

What Does “Under the Law” Really Mean?

by J.K. McKee posted 01 August, 2003 www.tnnonline.net

Those of you who have been in the Messianic community for any elongated period of time know that we can be a controversial group of people. Those of us who were raised in mainstream Christianity and have left the Church have questioned much of what we were taught in the past, testing it against Scripture. While Christianity gave many of us a foundational grounding in the Word of God, and indeed presented us the truth of the good news of salvation available in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), it is a human religious system, and as such did present us with some non-Biblical teachings.

One of the errant teachings of much of Christianity, which has re-arisen in the past few years as the Messianic movement has gotten larger, is the belief that Yeshua the Messiah came to abolish the Torah or the Law of Moses. Those of us who have come into the conservative Messianic community of faith¹ do not believe this to be true. We evidence this in our lifestyle by practicing many things that Christianity has deemed unimportant for the Body of Messiah, but likewise were adhered to by Yeshua's early followers. We keep the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, we celebrate the Biblical holidays of Leviticus 23, and we follow the kosher dietary laws. These are just a few Torah practices that most believe are unimportant.

Now this I do *not choose*, as some in the Messianic community do: to vehemently criticize, berate, and harass Christians who do not feel the same way as I do about these issues. I have taken my fair share of negative comments and realize that some are not ready to receive the message. All things happen in the Lord's timing. But, one of the reasons why there can be problems between Christians and Messianics is because many Messianics do not know how to properly defend their faith and practice. Rather than examining Scripture, insulting terms are usually thrown around and fights ensue.² This is most evident when Christians who oppose Torah obedience claim that we are “under the Law”—and that this is not a position that Believers who have received the Messiah should want to find themselves. Sadly, in our opinion, much of the Messianic handling of this one phrase has been anything but proper. We must be able to *properly* respond to this.

This article addresses the phrase “under the Law,” how it is used in Scripture, and what it really means in its appropriate context in light of what both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures tell us. We will examine Yeshua's words on the matter of the Torah. We will examine how a variety of Christians and Messianic theologians have handled this term. We will then test these claims against Scripture. When you finish reading, it is our sincere prayer that the next time a Christian says that you as a Messianic are “under the Law,” you will be able to properly respond to his claim.

Blessings and Curses

Before we examine the phrase “under the Law,” it is imperative that we understand the importance that the Torah plays in the life of a born again Believer who is maturing in his or her faith. Why was Ancient Israel given the Torah?

Our Heavenly Father says in Deuteronomy 7:6, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” The Hebrew word *qodesh* (קֹדֶשׁ) specifically means, “*apartness, sacredness, holiness*” (BDB).³ What this means is that Israel is supposed to be separate from all the other peoples of the world. This was to come about by Israel keeping God's commandments that were contained in His Instruction, the Torah:

¹ Conservative, i.e., the Messianic groupings that do not have considerable attachments to mainstream Christianity and encourage Torah observance, rather than dismiss the Torah as unnecessary or unimportant.

² Of course, we do note that in our experience as a Messianic ministry that we have encountered Christians who are not interested in polite, reasoned dialogue either, but rather in harassing debate. Dealing with these sorts of individuals is often a fruitless endeavor.

³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 871.

“The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will be afraid of you. The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you” (Deuteronomy 28:9-11).

If Israel is faithful to honor and keep the Torah, then Israel is promised by God to be “establish[ed]...as a holy people,” and it will lead to Israel’s greatness. The Hebrew verb *qum* (קום) appears in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice) and has a variety of possible applications in this text, including: “*cause to arise, raise*,” “*fig. raise (to dignity, power)*,” and “*erect, build*” (BDB).⁴ This is an indication that if Israel keeps the commandments that they will become a great people and be blessed by the Lord. Deuteronomy 4:5-6 specifically says,

“See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”

Notice that by Israel’s obeying the Torah, it would be said of them that “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” If there is anything that we need today, it is wise people who know Yeshua and can understand things with the power of the Holy Spirit. They need to be able to discern things based first and foremost on Scripture.

But what if the people do not heed the words of the Torah and disobey? Before Moses’ death at the end of Deuteronomy, the assembly of Israel is taken to Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. They are divided up and twelve distinct blessings and curses are pronounced upon the tribes (Deuteronomy 27:1-26). They end with a final word: “Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’” (Deuteronomy 27:26).

This is not a light usage of *Amein* (אָמֵן), or “*verily, truly*” (BDB).⁵ To paraphrase, the people of Israel are told that if they do not allow the Torah to be upheld and be established as their ruling principles, that they will be cursed because of their sin. In their being cursed, they would find themselves subject to the Torah’s penalties and would thus no longer be “under mercy” or “under grace.” Their answer to God’s request is *so be it*. These are not light words by any means.

Scriptural history and the nature of man reveal that Ancient Israel was not faithful in keeping the Torah. In fact, both the Lord and Moses knew this would happen. Deuteronomy chs. 29 and 30 discuss the judgment and curses that have been placed on all of Israel because of disobedience. However, though Israel has been disobedient to the Torah, there are still blessings to be gained by following it. This is what our Father has wanted all along. He gave His people the Torah and its commandments to be a blessing to us to demonstrate His love for us. Because of our love toward our Heavenly Father, we should then naturally follow what He has told us to do:

“Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, *and* to keep the LORD’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

The Lord says that His commandments are *l’tov lakha* (לְטוֹב לְךָ), “*for your benefit*” (ATS). The Torah was not given as something to place people in legalistic bondage or be a yoke to them, but rather to provide those who are a part of His people the best way to succeed on Planet Earth, both spiritually *and* physically.

Of course, over the centuries since Moses was given the task of delivering the Torah until Yeshua, there was disobedience to it. After the people of Israel entered into the Promised Land, there were struggles with how to implement the Torah as “the Law of the Land.” Israel was at its

⁴ Ibid., 878.

⁵ Ibid., 53.

pinnacle as a Kingdom during the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, but because of Solomon's idolatry *and disobedience* to the Torah, the Kingdom split. The Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim was taken captive by Assyria because of its disobedience, and has been corporately spread into the nations/Gentiles until this day. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken into Babylonian exile shortly thereafter, but returned to the Land of Israel when Babylon was conquered by Persia. The Jewish people, being the sole torchbearers of Israel for almost 2,500 years, have taken the Torah very seriously because of this judgment. As all Israel is to be restored in the Last Days according to Biblical prophecy, we see non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua beginning to take the Torah very seriously. This, as you can imagine, is causing quite a stir.

What did Yeshua say?

By the time Yeshua walked the Earth, there were various parties in the Jewish community that approached the Torah differently. The two parties most featured in the Apostolic Scriptures are the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sadducees only accepted the Written Torah, Genesis-Deuteronomy, as being relevant Scripture, and did not regard what is considered the rest of the Tanach (Old Testament), or the Prophets and Writings, as applicable. As a result, they had a very limited view of the world and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead,⁶ angels, demons, or miracles. The Pharisees, in contrast, considered the entire Tanach as applicable Scripture, and they believed in the resurrection, angels, demons, and miracles. But they also believed in the validity of the Oral Torah or Oral Law, which composed various oral traditions carried down over the centuries which gave explanations to the commandments. This Oral Law was later written in the 200s C.E. and is what we now largely know as the Mishnah.⁷ The Pharisees and the Sadducees made up the religious council known as the Sanhedrin.

Many people who read the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament believe that the Pharisees are all antagonists against Yeshua. Of course, many of them were, but so were many Sadducees. Yet at the same time, many other of His followers were Pharisees—and indeed, Yeshua's theology and that of His Disciples was closer to that of the Pharisees than that of the Sadducees. In fact, the Apostle Paul did indeed proclaim before the Sanhedrin, *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι) or *ani P'rush* (אֲנִי פְרוּשׁ, UBSHNT), "I am a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). Surprisingly to some Paul does not say, "I *was* a Pharisee."

If you have an understanding of the First Century times in which Yeshua lived, and have committed yourself to Torah study, you will have an appropriate background of the Gospel narratives and will discover that when Yeshua debates with the Pharisees, it is most often over Torah interpretation and application, not "doing away" with commandments as is often viewed.

So what were Yeshua's words on the Torah? Consider what He says in Matthew 5:17-19 in His Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

These three verses of Scripture are of primary importance for us who believe that Yeshua is the Messiah and that He is the Word of God made flesh—meaning that by living a perfect life He followed the Torah perfectly and is without sin. Because Yeshua is our example for living, all Scripture regarding the Torah *must be interpreted through these words*. No matter how hard it may seem to be, or how unpopular it may be, those claims that the Torah has been done away with

⁶ Matthew 22:23.

⁷ It is said the Oral Torah was given to Moses, but this is certainly debatable. Some oral teaching or instruction was certainly given to Moses that over time has been added to. The Mishnah contains valuable commentary on the Torah and historical information that should be consulted in theological exegesis, but undoubtedly should not be blindly followed.

and that it is no longer relevant for today *must be reconciled to these words*, that is if Yeshua is indeed God and His words are final.

What is Yeshua saying?

When the Messiah says, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” He is telling us that His mission is *not* to do away with the Law of Moses, contrary to what some theologians may have said in the past. The Greek verb translated here as “abolish” is *kataluō* (καταλύω), meaning, “to end the effect or validity of someth., **put an end to**” (BDAG).⁸ He says quite clearly “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets” (KJV).

Yeshua tells us what His mission is regarding the Torah: “I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” The Greek verb *plēroō* (πληρώω) means “to make full, to fill, to fill up,” “to carry into effect, bring to realization, realize” (Thayer).⁹ What this means is that in “fulfilling” the Torah, Yeshua came to live it properly as our example. Many do not believe this to be true, and instead believe that the Messiah “fulfilled” the Torah only in a prophetic sense, and that it is not relevant to be followed today. But *fulfill is by no means a synonym for abolish!* Yeshua’s next words indicate the correct context of the passage and what He is actually telling us:

“For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

This verse is confusing for some, because the KJV says “till all be fulfilled.” However, the verb translated as “fulfilled” in the KJV of v. 18 is not *plēroō*, but is rather *gignomai* (γίγνομαι), “to become” (Thayer).¹⁰ “Fulfilled” is a misleading translation, and the Messiah says until all is **accomplished** that the smallest letter and stroke, or “jot and tittle” (KJV) of the Torah, will not pass away. These are references to the minutest serifs and letters of the Hebrew *alef-bet*. He makes a reference to Heaven and Earth passing away before the Torah passes away. Are Heaven and Earth still here? Yes. So why do we have those who say that the Torah is no longer for today? Have they somehow *missed it*?

We know that the validity and relevance of the Torah continues to this day as Yeshua concludes His remarks with the following:

“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:18-19).

The Messiah attaches rewards to those who keep the commandments of the Torah and teach them to others, and penalties to those who do not keep the commandments and teach others to break them. The word “least” or *elachistos* (ἐλάχιστος) is of extreme importance. AMG defines this as, “The least, minimal in magnitude,” “in number and quantity,” “in rank or dignity,” “in weight or importance.”¹¹ What does this mean? Does it mean that many who have taught that the Torah is no longer to be followed are going to be given few rewards in the Kingdom?

It is not our place as humans to judge the (eternal) status of anyone, but we must heed the Lord’s words and endeavor to follow His admonition.

The Torah was originally given to Israel to be a blessing. Those who followed the Torah and obeyed its commandments would reap the rewards of obedience. Those who disregarded the Torah and disobeyed its commandments would be cursed. In today’s vernacular, we might say that the Torah can either be your “best friend” or your “worst enemy.” As Believers, we are indeed forgiven of our sin when we fall—but we are to strive *not to sin*. The Apostle John writes, “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3:24).

⁸ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 522.

⁹ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp 517-518.

¹⁰ Ibid., 115.

¹¹ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 561.

So how does not being “under the Law” factor into this?

What Christians Have Said About “Under the Law”

Before we explain the phrase “under the Law” from a Messianic perspective, it is important that we understand what the traditional Christian handling of “under the Law” means, so we can know what to respond to.

In the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Updated Edition (NASU), which is a widely used and respected literal Christian translation, the terms “under the Law” or “under Law” appear in eleven verses.¹² Further on we discuss how some verses cannot be literally translated with “under Law.” The example that we have chosen to see the standard Christian interpretation is Romans 6:14-15:

“For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!” (NASU).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, edited by Dallas Theological Seminary theologians John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, states the following concerning these verses:

“The mention that believers are ‘under grace’ (v. 14) raised another aberrant idea that the apostle refuted. The question is, **Shall we sin because we are... under grace instead of the Law?...** Paul’s response was the same as before (v. 2): **By no means!**”¹³

This commentary equates being “under the Law” as observing the Torah, by using the description “under grace *instead of* Law.” It says that when Paul says that Believers are “under grace” they are no longer obligated to observe the Torah, but at the same time that Believers are not permitted to sin. But what defines sin? The commentary goes on to say, “this can be done by following Paul’s instructions.”¹⁴

But what does Paul himself say in Romans 3:20? “[F]or through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.” The Apostle John further says, “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4), so sin is violation of the Torah. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul admonishes, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” How can these unbelievers be practitioners of lawlessness if they are not breaking, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the Torah of God?

This Christian interpretation of “under the Law” comes up short because both Paul and John testify that sin is defined by the Torah, and to avoid lawlessness. As the Torah demonstrates, if you disobey the commandments then you will be cursed. If we are instructed by Paul not to sin, and the Scriptural definition of sin is defined as lawlessness or disobedience to the Torah, then Paul is actually telling us not to transgress the Law of Moses contrary to what many in Christianity may believe.

Christian theologians need to examine the whole of Scripture, especially when telling us that Believers are to exclusively follow Paul’s instructions. When Paul says, “For this, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’” (Romans 13:9), he was not just “making this stuff up.” He was quoting directly from the Torah. And if Paul still upholds the commandments of the Torah as being valid and relevant instruction for the Believer, then what does “under the Law” really mean?

The standard Christian interpretation of “under the Law” as being obedient to the Torah also comes up short because of the position of unbelievers in this paradigm. Are unbelievers who have rejected salvation in the Messiah “under Law” or “under grace”? Considering that Paul’s letters were written to regions of the Roman Empire where the non-Jewish, non-believing populace was not following the Law of Moses, this is something that needs to be seriously considered. Is not

¹² Romans 2:12; 3:19; 6:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:20-21; Galatians 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18.

¹³ John A. Whitmer, “Romans,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 464.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

being “under grace” something that is *only available* for those who know the Messiah and have been redeemed? Keep in mind that when you disobey the Torah you are cursed. Would not the non-believing pagans in the communities to which Paul was writing be cursed by their sin: their idolatry, fornication, homosexuality, etc.?

If these pagans are not “under grace,” then what are they? They cannot be “under nothing.” Paul says in Romans 1:25, concerning the heathen, that “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” Romans 1 in its entirety discusses how these people are turned over to sin. What is the status of these people? We often do not see a satisfactory answer by Christian theologians.

What Messianics Have Said About “Under the Law”

What has the Messianic handling of the term “under the Law” been? Those Messianics who believe that Torah obedience is something that should be encouraged in the Body of Messiah have had a substantial amount of Christian teaching relating to the Law of Moses, that is engrained in the minds of many, to address. As a result, there are varied responses to what “under the Law” really means.

Most of the Messianics that I have encountered turn to the works of Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern, author of several books, including the *Jewish New Testament* and *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. He explains his opinion that the Greek phrase “*upo nomon*,” which is translated as “under Law” in most Bibles, more accurately means “in subjection to the system which results in perverting the *Torah* into legalism.”¹⁵ Using the example of Romans 6:14-15 given above, he translates these verses,

“For sin will not have authority over you; because you are not under legalism but under grace. Therefore, what conclusion should we reach? ‘Let’s go on sinning, because we’re not under legalism but under grace?’ Heaven forbid!”

Justifying this translation, Stern remarks in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* that “The word twice translated ‘under,’ *upo*, means ‘controlled by’...or ‘in subjection to,’”¹⁶ which leads him to conclude that the best translation of *nomos* (νομός) is “legalism,” rather than the traditional translation “Law,” which would mean “Torah.” While there is without doubt an understanding that perverting the Torah of God into legalism is wrong, critics of the Messianic movement have attacked Stern for subjectively rendering *nomos* as “legalism” in some places, and then as “Torah” in others. While Stern’s works have certainly helped the Messianic community, it is notable that his translation is not literal, and thus cannot be used as a prime source work in refuting any antinomianism that one may encounter.

I also believe that many Messianics have misdiagnosed the problem of why Christians are hesitant to adopt a Torah observant lifestyle. Messianic Jewish authors Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz comment in their work *Torah Rediscovered*, “First and foremost, the Torah is ‘God’s teaching.’...The word does not mean ‘law’; it means ‘teaching.’”¹⁷ They further state that Bible translators could not just “break out of their centuries-old tradition” and “have chosen a translation of ‘law’ where *Torah* would have been the accurate translation.”¹⁸

The root problem of why Christians are hesitant to following the Torah is said by many Messianics to be that both *torah* (תּוֹרָה) in the Hebrew Scriptures and *nomos* (νομός) in the Greek Scriptures should be translated as *Torah* and not *law*. We should not doubt by any means that the Hebrew word *torah*—derived from the Hebrew verb *yarah* (יָרָה), meaning to “throw, cast,” “shoot (arrows),” and “direct, teach, instruct” (BDB)¹⁹—more accurately means “Teaching”²⁰ or

¹⁵ David H. Stern, trans., *Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), xxiv.

¹⁶ David H. Stern, *New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 374.

¹⁷ Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (Lakewood, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 1996), 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹ BDB, 435.

“Instruction,” or just plain “Torah.” There have been some serious misunderstandings regarding its translation as “Law.” But, I cannot concur that this is the primary problem.

It is only a modern phenomenon whereby the word “law” has come to have a negative connotation among Christians, as law and order are good things. The Jewish Rabbis who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek three centuries before the Messiah thought the same thing, and thought that *nomos*, the Greek word for “law,” was the best rendering for *torah*. This carried into the Apostolic Scriptures. Perhaps if they had known that in the future “law” would come to have a negative meaning they would have chosen something else, but we have to live with their decision.

To diagnose the translation of *torah* as *nomos* or *law* as being the primary problem is not proper, especially when the term “law” is used frequently in many Jewish Torah commentaries, and even the 1917 Jewish Press Society version to translate *torah*. It would not even occur to most Christian translators to render *torah* or *nomos* as “Torah” in English versions of the New Testament.

The primary problem of why many Christians do not want to adopt a Torah obedient lifestyle is something that many people are not willing to see, including many in the Messianic community. This reason is humanity’s inherent disobedience or *rebellion* toward God, which results in sin and being accursed just as the Torah tells us. Consider that Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” This epistle of his was written in about 50-52 C.E., some twenty years after the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven. By the end of the First Century, lawlessness or disobedience to the Torah grew to such an extent in the *ekklēsia*, that we can understand the Apostle John’s poignant words where he says, “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3-4). John directly tells His audience that if they do not follow the Torah, but at the same time claim to know the Messiah, then they were speaking lies.

We are now in an appropriate position to understand what “under the Law” really means.

What Scripture Says About “Under the Law”

The phrase “under Law” or “under the Law” is used in eleven verses in the NASU, which is a widely used translation by many Christians, and is widely respected in the Messianic community as well. We will use this translation as our base of comparison for properly understanding what this phrase means.

In the Greek, the phrase “under Law” is *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμον). *Hupo* (ὑπό), when appearing with an accusative case noun (indicating direct object), can mean “under, below; under the authority of” (CGEDNT).²¹ *Nomos* is defined by AMG as “spoken in the NT mostly of the Mosaic statutes,”²² meaning the Torah, but it is notable that it can also mean, “law as decreed by a state and set up as the standard for the administration of justice” (Vine).²³ We point this out because *nomos* can also refer to Greek or Roman law, or extra-Biblical Jewish law.²⁴ James H. Nichols, Jr., in his translation of Plato’s *Gorgias*, indicates, “Nomos, translated ‘law’ or ‘convention,’ includes written law, unwritten law, custom, and prevalent opinion.”²⁵ Keep this in mind when you see the word “law” in Scripture.

²⁰ The NJPS version of the Tanach consistently renders *torah* as “Teaching.”

²¹ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 188.

²² Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1015.

²³ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1968), 643.

²⁴ Modern Hebrew translations of the New Testament render *hupo nomon* as *yad ha’Torah* (יד־הַתּוֹרָה), which would literally mean “hand of the Torah,” understood as meaning the power of the Torah and being subjected and obedient to it. This is a problematic translation because *mattah* (מַתָּה) or *tachat* (תַּחַת), more accurately mean “under” or “beneath.”

²⁵ Plato: *Gorgias*, trans., James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1998), 73, fn 69.

Let us now examine each of the eleven references where "under Law" is used, placing them in their proper context.

Romans 2:12

"For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law."

Most Christian theologians believe that "under the Law" equates to Torah observance, but this is neither an accurate assessment nor a proper translation of these verses. Paul describes the state of two different groups of people relating to the judgment of God upon sinners. He first mentions those who are *anomos* (ἄνομος), "without law, lawless" (LS).²⁶ This describes a behavioral pattern of those who live without God's Divine Law, and will thus die in this manner. Whether one knows God's Torah or not in this case is irrelevant. The person turned over to sinful behavior, knowing it is sin or not, is going to be judged by the consequences of that sin. Paul states earlier in Romans 1:24 that "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity." By rejecting Him, they accept sin, and are delivered up to it and will be judged in their lawless behavior.

The second status is those who are *en nomō* (ἐν νόμῳ), correctly rendered as "in law" (YLT). This is referencing those who know the Torah of God, and what is considered acceptable and unacceptable via its commandments. Paul writes that those who sin while keeping this Law are going to be judged by it. This judgment is going to be much higher because what is right and wrong is clearly laid out by the Lord and His commandments, whereas the person who just sins lawlessly, not knowing what God considers acceptable and unacceptable, may not be judged as severely.

The next verse, Romans 2:13, says, "for it is not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." The NIV actually says "it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." The word translated "doers" is *poiētēs* (ποιητής, sing.), "a doer, performer," and "one who obeys or fulfils the law" (Thayer).²⁷ It is used in James 1:22 where we are admonished, "But prove yourselves doers [*poiētēs*] of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." Its verb form, *poieō* (ποιέω), appears when Yeshua tells us "whoever keeps [*poieō*] and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19b).

Obviously this does not at all speak against obeying the Torah, because otherwise the doers of the Torah would not somehow be considered just before God. Paul speaks of the state of the person who lives lawlessly or without the Torah, and then the state of the person who lives according to its standards. This does not mean that we are "saved by works," but rather with the correct understanding, "faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself" (James 2:17). Works are natural evidence of our salvation experience, and come naturally because of our love for the Lord. They testify to outsiders that we are His people.

Romans 3:19

"Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God."

The most literal rendering of Romans 3:19 is not with "under the Law" but rather "in the Law," *en tō nomō* (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ). What this means is that the Torah speaks directly to those who know what it says. Yet, Paul also says that the entire world is somehow "accountable" or "guilty" (NKJV) to God because of the Torah, likely because of basic principles of right and wrong impressed on the human psyche that the Torah speaks about. *Hypodikos* (ὑπόδικος) specifically means, "Under sentence, condemned, liable, subject to prosecution" (AMG).²⁸

The next verse, Romans 3:20, clarifies by telling us "because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin." In other words, the Torah reveals the sin in our lives and will hold all of us to accountability. The Torah shows the world what it is guilty of and what it will be punished for. But the Torah also shows

²⁶ H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 74.

²⁷ Thayer, 527.

²⁸ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1422.

Believers in the Messiah the best way to get the most out of our relationship with our Heavenly Father by obeying Him.

Romans 6:14-15

"For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!"

Are we allowed to sin and break the Torah because we are not "under law" as redeemed saints? No. Since the Biblical definition of sin is violation of the Torah, being "under law" or "under Torah" cannot possibly mean being obedient to the Torah. As born again Believers we do not find ourselves "under Torah," but rather "under grace"—covered by the blood of the Messiah because we are *not subject to the punishment* of Torah violation. **Being "under law" in this construct must mean being subject to the Torah's punishments.**

Believers who are born again and redeemed are not subject to the Torah's punishments pronounced upon sinners and are not "under Law." Romans 6:14-15 demonstrates our need to live responsibly being covered by God's grace, living in obedience to Him. If we have been spiritually regenerated, we need to remember that Yeshua has taken away the penalty of our disobedience to the Law. But as Paul has previously said, our faith in Yeshua does not nullify our need to obey God:

"Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31, RSV).

1 Corinthians 9:20-21

"To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law."

1 Corinthians 9:20-21 is problematic for many people, because first of all, it may seem as if Paul is wavering in his obedience to the Torah. Secondly, most Bibles have mistranslated v. 21 with "under the law of Christ."

Is Paul wavering in his Torah observance, being Torah observant around Jews and then not being Torah observant around those of the nations? No, he is not. He says later on in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah." If Paul is being truthful with us here, and Yeshua followed the Torah, then Paul followed the Torah as an imitator of the Messiah. Imitators of Paul are *to likewise do the same*.

What Paul is saying by "to the Jews I become as a Jew," is that he does his best to understand his audience. These are the Jews who are "under the Law" or subject to its penalties, not being Believers in the Messiah redeemed from sin, something that Paul as a Jewish Believer was free from. Similarly, when Paul says "to those who are without law, as without law," he does his best to relate to the pagans who do not know the Torah. This is probably best evident by Acts 17:22-23 when he was in Athens debating with the Athenians, and made note of the Temple to the Unknown God, which he said was a memorial to the Holy One of Israel (although the Athenians did not know it). Paul is telling us to do our best to relate to our audience that we might best present them with the good news of salvation in Yeshua.

So what about when he says that he is "not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ"? Keep in mind that if Yeshua is indeed God, then the Torah of God is His Torah. Sadly, the translation of "under the law of Christ" in many Bibles is incorrect. It is a mistranslation because earlier in v. 20 *hupo nomon* is translated literally as "under the Law" meaning "under Torah." But *hupo nomon Christou* (ὑπὸ νόμον Χριστοῦ), "under the Law of Christ," is not what appears in the Greek text of v. 21. Rather, it is *ennomos Christou* (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ), which Young's Literal Translation renders as "within law to Christ."

This certainly changes our perspective. *Ennomos* (ἐννομος) means "what is within range of law and governed or determined by law" (AMG).²⁹ In other words, by Paul saying that he is

²⁹ Ibid., 591.

“within the Torah to Messiah,” he is following the Torah as the Messiah demonstrated it and his obedience is thus focused around His work in his life and the imperatives of the gospel as first seen in the Torah (cf. Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8).

Galatians 3:23

“But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.”

Galatians 3:23, although usually interpreted as meaning that being “in custody” or “confined” (RSV) or “held prisoners” (NIV) “under the law” pertains to being Torah obedient, takes on an entirely new perspective when we understand that being “under the Law” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties upon sinners. Galatians 3:23 speaks of the fact that before our faith in Messiah Yeshua came, we were “imprisoned and guarded” (NRSV).³⁰ This position of the Torah *changes* when we receive Messiah Yeshua into our lives and receive forgiveness from our sins. We are released from the bondage to sin and are no longer “under the law.” But this does not mean that the Torah no longer has relevance for us as Believers and that we are to cast aside its ethics and morality. It no longer serves the same purpose as it did prior to our salvation experience.

Galatians 4:4-5

“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

These verses are fairly straightforward when we understand that “under the Law” or “under Torah” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties. Our Heavenly Father sent His Son Yeshua during the time when all humanity was still “under the Law,” because He had not yet been sacrificed at Golgotha (Calvary) for our sin as the final atonement. Yeshua the Messiah came to “redeem those who were under the Law,” those who stood condemned because of violating the Torah. Via the power of Yeshua and His atoning work, the curse of the Law has been remitted!

Galatians 4:21

“Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?”

Galatians 4:21 has been a cause of some misunderstanding, again because the proper definition of “under the Law” as being subject to the Torah’s punishments upon sinners has not been applied. When we understand the situation that Paul faced in Galatia, his words can be properly understood. There was a sect of Judaizers in Galatia that said if you do not follow “the works of the Law” *as they did*, being circumcised and converting to Judaism, that you could not be saved. This was influencing many people and was leading people into bondage to sin because legalistic Torah observance will lead to stumbling, as opposed to Spirit-led obedience that comes as natural evidence of a true born again experience. Some expositors believe that the Judaizers were using the platform of Torah observance to promote errant teachings in the assembly related to Jewish mysticism, which would be strongly opposed by the Torah. If this is the case, then to paraphrase, Paul was probably telling the Galatians, “You who want to be subject to the Torah’s penalties, do you not know what the Torah prescribes for your punishment?” It was a form of ironic rebuke.

Sadly, many theologians over the centuries have taken Paul’s letter to the Galatians out of its Jewish context and have construed that this rabbi and Pharisee taught against the Torah and taught against the rite of circumcision. He did no such things; but he did place these things in proper perspective in regard to faith in the Messiah. When Paul later tells these Galatians, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you” (Galatians 5:2), he is telling this group of people that if they think circumcision and conversion are going to save them, then do not even think about it. He is not speaking to all people of all

³⁰ Grk. *phroureō* (φρουρέω), meaning “to maintain a watch, guard” or “to provide security, guard, protect, keep” (BDAG, pp 1066-1067).

generations that circumcision is wrong, but he is again placing it in proper perspective and emphasizing that it is not a salvation issue.³¹

Galatians 5:18

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.”

Knowing that “under the Law” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties allows this verse to make much more sense to us as Messianics. If you are truly led by God’s Holy Spirit, then you are not subject to the Torah’s penalties. If you are truly led by the Spirit, then you will not be led to disobey the Lord and be cursed, erecting spiritual barriers between yourself and God. Rather, if you are truly led by the Spirit, you will naturally obey our Heavenly Father and obey the commandments of Torah and be blessed—just as the Torah tells us.

Are you “under the Law”?

Take to serious heart the words of Deuteronomy 27:26: “Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” The Hebrew verb translated “cursed” is *arar* (אָרַר). *TWOT* indicates “that the majority of ‘curse’ sayings with ‘arar fall into one of three general categories: (1) the declaration of punishments... (2) the utterance of [something]... (3) the proclamation of laws... It is interesting that all **these curse-sayings are a reflex of one violating his relationship to God.**”³² In other words, it is quite clear that when we violate the commandments of the Torah and fail to abide by its guidelines, that we damage the relationship with our Heavenly Father that we should be having. Disobedience to the Lord certainly does not help the communion that we should be having with Him!

Yeshua the Messiah came to free us from slavery to sin and from the curse of the Torah upon sinners: “Messiah 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’” (Galatians 3:13). Paul tells us in Colossians 2:13-14, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” Contrary to popular belief, “the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us”³³ is not the Torah, but is rather the curse pronounced in the Torah against sinners. **Those who have received Yeshua into their lives and have been forgiven of their sin are not “under the Law” or subject to “the curse of the Law.”** But even so, this gives us no reason to disobey God—for obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings cursing. When we disobey our Father we damage the relationship that we have, or should be having, with Him.

So what do you have to change in your life so you can find yourself in obedience to the Lord and hence not “under the Law”—subject to its penalties?

In our day and age, our Heavenly Father is doing new and exciting things through the prophesied restoration of all Israel, as more and more Believers are drawn to their Hebraic Roots and a Torah obedient lifestyle. *The Messianic movement is growing.* The prophecies tell us that when all Israel is restored, “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them” (Ezekiel 37:24). The heart of our Heavenly Father is that we demonstrate our love for Him and obey Him:

³¹ The issue of circumcision is thoroughly addressed in the author’s article “Is Circumcision for Everyone?” Also consult his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

³² Victor P. Hamilton, “אָרַר,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:75.

³³ Grk. *cheirographon* (χειρόγραφον); “The meaning in Col. 2:14... is a ‘promissory note.’ God cancels the bond that lies to our charge... It is the debt that we have incurred with God. The forgiveness of sins (v. 13) through identification with Christ in his vicarious death and resurrection means that this note is cancelled; God has set it aside and nailed it to the cross” [E. Lohse, “*cheirógraphon*, in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 1312).

"Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29).

Do we want to be blessed or do we want to be cursed? Do we want to have the best relationship with our Father as is possible? Or do we want to have a strained relationship?

Consider these questions as you ponder whether or not following the Torah is important.

J.K. McKee (B.A., University of Oklahoma; M.A., Asbury Theological Seminary) is the editor of TNN Online (www.tnnonline.net) and is a Messianic apologist. He is author of several books, including: *The New Testament Validates Torah*, *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*, and *When Will the Messiah Return?* He has also written many articles on the Two Houses of Israel and Biblical theology, and is presently focusing on Messianic commentaries on various books of the Bible.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

revised 03 August, 2005

edited for spelling/grammar

13 March, 2007