

# TORAH INCOGNITA

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## 1. Christian Theology's Greatest Deficiency

I have given an entire chapter to the question of how Messianic Judaism is to relate to the *Torah* because I am certain that the lack of a correct, clear and relatively complete Messianic Jewish or Gentile Christian theology of the Law is not only a major impediment to Christians' understanding their own faith, but also the greatest barrier to Jewish people's receiving the Gospel. Even though many Jews do not observe *Torah*, often neither knowing nor caring about it, I stand by this statement; because attachment to the *Torah* is rooted deep in the Jewish people's memory, where it affects attitudes unconsciously.

While ultimately the issue becomes who Yeshua is Messiah, Son of the Living God, final Atonement, Lord of our lives - the Church's problem here is mainly one of communication, of expressing the truth in ways that relate to Jewish world-views. But the Church hardly knows what to make of the *Torah* or how to fit it together with the New Testament. And if the Church doesn't know, don't expect the Jews to figure it out for them! I believe that Christianity has gone far astray in its dealings with the subject and that the most urgent task of theology today is get right its view of the Law.

Christianity organizes systematic theology by subjects it considers important. Thus topics like the Holy Spirit and person and work of the Messiah take a healthy amount of space in any Christian systematic theology. Judaism too organizes theological thinking into categories reflecting its concerns, as we noted earlier, its three main topics are God, Israel (that is, the Jewish people) and *Torah*.

Comparing Jewish and Christian theology, one finds that both devote much attention to God and to the people of God (in the one case the Jews, in the other the Church). It is all the more striking, therefore, to notice how much Jewish thought and how little Christian theology addresses the topic of *Torah*—generally rendered in English as "Law," although the meaning of the Hebrew word is "teaching." As a rough measure, I checked the subject index of Augustus Strong's *Systematic Theology* and found under "Law" 28 pages out of a total 1,056 (less than 3%). In L. Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* there are 3 pages out of 745 (less than 1/2%). And in Lewis Sperry Chaffer's 7-volume work with the same title, there are only 7 out of 2,607 (about 1/4%). On the other hand, Isidor Epstein's *The Faith of Judaism* has 57 pages on *Torah* out of 386 (15%), Solomon Schechter's *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* has 69 out of 343 (20%), and Louis Jacobs' *A Jewish Theology* 73 out of 331 (22%) (these three authors are Orthodox, Conservative, Liberal (Reform), respectively). One is forced to the conclusion that the topic interests Jews and not Christians.

And that is unfortunate for the Christians. It means, first, that most Christians have an overly simplistic understanding what the Law is all about; and, second, that Christianity has almost nothing relevant to say to Jews about one of the three most important issues of their faith. In short, *Torah* is the great unex-

plored territory, the *terra incognita* of Christian theology.

The main reason for this is that Christian theology, with the anti-Jewish bias it incorporated in its early centuries, misunderstood Sha'ul [Paul] and concluded that the *Torah* is no longer in force. This is not the Jewish Gospel, nor is it the true Gospel. It is time for Christians to understand the truth about the Law. Christian theologians in the last thirty years have made a beginning.<sup>1</sup> Messianic Jews should now move to the

front lines and spearhead this process.

## 2. Nomos In The New Testament

A good starting place would be a thorough study of the Greek word *nomos* ("law," "*Torah*") and its derivatives as used in the New Testament. Unfortunately there is not space in this book to undertake it, since the word and its cognates appear some 200 times. The sampling which follows is intended to whet the appetite and encourage further investigation.

### a. Romans 10:4 - Did The Messiah End The Law?

Consider Romans 10:4, which states - in a typical but wrong translation - "For Christ ends the law and brings righteousness for everyone who has faith." Like this translator, most theologians understand the verse to say that Yeshua terminated the *Torah*. But the Greek word translated "ends" is *telos*, from which English gets the word "teleology," defined in Webster's Third International Dictionary as "the philosophical study of the evidences of design in nature; ... the fact or the character of being directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose — used of ... nature ... conceived as determined ... by the design of a divine Providence ...." The normal meaning of *telos* in Greek - which is also its meaning here - is "goal, purpose, consummation," not "termination." The Messiah did not and does not bring the *Torah* to an end. Rather, attention to and faith in the Messiah is the goal and purpose toward which the *Torah* aims, the logical consequence, result and consummation of observing the *Torah* out of genuine faith, as opposed to trying to observe it out of legalism. This, not the termination of *Torah*, is Sha'ul's point, as can be seen from the context, Romans 9:30-10: 11.

### b. "Under The Law" And "Works Of The Law."

Much of Christian theology about the *Torah* is based on a misunderstanding of two Greek expressions which Sha'ul invented. The first is *upo nomon*; it appears to times in Romans, 1 Corinthians and Galatians, and it is usually rendered "under the law." The other is *erga nomou*, found with minor variations 10 times in Romans and Galatians, translated "works of the law."

Whatever Sha'ul is trying to communicate by these expressions, one thing is clear: Sha'ul regards them negatively: being "under the law" is bad, and "works of the law" are bad. Christian theology usually takes the first to mean "within the framework of observing the *Torah*" and the second, "acts of obedience to the *Torah*." This understanding is wrong. Sha'ul does not consider it bad to live within the framework of *Torah*, nor is it bad to obey it; on the contrary, he writes that the *Torah* is "holy, just and good" (Romans 7:12).

C. E. B. Cranfield has shed light on these two phrases; his first essay on the subject appeared in 1964, and he summarized

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it in his masterly commentary on Romans. There he writes,

"... the Greek language of Paul's day possessed no word group corresponding to our 'legalism,' 'legalist' and 'legalistic.' This means that he lacked a convenient terminology for expressing a vital distinction, and so was surely seriously hampered in the work of clarifying the Christian position with regard to the law. In view of this, we should always, we think, be ready to reckon with the possibility that Pauline statements, which at first sight seem to disparage the law, were really directed not against the law itself but against that misunderstanding and misuse of it for which we now have a convenient terminology. In this very difficult terrain Paul was pioneering."

If Cranfield is right, as I believe he is, we should approach Sha'ul with the same pioneering spirit. We should understand *erga nomou* not as "works of law," but as "legalistic observance of particular *Torah* commands." Likewise, we should take *upo nomon* to mean not "under the law" but "in subjection to the system that results from perverting *Torah* into legalism." This is how these phrases are rendered in the *Jewish New Testament*.

The expression "in subjection" is important because the context of *upo nomon* always conveys an element of oppressiveness. Sha'ul is very clear about this, as can be seen from I Corinthians 9:20, where, after saying that for those without *Torah* he became as one without *Torah*, he stressed that he was himself not without *Torah* but *ennomos Christou*, "en-lawed" or "en-*Torah*ed of Messiah." He used a different term, *ennomos* in place of *upo nomon*, to distinguish his oppression free relationship with the *Torah*, now that he is united with the Messiah, from the sense of being burdened which he noticed in people (probably Gentiles!) who instead of happily "enlawing" themselves to God's holy, just and good *Torah*, subjected themselves to a legalistic perversion of it.

If the above renderings of *upo nomon* and *erga nomou* were used in the 20 passages where these phrases occur, I believe it would change Christian theology of *Torah* for the better.

#### c) Galatians 3:10-13 - Redeemed From The Curse Of The Law?

Galatians 3: 10-13 presents a number of stumbling blocks in most translations. As an example, here is the New American Standard Bible's rendering, which strikes me as neither better nor worse than most:

"[10] For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.' [11] Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'The righteous man shall live by faith.' [12] However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them.' [13] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

These verses appear as follows in the *Jewish New Testament*:

"[10] For everyone who depends on legalistic observance of *Torah* commands [*erga nomou*] lives under a curse, since it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not keep on doing everything written in the Scroll of the *Torah*.' [Deuteronomy 27:26] [11] Now it is evident that

no one comes to be declared righteous by God through legalism [*nomos*], since 'The person who is righteous will attain life by trusting and being faithful.' [Habakkuk 2:4] [12] Furthermore, legalism [*nomos*] is not based on trusting and being faithful, but on a misuse of the text that says, 'Anyone who does these things will attain life through them.' [Leviticus 18:5] [13] The Messiah redeemed us from the curse pro-

nounced in the *Torah* [*nomos*] by becoming cursed on our behalf; for the *Tanakh* says, 'Everyone who hangs from a stake comes under a curse.' [Deuteronomy 21:22-23]"

"The curse of the law" is not the curse of having to live within the framework of *Torah*, for the *Torah* itself is good. Nor is it the curse of being required to obey the *Torah* but lacking the power to do so - this would be a kind of "Catch 22" unworthiness of God, although there are theologies which teach that this is exactly the case. Rather, it is "the curse pronounced in the *Torah*" (v. 13; see v. 10) for disobeying it. Sha'ul's point is that that curse falls on people who are actually trying to obey the *Torah* if their efforts are grounded in legalism (vv. 11 a, 12). For Sha'ul, such a legalistic approach is already disobedience; for the *Tanakh* itself requires genuine obedience to emerge from faith (v. 11 b). There is not space here to prove that this is the case or to deal with other controversies raised by the above rendering of these four verses; my *Jewish New Testament* commentary addresses these matters.

#### d) Messianic Jews [Hebrews] 8:6 - The New Covenant Has Been Given As Torah.

One of the most surprising discoveries I made in the course of preparing the *Jewish New Testament* is that the New Covenant itself has actually been given as *Torah* - as much as, and in exactly the sense that, what Moses received on Mount Sinai was given as *Torah*. The verse which hides this extremely well kept secret is Messianic Jews [Hebrews] 8:6, which reads, in a typical translation,

"But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. "

The passage would seem poor ore for my mining efforts. But upon examining the Greek text I noticed that the phrase "is enacted on" renders the word *nenomothetetai*, a compound of our friend *nomos* ("law, *Torah*") with the common verb *tithemi* ("to put, place"). If the subject matter of the Letter to a Group of Messianic Jews were, say, Greek law, or the Roman Senate, it would be appropriate to translate this word as "enacted, established, legislated," that is, "put" or "placed as law. "

But in the letter to these Messianic Jews, the word *nomos*, which appears 14 times, always means *Torah* specifically, never legislation in general. Moreover, the only other appearance of *nenomothetetai* in the New Testament is a few verses back, at Messianic Jews 7: 11, where it can only refer to the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai (the related word *nomothesia*, "giving of the *Torah*," at Romans 9:4 is equally unambiguous). Therefore the *Jewish New Testament* renders Messianic Jews 8:6:

"But now the work Yeshua has been given to do is far superior to theirs, just as the covenant he mediates is better. For this covenant has been given as *Torah* on the basis

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of better promises."

So the New Covenant has been "given as *Torah*," which implies that *Torah* still exists and is to be observed in the present age - by all Jews and by all Gentiles, as we shall see. However, precisely what is demanded of "all Jews" and of "all Gentiles" is not quite so obvious. We will address this question in a limited way, but comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of this book.

### 3) *The Gospel With An Ended Law Is No Gospel At All*

The statement has been made (I'm not saying I agree) that of the three items mentioned earlier as most important on the Jewish theological agenda, Reform Jews focus mainly on "God," the Conservatives on "Israel," and the Orthodox on "*Torah*." Reform and secular Jews disagree with the Orthodox and Conservative over whether the *Torah* is binding forever, while Conservative Jews deny the exclusive claim of Orthodoxy to determine specific applications of what they agree is the eternal *Torah*. Nevertheless, although Orthodox Jews constitute only 15-20% of the Jewish population in Israel and less in the United States, their view of *Torah* as eternal has found a very deep place in the heart of the Jewish people; so that the non-Orthodox find themselves somewhat in the role of upstarts trying to dislodge a clever, experienced and self-confident ruler.

Now if Christianity comes into such an environment with the message that the *Torah* is no longer in force, the line of communication with Orthodox Judaism is simply cut. There is no longer anything to discuss. Moreover, if I am correct about the role of the Orthodox Jewish view of *Torah* in the Jewish mentality, then even the secular Jew "knows" at some level, whether correctly or not, that Orthodoxy is right. In fact there are secular Jews who, though not religious themselves, regard the Orthodox as the preservers of the Jewish nation.

Thus, if Christianity cannot address the issue of *Torah* properly and seriously, it has nothing to say to the Jewish people. Individual Jews may be won away to Christianity, across the wide gap between the Jewish people and the Church; but the central concern of Orthodox Judaism itself is dismissed, perhaps with a casual and cavalier citation of Romans 6: 14, "We're not under the law but under grace." In my opinion this shallow, sterile way of thinking has gone on too long in the Church, and it serves no purpose but the Adversary's!

Moreover, this way of thinking is not only shallow, but perverse! Yeshua said very plainly in the theme sentence of the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law ... ; I did not come to abolish, but *plerosai*, "to fill." We learned earlier<sup>7</sup> that Yeshua's "filling" here means making clear the full and proper sense of the *Torah*; and we pointed out that even if *pleroo* meant "fulfillment," it could not be twisted to mean "abolition," in contradiction to what he had said three words earlier. This seems so clear that it is hard for me to understand how Christian theology has even dared to propose the idea that the *Torah* is no more. I myself believe it came about because of anti-Jewish bias infused into the Gentile Church in its early centuries; 8 this bias is now so pervasive and difficult to root out that even Christians without any personal anti-Semitism whatever are unavoidably affected by it.

The remedy is to reassess the theology of *Torah*. I am convinced it will be found that the *Torah* continues in force. When I

say this, I am not making a "concession to Judaism," as some Christian critics might suppose. Nor am I somehow expressing anti- *Torah* theology in hypocritical, deceptive and confusing pro- *Torah* language, an accusation I could expect from a few non-Messianic Jews. Rather, I am stating as clearly as I can what I believe the New Testament teaches. It will prove to be neither a concession nor a confusion, but a challenge - to both Jews and Christians.

For a key element of the New Covenant, both as promised by Jeremiah and as cited in the Letter To A Group of Messianic Jews ["To The Hebrews"] is that the *Torah* is written on people's hearts (Jeremiah 31:30-34, Messianic Jews 8:9-12). It takes unacceptable theological legerdemain to conclude that when God writes the *Torah* on hearts he changes it into something other than the *Torah*!

But if Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles acknowledge the ongoingness of the *Torah*, then the question arises, "Just what does the *Torah* require, now that Yeshua the Messiah has inaugurated the New Covenant? What is the New Covenant *halakhah*?<sup>(1)</sup> And this is already a Jewish question, and, as we will see, an essential element of the Gospel.

For there is a tradition within Judaism which says that when the Messiah comes he will explain the difficult questions of *Torah*. Another tradition says he will change the *Torah*. Yeshua the Messiah has already come; some things he has explained - for example, in the Sermon on the Mount -- and other things have been changed, as we learn later in the chapter. (When he comes the second time he may give more explanations and make more changes!) A Jew can cope with this kind of approach to *Torah*. And the Christian will just have to get used to it.

### **The Torah Of The Messiah, A Tree Of Life**

*I give you good instruction; do not forsake my Torah.*

*It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and those who hold fast to it are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. (2)*

<sup>1</sup> *Halakhah* means, literally, "way of walking;" but, depending on the context, it can convey either the broad sense, "way of living, according to the *Torah*," or the narrow sense, "the rule to be followed" in a particular situation. In Jewish discourse when one speaks of "the *halakhah*," one is bringing to mind the whole framework of Jewish life as seen from a particular viewpoint. Sometimes the intent is to know what is permitted and what is forbidden by Jewish law; however, just as often the concern is not "legal" but simply related to finding out what the customs are, and perhaps why they are that way. The phrase "the *halakhah*" connotes Jewish people hood spanning centuries and expressing itself through ordinary Jews consulting with their rabbis in order to learn more about how God wants them to live.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 4:2 and 3: 18, as quoted in the *Siddur* [Jewish prayer book] and recited in the synagogue after the public reading from the *Torah* scroll.

\*Quoted for educational purposes, without some notes, from Chapter V in the Messianic Jewish Manifesto by David Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1988. Pages 125-136.



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