

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anti-Nomianism

Well, there's a fancy word. It's a useful word to whip out to impress people at your next Bible study. Actually, it emanates from the Greek “anti” meaning “against” and “nomos” meaning “law”. In the general sense it can mean “against law” or “lawlessness”. This usage, unfortunately, has quite a broad application in our current society.

Our focus is on the religious understanding of the term. The word “nomos”, is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word “torah” in the Tanach, called the Old Testament. The word “torah” is a complex word that has various definitions, all context-dependent. In most cases, the Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These are also referred to as the “books of Moshe or Moses” since he wrote them. Another title is the word “Chumash¹” for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. In a broader sense, the word “torah” simply means “teaching” or “instruction”.

The translators who gave us the Septuagint², which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, used the word “nomos” to translate the Hebrew word “torah” since that word was unique to Hebrew. It was an attempt to provide an equivalency in the minds of the readers to facilitate understanding. By use of this word, however, it inadvertently introduced the word “law” in their minds since that is the usual meaning of the Greek word “nomos”. They would have been better served to simply transliterate the word “torah” into Greek to maintain the unique distinction in the minds of the readers.

Words can be powerful things. When we hear the phrase “the Old Testament” the word “old” jumps off the page at us. We think through our current filters and immediately connect “old” with an antique, perhaps something worthy of sitting on the shelf but not to actually use. It is an artifact from the past from a bygone era, a part of history that belongs in a museum.

When we hear the phrase “the New Testament” the word “new” also telegraphs meaning and definition to us. “New” must mean something current, up-to-date, applicable now, the latest and greatest, and the attainment or pinnacle of accomplishment. This would certainly supersede the “old”, right? Wrong.

These are unfortunate word choices to describe the eternal Word of God. Nowhere do the Scriptures bifurcate themselves

with these labels and place an artificial separation page within. The theologians and the Bible publishers are to blame for that. The Word of God is one continuous revelation of His will and teaching for us. There is perfect continuity, not false contrast, within the stream of progressive revelation from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

The unfortunate word choice misrepresenting the Torah is the word “law”. Certainly, the Torah does contain some laws, known as statutes or ordinances. God never envisioned a lawless society for mankind, despite mankind's ever-increasing movement in that direction. The Torah also includes history, teaching, poetry, guidance, instruction, correction, important genealogical tables, promises from God, and much more. To define this broad category by the limiting word “law” creates a false impression and leads to false conclusions regarding its many purposes.

So why do so many Christians have a problem with “the law”? There is a widely held tradition that says that since we are “saved by grace and not by works” and that we are “not under the law” we have no relation to that law. This traditional interpretation is so common that in discussing the issue, it is an automatic reflexive, knee-jerk response from most Christians including pastors and teachers. It is as automatic and predictable as Pavlov's dog salivating when he rang the bell³. The problem is exacerbated

by the fact that the pastors and teachers who teach this are usually godly and righteous people whose teaching is otherwise correct and solid. Their disciples tend to “swallow whole” their teachings in total, thus making them unaware of subtle but significant errors within their teachings. It is much like the fish swallowing the “good worm” not realizing the unseen hook buried within. This phenomenon is alive and persistent within congregations, Bible schools, and Seminaries to this day.

This problem of swallowing error while feeding on otherwise “good food” works retroactively to the pastors and teachers themselves. They frequently spent many years studying from godly teachers to prepare for their ministries. Their teachers also were products of whole departments of “systematic theology” and the traditions of men. Thus, errors have a tendency to become “accepted theology” and fossilized in the minds of men. It was no different for the Pharisees in Mark 7. It is no different for theologians and Bible teachers today.

To seek a resolution to the questions regarding Torah observance for believers in Messiah, I have decided to bypass the usual ivory towers of academia with their theologians who are so skilled at weaving elaborate and lofty, erudite syllogisms, the many axioms of philosophical speculation and the varied postulations that emanate from the advanced mind of man. Instead,

I have decided to go to the ultimate source, the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Messiah, Himself.

What does the Messiah have to say about the place of the Torah (law) in the life of the believer? That would be a good place to start. In Matthew 5:17-19 Yeshua says, “Don’t think that I came to destroy the Torah or the Prophets. I didn’t come to destroy but to fulfill. For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the Torah until all things are accomplished. Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” This important and enlightening passage of Scripture provides many answers to the questions regarding the continuing validity and place of the Torah in the lives of believers.

Firstly, Yeshua boldly and emphatically declares His position on the Torah. He states that He did NOT come “to destroy the Torah or the Prophets”. The word “destroy” means just that, to “abolish, overthrow or render inoperative”.

He further states that He came to “fulfill”. However you attempt to interpret the word “fulfill”, Yeshua said it does NOT mean to “abolish, overthrow or render inoperative”.

The words “abolish” and “fulfill” are common rabbinic terms historically used to describe interpretations of the Torah given during argumentation over the meaning of a passage. If a rabbi gave an incorrect interpretation, it was said that he “abolished the Torah”. If he gave the correct interpretation, the rabbi would be said to have “fulfilled” the Torah, meaning he gave the Torah its proper, intended meaning.

Yeshua was saying that His intent with the Torah was NOT to give the wrong interpretation but to give the correct one. In no way should His words be misconstrued into saying He intended to “do away with” the Torah or make it inoperable. That, by the way, would disqualify Him from being the Messiah!

Secondly, Yeshua's positive view regarding the continuing authority and relevance of the Torah is further clarified in His saying “Until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the Torah until all things are accomplished.” That sounds like a pretty permanent position on the subject. Since heaven and earth are still here and “all things” have yet to be fully accomplished, we can accept the rest of His statement regarding that even the smallest letter or tiny pen stroke in the Torah still has force and relevance.

Thirdly, His next statement adds more clarity. He states, “Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least command-

ments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” The first observation to be made is that Yeshua is describing two different types of disciples, both of whom are “in the Kingdom of Heaven”. One disciple not only breaks the commandments but also teaches others to do so as well. This may be likened to the current believer, pastor, or teacher who disregards the commandments and teaches others to also disregard them, thus “destroying” the Torah. This disciple’s position in the kingdom is called “least”. The other disciple Yeshua describes is one who not only does the commandments but also teaches others to do them as well. This may be likened to a current believer, pastor, or teacher who correctly does the commandments and teaches others to also do them, thus “fulfilling” the Torah. This disciple’s position in the kingdom is called “great”.

Of particular importance to note is that both disciples are “in” the kingdom. Torah observance is never about gaining a right standing with God or getting “in” to the Kingdom. Torah observance is never about earning or meriting salvation. It is never about legalism. That is the treadmill of works-righteousness that Paul wrote so strongly against. Instead, what this passage teaches is that Torah observance is the way of life for the believer and the

fruit of that life will be manifested in those he or she teaches as they also embrace the Torah as the lifestyle of the redeemed.

So what about those passages by the Apostle Paul⁴ that seem to contradict the above conclusions by the Messiah? The first response to this question is to assure the reader that there is no disagreement between Yeshua and Paul. Period. The harmony of the Scriptures is intact. Paul, himself, said in 1 Corinthians 11:1 “Be imitators of me, even as I also am of Messiah.” If we ever think Paul is teaching something that is different from or in opposition to what Messiah taught, we need to go back to school and rethink how we have misinterpreted the writings of Paul.

Unfortunately for some, the pride of man has prevented some pastors, teachers, and theologians from doing just that. They have forged ahead with their errant teachings, ignored the harmony of the Scriptures, and developed a host of fanciful theories to justify their heresy. Let us not follow their example, but rather be faithful students of the Word of God.

Let us follow the example of the faithful Bereans in Acts 17:11, “Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” The Bereans were commended for receiving the word from Paul “with all readiness of mind” meaning they were teachable

but also that they were committed to “examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”

What were the Scriptures they used as their authority to examine the teachings of Paul but the Tanach, referred to as the Old Testament, including the Torah? If Paul had deviated from the authority of the Torah, his teachings would have been and should have been rejected. It's the same today. That leaves no room for “the New Paul”, “Paul seen in the New Light”, “Paul as the Inventor of Christianity” or the Paul that taught “Bondage to the Law ended when Christ made all men free”.

Let's examine a few Pauline Scriptures “with all readiness of mind” and “examine the Scriptures” like the Bereans. Paul's own example of Torah observance is instructive to use.

Acts 18:18 states, “Paul, having stayed after this many more days, took his leave of the brothers, and sailed from there for Syria, together with Priscilla and Aquila. He shaved his head in Cenchreae, **for he had a vow.**” This no doubt refers to the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6:5 “All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall come on his head, until the days are fulfilled in which he separates himself to the LORD. He shall be holy. He shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow long.” This was the vow that Paul intended to fulfill as described in Acts 21.

In Ephesians 6:2,3 we see Paul affirming the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with a promise: “that it may be well with you, and you may live long on the earth.”

In 1 Corinthians 9:8-10 Paul bases his argument regarding support for ministers on the very Torah of Moshe, “Do I speak these things according to the ways of men? Or doesn’t the Torah also say the same thing? For it is written in the Torah of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” Is it for the oxen that God cares, or does he say it assuredly for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because he who plows ought to plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should partake of his hope.” Paul claims the authority and applicability of the Torah of Moshe to the people and issues of his day. We would do well to follow suit.

In Acts 21, we see the Apostle Paul giving a ministry report to the Jerusalem Assembly with Ya’akov⁵ and all the elders present. The brothers praised God for the wonderful report Paul had given recounting all the fruit of his ministry among the gentiles. The leadership then informed Paul about the believing Jews there in Judea. In Acts 21:10 “They said to him, “You see, brother, how many **thousands** there are among the Judeans of those **who have believed**, and they are **all zealous for the Torah**.” The actual Greek word translated as thousands is the

word “myriad”. A single myriad is ten thousand. Two myriads would be twenty thousand. Many myriads, as the text states, would be at least three or more which would calculate to a minimum of thirty thousand, possibly more as the phrase “how many myriads” doesn’t have an upper limit! These large numbers of Jews in Judea are further described as those “who have believed” in the Messiah. Furthermore, it describes this large number of Messianic Jews as “all zealous for the Torah”. There is no indication in the text that Ya’akov and the other elders or Paul had any issue with these large numbers of Messianic Jews being Torah-observant. Had they held the anti-Torah theology so common today, then their actions would have been quite different. Instead, we see them affirming their faithfulness to the Torah.

The Jerusalem leaders went on to say that these believers had been told that Paul had been teaching all the Jews to apostatize from Moshe, not to circumcise their sons, and not to follow the traditions. If Paul had been such an anti-Torah zealot, as is claimed today, he would have agreed with what was said about him and would have said, “At least they got that right!” Upon hearing the news of these tens of thousands of Jewish believers in Yeshua being “all zealous for the Torah” he would have set his hair on fire and screamed that they needed to be stopped, that they were all wrong and needed correction.

Instead, what did Paul do? His subsequent action of what he actually did destroys the popular argument of Paul being anti-Torah. He knew, as did the Jerusalem leaders, that these charges against him were **false**. They were false charges. Let that sink in. He proved his faithfulness to the Torah by agreeing to the wisdom of the Jerusalem leaders by agreeing to go to the temple to offer the appropriate Torah-prescribed sacrifices to complete his Nazarite vow and to also pay for the expenses for four others under the same vow.

The point of doing this was to demonstrate his Torah faithfulness in a very public way so that, according to Acts 21:24, “Then **all will know** that there is **no truth** in the things that they have been informed about you, but that **you yourself also walk keeping the Torah.**” This action by Paul, as created by and approved by the Jerusalem leaders, should resonate throughout the ages as a definitive statement demonstrating Paul's position regarding Torah observance in the life of the believer.

There remains, however, an issue with Paul with respect to Torah observance. There are a host of Scriptures that, on the surface, appear to either downplay or even negate Torah observance.

- Romans 3:28 states, “We maintain therefore that a man

is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

- Romans 6:14 states, “For sin will not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.”
- Romans 7:4 states, “Therefore, my brothers, you also were made dead to the law through the body of Messiah.”
- Romans 7:6 states, “But now we have been discharged from the law.”
- Galatians 2:16 states, “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law.”
- Ephesians 2:15 states, “having abolished in his flesh the hostility, the law of commandments contained in ordinances.”

Wow, that’s only a partial list of the many Scriptures where Paul is viewed as being anti-Torah.

Now the waters get real muddy . . .

On the other hand, there are many New Covenant Scriptures that offer a very Torah-positive view.

- John 14:15 states, “If you love me, keep my commandments.”
- John 15:10 states, “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love.”
- Romans 3:31 states, “Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be! No, we establish the law.”
- Romans 7:12 states, “Therefore the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, righteous, and good.”
- Romans 7:14 states, “For we know that the law is spiritual”
- Romans 7:16 states, “I consent to the law that it is good.”
- Romans 7:22 states, “For I delight in God’s Torah after the inward person.”
- I Corinthians 7:19 states, “Circumcision⁶ is nothing, and uncircumcision⁷ is nothing, but what matters is keeping God’s commandments.”

Wow, that is also quite a list of Scriptures. What are we to make of this apparent conflict within the Word of God? Is the Bible unreliable? Does it contain errors? Is it a broken compass incapable of showing us the true North? Was the Apostle Paul confused or was he just pandering to the crowd? The answer, as always, is found in one word . . . context.

Those verses that, on the surface, appear to be anti-Torah are not so at all when properly examined in context.

Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16 correctly affirm that justification, that is, right standing before God, is by grace and not by works of law. This stands as a rebuke to a legalistic treadmill of works-righteousness to attain and keep one's standing before God.

Romans 6:14 can be best understood by looking at the word “under”. It is true that we, as believers, are no longer “under” the condemnation of the Torah. Messianic author David Stern sees this verse as referring to “legalism” and I believe he is correct. If we are in the grace of God we are no longer “under” the bondage to legalism that characterized our previous relationship to God's Torah.

Romans 6:14, 7:4, 7:6, and Ephesians 2:15 all echo Paul's solid teaching against misuse of the Torah by perverting it into a legalistic, works-righteousness document.

Another important point to remember when attempting to understand Paul's writings is that his epistles or letters were written as responses to issues brought to his attention to address. Unfortunately, we do not have the questions, only Paul's responsive answers, which sometimes do inform as to the issue, but not always.

If we miss the issue, we will probably go down a false path in interpreting the writings of Paul.

When I studied law, I learned the standard formula used when briefing legal cases. It is called I.R.A.C. which stands for Issue, Rule, Application, and Conclusion. The Issue is of prime importance. If you get the issue wrong, then, even if you cite all manners of rules and find all manners of relevant applications, your conclusion may sound thoroughly logical and internally consistent but will be completely wrong.

I share this to remind us of the need to seek understanding regarding the various issues Paul was addressing in his writings. It is critical to realize that when Paul is speaking about the misuse of the Torah as a legalistic document as a means of obtaining salvation, it is understandable that he would present a rather harsh rebuke of such error. When he is speaking of the Torah as the God-inspired teaching for the lifestyle of the redeemed, which it is, Paul's words come across as very Torah-positive. It all depends on the context, doesn't it?

-
1. Chumash is related to the word “chamesh” which is Hebrew for the number five
 2. From the Greek for “seventy” referring to the seventy Hebrew scholars who did the translation of the Torah into Greek around 250 BCE. It is sometimes written as LXX.
 3. This was a famous experiment known as “Classical Conditioning” where Ivan Pavlov demonstrated that if you expose a dog to a bell tone every time he was fed, eventually he would involuntarily salivate in anticipation of eating even when the bell was sounded without providing food.
 4. For a thorough and in-depth scholarly work on the Apostle Paul I highly recommend the book titled “The Letter Writer” by Tim Hegg available at www.torahresource.com and Amazon.
 5. The name of the leader of the Jerusalem assembly and the brother of Yeshua should be rendered Ya'akov, certainly not James as is commonly done.
 6. Saying circumcision was shorthand for saying “being Jewish”.

7. Saying uncircumcision was shorthand for saying “being gentile”.