under grace" in Christ. Similarly, Paul interprets the gracious outpouring of Christ's Spirit as the very thing by which "the just requirement of the Law might be carried out" in believers.²⁵

If there is any particular command of Torah that Paul critiques with a passion, it is surely the command of circumcision. But here too Paul can be easily misunderstood. As Acts 16:3 and 21:21 (understood in context) would suggest, Paul did not disparage the maintaining of Jewish practice for his fellow Jewish Christians. But isolating circumcision as a mark of particular Jewishness, Paul draws attention away from it for the sake of Gentile Christians who were not born under such Jewish customs. This is all done in the interests of his calling as an "apostle to the nations."

The Law in Christian Hands

What sort of hermeneutic can churches take away from this argument that Jesus and Paul did not position themselves against Torah/Jewish Law, but that they positioned themselves as faithful Jews within the Torah spectrum? The first lesson of importance is that the Law (at this point I will fall back on the terminology more broadly used by modern Christian communities) is not a homogenous, take-it-or-leave-it entity. It is a rich compilation of cultic and social commands, mixed with narrative and poetry, that was the product of many hands. As such, it does not present a single, consistent vision of what faithfulness to God looks like but represents a few Israelite/Jewish stances on how best to obey God.

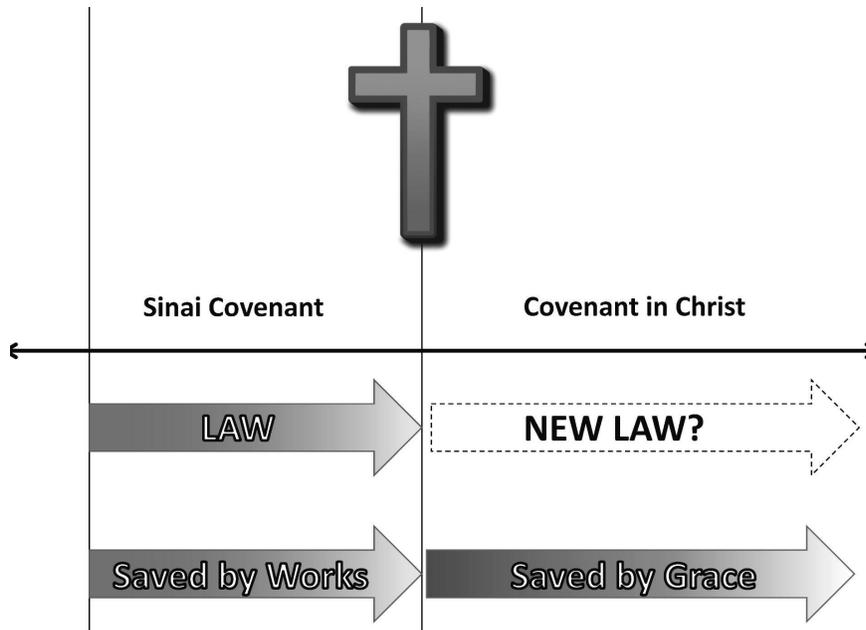
Secondly, because Jesus and Paul both honor the Law, practice it, and teach other Jews to practice it, Christians do great harm to Christ's message and to their own theology

²⁴ See Rom. 2:17-22 for Paul's examples of teachings from Torah. These include teachings against theft, adultery, and idolatry—social and not just cultic interests.

²⁵ Rom. 8:4. Paul here seems to channel those voices of Jewish revival found in Jer. 31:31-34 and Ezek. 36:26-28, both texts anticipating a time in which the heart/spirit of every Israelite would be changed, with the result that they would conduct their lives consistently according to Torah.

if they maintain that the Law “was nailed to the cross.”²⁶ By making statements such as these, Christians unwittingly create a vacuum of cultic (and possibly social) instruction that demands to be filled by some new code of conduct. This also results in misunderstandings of God’s grace and forgiveness as they are expressed in both the Old and New Testaments. The imbalance can be expressed in the following diagram:

Figure 1.



Here, the message is perpetuated that Christ’s ministry brings an end to Law, both as a standard of behavior (praxis) and as a means of securing one’s position with God (salvation), the latter neglecting the many messages in the Hebrew Bible, including those in the Pentateuch, that demonstrate Yahweh saving his people apart from Torah observance (and sometimes in spite of their breaking Torah).

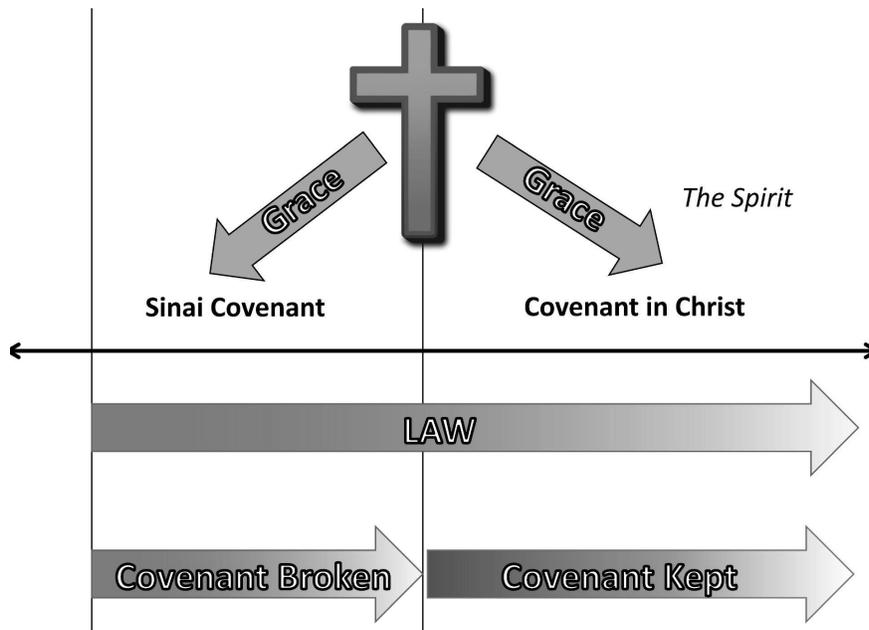
The problem with this schema of understanding is not only that it oversimplifies and misrepresents Torah, but that it also creates a vacuum of a standard for praxis. If the “Old Law” is cast aside, some concept of “New Law” must inevitably replace it. New customs that dictate social and cultic behavior will fill the void of Torah, if Torah has truly died. But this leads to a subtle form of self-achieved salvation. Indeed, the Christian may still use the language of “grace” and “salvation in Christ,” but other language and behaviors in the Christian’s life will suggest another principle at play. The “Old Law,” the Christian will say, was the way of salvation for Israel, but it is outmoded and has now been

²⁶ This idea comes from a misreading of Col. 2:14, which speaks of an official document of an individual’s debt or indictment that God “nailed to the cross” rather than the Law itself.

replaced by new customs that, secretly, the Christian becomes convinced are the rules and rituals that make for real security with God.

This kind of thinking ignores the rich impact of those messages communicated by Jesus and Paul, Jews who honored Torah but pushed back against it as well. For them, Torah will never be the solution for all the believer's needs. It teaches them an ethic, yes, but the ethic must also form in the heart of the believer somewhat independently of Torah. Once done, this ethic helps the mature believer to contribute to the ongoing Torah conversation. This ethic might be better represented in the following diagram:

Figure 2.



Not only does this model better reflect Jesus and Paul's appreciation of Torah as a text that remains formative for believers even going forth into the era of a "New Covenant," but it also speaks well for Jewish reformation advocated by those complex Jewish voices of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. All four of these Jews on the Torah spectrum call for the advent of a new movement (or "covenant") among Jews, and yet none of them calls for the abolition of Torah in that revolution. Rather, the change they advocate amounts to a body of believers who are *more* inclined to observe Torah because it is written in their hearts. The believer who operates by this understanding of Torah spectrum feels no need to deny or adopt the entirety of Law—in the former case to replace it with a system of observances that one can feel justified in keeping perfectly, and in the latter case swallowing the whole out of fear of not having the maturity to discern the better from the lesser commands—but finds salvation through genuine trust in God. In other words, such an understanding invites the modern Christian community to join Jesus and Paul on the Torah spectrum.

Bibliography

- Balberg, Mira. *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
- Banks, Robert. *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- Chilton, Bruce, and Jacob Neusner. *Classical Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: Comparing Theologies*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Chilton, Bruce, Craig A. Evans, and Jacob Neusner. *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002.
- Dunn, James D. G. *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.
- Dunn, James D. G., ed. *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Herzog, William R. II. *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- . *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Loader, William. *Jesus and the Fundamentalism of His Day*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- . *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- Neusner, Jacob. *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Sanders, E. P. *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Van Wijk-Bos, Johanna. *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Vermes, Geza. *Jesus in His Jewish Context*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Whybray, R. N. *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987.
- Young, Brad H. *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.