

# WHAT DOES THE TERM “UNDER THE LAW” MEAN?

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## WHAT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY TEACHES

Does the term “under [the] law” as found in a dozen places in the writings of the Apostle Paul mean that the “*law*” of *Moses* (correctly translated as “Torah [instructions or precepts] of Yahweh”) was abrogated, nullified or done away with in part or in whole and therefore is partially or totally irrelevant (depending on one's theology) to a “New Covenant” believer in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah?

Many Christians have the notion that Messianics (those returning to the Hebraic/Jewish roots of the Christian faith) are returning to or going back *under [the] law* in order to procure and keep salvation. They believe that the “Old Covenant,” “Mosaic system” was a salvation-by-works-based system (properly referred to as *legalism*) from which Yeshua and the Apostle Paul came to free “New Covenant” believers. So, therefore, why would anyone “New Covenant” believer want to return to that, it is reasoned.

Most Christians who accuse Messianics of going back “under the law” would be hard-pressed to correctly define the term they are throwing out as a sort of verbal arrow or pejorative epithet, or to cite where in Scripture the term is found and who used it and the Scriptural context in which it was used. In fact, it is probably safe to say that most who use this term as a verbal assault don't even care to know where in Scripture it is found, who said it, how and why it was used and what it means. They just *feel* that the Messianic is wrong, that the “Old Covenant” and its “laws” are negative, against us, and are passé. Does this not make, therefore, their objection, more or less, a knee-jerk one using a buzz-word or cliché that they have picked up during their tenure as a Christian being exposed to antinomian (anti-Torah) theological rhetoric? Therefore, as a *feeling-based* reaction their objection is not based in logic or a rational, which is a function of the cognitive or reasoning faculties of the mind. Therefore, they are not able to give a reasoned explanation or defense for why they believe as they do. I have personally witnessed this scenario play itself out (sadly) numerous times.

## WHERE IN SCRIPTURE IS THE TERM *UNDER THE LAW* FOUND?

- Ro 3:19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are **under the law**: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.
- Ro 6:14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not **under the law**, but under grace.
- Ro 6:15 What then? shall we sin, because we are not **under the law**, but under grace? God forbid.
- 1 Cor. 9:20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are **under the law**, as **under the law**, that I might gain them that are **under the law**;
- 1 Cor. 9:21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but **under the law** to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

- Gal. 3:23 But before faith came, we were kept **under the law**, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.
- Gal. 4:4 But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made **under the law**,
- Gal. 4:5 To redeem them that were **under the law**, that we might receive the adoption of sons.
- Gal. 4:21 Tell me, ye that desire to be **under the law**, do ye not hear the law?
- Gal. 5:18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not **under the law**.

### WHAT WAS PAUL'S VIEW OF THE *TORAH* (“LAW”)?

In all of these cases the Apostle Paul is the author. Before we proceed let us determine how the Apostle Paul (or Rav Sha'ul, his Hebrew name) viewed “the law,” hereafter correctly referred to by the correct Hebrew term *Torah* (meaning Yahweh's *instructions, teachings or precepts in righteousness*). Was he a proponent or opponent of the *Torah*? Several Scriptural quotations from Paul's own pen should suffice to answer this question:

- Rom. 7:12 Wherefore the law [Torah] is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.
- Rom. 7:14 For we know that the law [Torah] is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.
- Rom. 7:22 For I delight in the law [Torah] of God after the inward man...
- Rom. 6:1-2 1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin [i.e., violation of the laws/Torah of Yahweh, see 1 Jn. 3:4], that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?
- Rom. 3: 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. (Romans was written in about A.D. 56)
- 1 Tim. 1:8 But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully...(First Timothy was written just before Paul's martyrdom in about A.D. 66)
- Gal. 2:17 But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners [i.e., violators of the law/Torah], is therefore Christ the minister of sin [lawlessness/Torahlessness]? God forbid. (Galatians was written from A.D. 55 to 56)

Toward the end of Paul's life and ministry when, according to Christian theology, Paul was supposed to have already liberated the first-century believers from the “shackles and bondage” of the law/Torah we read in Acts the following:

- Acts 20:20-24 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe [in Yeshua the Messiah]; and they are all zealous of the law [Torah]: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. (Written in about A.D. 58 to 60)
- Acts 25: 8 While he answered for himself, Neither against the law [Torah] of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all. (Paul made this statement in a court of law about A.D. 62.)

- Acts 28:17 And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers. [i.e., the Torah] yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. (Written about AD 63)

Though briefly stated and not exhaustively treated, hopefully the above passages will help to dispel the idea that Paul came to liberate Christians/Gentiles from any responsibility toward the Torah as given by Yahweh to Moses.

## WAS PAUL BOTH *FOR* AND *AGAINST* THE TORAH (“LAW”)?

If we believe, at face value, the above-cited passages, can there be any doubt that Paul was consistent in his theology? He did not keep Torah and speak positively toward it, and all at the same time fail to live it and teach against it. Either he kept it or he didn't! Either he taught that it was valid or he did not. He did not waffle back and forth between Torah obedience and Torahlessness. Quite to the contrary, he warned that in the last days spiritual delusion would come upon the saints of Yahweh, that they would fall away from the truth of Scripture (i.e., Torah literally meaning *Yahweh's instructions, teachings, precepts in righteousness*) and turn to a Torahless gospel message which he refers to as the “mystery of iniquity [the Greek word is *anomia* which means *without Torah*]” which would be championed by the very man of sin himself (1 Thes. 2:1-12).

## LET'S LOOK CLOSELY AT THE TERM *UNDER [THE] LAW*

Now, let us critically analyze the term *under the law [Torah]*. Is the Christian idea that *being under Torah* or *having to obey* the Torah (i.e. the precepts and righteous teachings of Yahweh often referred to as the “laws” of Moses), a legalism or a works based system to earn favor or merit with Yahweh a Jewish concept? Did the Jews of old view Torah-obedience as the means to gain Yahweh's favor, and hence earn their salvation and a place in the world to come? Does Jewish tradition teach this? Does the Tenakh (OT) itself teach this? In other words, were the ancient Jews “under” law or “under” grace?

## THE ANCIENT JEWS WERE NEVER “UNDER” TORAH (AS CHRISTIANS VIEW IT)

Let's establish the fact, and then prove it, that the Jews have never considered themselves to be “under the law/Torah” in the sense that Paul is using it to argue his point in the Scriptures where he uses the term *under the law*. It is interesting to note that word *grace*, meaning *unmerited favor* (which in Hebrew is the word *chesed*, *Strong's* #2516 and 2517) appears 251 times in the Tenakh (OT) which is five times more than the word *grace* is found in the Renewed Covenant (NT). Here are some examples of its usage in the Tenakh as well as other Hebrew words which express the idea of *grace* or *unmerited favor*:

- Psa. 23: 6 Surely goodness and mercy [chesed] shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.
- Exod. 33:18-19 And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.
- Jer. 9:24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness [chesed], judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.
- Psa. 145:8 The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy [chesed].
- Psa. 86:15 But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and

plenteous in mercy [chesed] and truth.

- Gen. 6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.
- Exod. 33:12,17 And Moses said unto the LORD, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight...And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name.
- Jud. 6:17 And he said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, then shew me a sign that thou talkest with me.
- Jer. 31:2 Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest.

## IS KEEPING TORAH A BURDEN OR A CURSE?

Many Christians have been unwittingly inculcated with the idea that Torah (or what they call *the Law of Moses*) is a burden and a curse to all who follow it since is it not impossible for man to live by it? And therefore, as Christian theological reasoning continues, if it is impossible to follow all of its tenets, it is nearly impossible not to violate “the Law” (i.e. sin) and is therefore a curse. This line of reasoning begs the following question: How could a just and loving Elohim demand of his people Israel to live up to a standard (i.e., Torah) that he knew was impossible for humans to obey, and knowing this, curse them for falling short? Yet this is what, in essence is taught! No wonder the idea has prevailed that the God of the “Old Testament” is mean, harsh, sadistic and merciless.

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth! To wit, let's establish some basic truths about Torah:

- 1) The Torah is not impossible for man to keep. This is stated in Deuteronomy 30: 11-14:

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

- 2) The Torah is for the benefit of man and not vise versa. The Jews teach this in their Talmud (Yoma 85b) and so did Yeshua in Mark 2:27. The Apostle Paul call the Torah “good (beneficial)” in Romans 7:12.
- 3) We are called to live *in* Torah, not *under* Torah (Lev. 18:5).
- 4) Living *in* Torah brings life. Living contrary to Torah brings death. See the blessings and curses for Torah obedience versus Torah disobedience listed in Deuteronomy 28. Deuteronomy 30:15 states:

See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

- 5) Other benefits to obeying Torah include:

- Obey it that life may go well for you (Deut. 4:40; 6:18)
- Long life on the earth (same as above).
- Victory over your enemies (Deut. 6:19).
- It will be your righteousness (Deut/ 6:25).
- Yahweh will love, bless, multiply you in every way (Deut. 7:11-14).
- Physical healing and freedom from diseases (Deut. 7:15).
- Torah is your life (Deut. 30:15-16; 32:52)
- Blessings (Deut. 28:1-14).

### **PAUL'S WRITINGS EASILY TWISTED, ACCORDING TO PETER**

Now let's analyze how Paul uses the term *under the law* in his writings. Paul uses this term in a negative sense to teach against legalism which is the wrong use of Torah; that is, attempting to pervert the use of Torah into a system of do's and don'ts for the purpose of EARNING, MERITING or KEEPING one's salvation through obedience to Torah's commands. Because neither the Hebrew nor the Greek languages have sufficient linguistic terms to express the concept of *legalism* Paul was forced to use various (sometimes awkward and easily misconstrued) phrases to explain this concept. If these phrases were misunderstood and wrongly interpreted one could be easily led to believe that Paul was against Torah. Peter alludes to this very thing in his epistle:

And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness (2 Pet. 3:15-17).

It is interesting to note that the Apostle Peter, in the previous chapter, is warning the believers against false teachers. In verse 21 of chapter 2 Peter says that these false teachers have “[turned] from the holy commandment delivered unto them.” This could mean only one thing: they were turning from the revelation of the Written Torah in Tenakh as well as the Word of Elohim made flesh: the Living Torah, which is Yeshua the Messiah.

### **UNDER *THE* TORAH [LAW] OR UNDER TORAH [LAW]?**

Another important point to note about the usage of the term *under the law [Torah]* in the Renewed Covenant (NT) is that in every place it is used (Rom. 3:19; 6:14, 15; 1 Cor. 9:20,21; Gal. 3:23; 4:4,5,21; 5:18) the definite article *the* is not to be found in the original Greek. This can be easily verified by checking a Greek Interlinear which shows the Greek language with the English translation underneath the Greek text. In our English Bible's, the word *the* has been added. Does this change the meaning? Yes! Ask yourself what the difference in meaning, in a Scriptural context is between the term *law* and *the law*? It is the same difference between the term *car* and *the car*. The first is indefinite and is speaking about any law or car out there, while the second is definite and is referring to a specific law or car. As we have asserted above, Paul is taking a stand against any form of legalism (or a man-made system of works) of which performance-based acceptance is the core belief. So the phrase *under the law* should be properly translated in your Bibles as *under law*. The English translators by adding the definite article *the* to the word *law* steered the meaning of the word *law* toward Torah. In reality, *works of law* is not referring to Torah, but rather is a phrase referring to any man-made system of works of which performance-based acceptance is a core belief. In other words, Paul is referring to a misuse or perversion of Torah into a works-based, legalistic system which it was never

intended to be. (See *Take Hold* by Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz, p. 127 and *Torah Rediscovered* by Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz, p. 130).

## SAVED BY WORKS OR FAITH: THE PROPER USE VS. MISUSE OF TORAH

The wrong use of Torah, that is, perverting it into a legalistic system of performance-for-acceptance is equivalent to the following equation:

- SALVATION=WORKS+FAITH/GRACE This is man's way, the way of works (Gal. 4:21-31). This approach places the Sinaitic Covenant first or before the Abrahamic Covenant which declares that salvation is based on grace and faith, not on works.
- Yahweh's way, the way of Sarah and the proper use of Torah teaches that:  
SALVATION=GRACE THROUGH FAITH leading to or producing GOOD WORKS (by the help and power of Yahweh's Spirit living in us, and not through our own human efforts and will power.

The Tanakh (OT) teaches that no one's works suffice to earn him being declared righteous by Yahweh: "...[F]or in your sight no one alive will be considered righteous" (Psa. 143:2, *The Complete Jewish Bible*; also see *The Complete Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 343, by David Stern).

Finally, let's look actually at the Greek word *under* as it is used in the phrase *under law*. *The Complete Jewish Bible* (by David Stern) translates the phrase *under [the] law* as *under legalism* (See Stern's *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 344 where he explains why). Stern explains here that the word *under* is the Greek word *upo* which means *controlled by* (as in *under the control of* or *in subjection to sin*, see Rom. 3:9). He reasons that if one is not *controlled by* or *in subjection to* law/legalism, then how is one *under, controlled by* or *in subjection to* grace? In the same sense that we have accepted Yeshua's yoke which is *easy and light to be under* (Mt. 11:28-30), this is in contrast to the yoke of legalism which is not easy and light to be under.

Stern contends that Yahweh's people are living *en* (i.e. within the framework of Torah, but not to be *upo* (i.e., *in subjection to*) legalism. Yahweh's people are in a faith/trust relationship with him and always have been under grace and "under" Torah (a gracious subjection), but never under legalism (a harsh subjection) (*Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 374).