

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.¹ Those of us who were raised in mainstream Christianity and have now joined Messianic congregations have questioned much of what we were taught in the past, testing it against Scripture. While today's Christianity did indeed give us a foundational grounding in the Word of God, and *thankfully and gratefully* presented us the gospel of salvation available in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), it is nevertheless a human religious system, and as such did present us with some non-Biblical teachings.

One of the errant teachings of much of contemporary 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 entered into the Messianic community of faith do not believe this to be true. We evidence this in our lives by now practicing many of the things that Christianity has deemed unimportant for the Body of Messiah, but were adhered to and kept by Yeshua's early followers. We keep the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, we celebrate the appointed times of Leviticus 23, and we follow the kosher dietary laws. These are just a few Torah practices that most Christians believe are unimportant.²

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 hear or receive the message. All things happen in the Lord's timing, and much more unites Christians and Messianics than divides them (Ephesians 4:1-6). Yet 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. This is most evident when Christians who oppose Torah obedience claim that we are “under the Law”—and that this is not a position in which born again Believers should want to find themselves. Sadly, in my opinion, much of the Messianic handling of this one phrase has been anything but proper. We must be able to *properly* respond to this and see how it is used in the New Testament.

This article addresses the clause “under the Law” (Grk. *hupo nomon*, ὑπὸ νόμου), how it is used, and what it means in its appropriate context in view of what both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures tell us about the significance of God's Torah. We will examine Yeshua's words on the matter of the Law of Moses. We will examine how a variety of Christians and Messianic teachers have handled this term. We will then test these claims against what the Apostle Paul says in his letters. When you finish reading, the next time a Christian says that you as a Messianic are errantly “under the Law,” you should 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 is to play in the lives of God's people. Should its instructions continue to guide God's people today?

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 God's people are supposed to be separate from all the other peoples of the world. Ancient Israel was to do this by keeping God's commandments that were contained in His Instruction, the Torah:

“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

¹ This article has been reproduced from the paperback edition of *Introduction to Things Messianic*, pp 37-57.

² These three areas are discussed in order in Chapters 10, 11, and 12.

³ BDB, 871.

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 obey God, then His people are promised by Him to be established as a holy people, and it will lead to their greatness. The Hebrew verb *qum* (קָמַן) 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 it 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 “Only a wise and understanding people is this great nation” (Alter). If Israel obeyed the Lord, the people would be blessed by Him—and being blessed by Him they would serve as a testimony to outsiders of His goodness. If there is anything that we need today, it is wise people who know Yeshua as Savior and can understand God’s Word with the power of the Holy Spirit—being examples of those blessed by Him! *Deuteronomy 4:6 is a significant statement of mission and purpose.* God’s people need to be able to discern things based on Scripture, and possess the ability to share His wisdom with others.

But what if the people did not heed the words of God’s Torah, and instead chose to disobey Him? Before Moses’ death at the end of Deuteronomy, the assembly of Israel is instructed to go to Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. They are to be divided up, with twelve distinct blessings and curses to be pronounced upon the tribes (Deuteronomy 27:1-26). They are to 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 The people of Israel are told that if they do not allow God’s Torah to be upheld and established as their ruling principles, that they will be cursed because of their sin and disobedience. In their being cursed, they would find themselves subject to the Torah’s penalties. Their answer to God’s request is *so be it*.

Scriptural history and the nature of fallen humanity show us 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 detail the judgment and curses that would manifest because of disobedience.⁶ However, even though Ancient Israel was once disobedient to the Torah, there are still blessings to be gained by following it. As Paul taught, “Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of death* for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin” (Romans 7:13a). The Torah is something that is “*spiritual*” (Romans 7:14), and “*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly*” (1 Timothy 1:8, NIV).

Our Heavenly Father gave His people the Torah and its commandments to demonstrate His love for us, and His desire to watch out for us. Because of the love we should have toward Him, we should naturally want to follow what He has told us to do—especially as its commandments form the basis of proper ethics and morality. As Moses’ Teaching details,

“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).

⁴ Ibid., 878.

⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶ Consult the author’s article “The Message of Deuteronomy” for a further discussion.

The Lord says that His commandments are *l'tov lakha* (לְטוֹב לְךָ), “for your benefit” (ATS) or “well-being” (NRSV). The Torah was not given as something to place God’s people into legalistic bondage or be a yoke to them, but rather to provide them the best way to succeed on Planet Earth, both spiritually *and* physically. God certainly did not free Ancient Israel from Egyptian bondage via the Exodus, only to later guide them to Mount Sinai and place them in bondage to the Law!

Of course, over the centuries since Moses was given the task of teaching the Torah to Ancient Israel, there was disobedience to it. After the people entered into the Promised Land, there were struggles with how to implement the Torah, including a period of anarchy (Judges 17:6). Israel was at its peak during the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, yet because of Solomon’s idolatry and disobedience to the Torah, the Kingdom split. The Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim was besieged, with many taken captive by Assyria because of its disobedience and idolatry. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken into Babylonian exile, for seventy years, likewise because of its disobedience and idolatry.

Upon their return, the Jewish exiles made it a point to teach the Torah publicly (Nehemiah 7:73-8:12). The Jewish people have taken the Torah very seriously because of past judgment incurred from disobedience. When Israel is fully restored in the Last Days, there will once again be a return to God’s Torah as the New Covenant is implemented *completely* (i.e., Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27).⁷ And we are also told that the Torah will go forth from Zion to the nations (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2). In our day, we are witnessing non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua embracing their Hebraic Roots and taking the Torah very seriously, as these prophecies begin to manifest themselves. 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, angels, demons, or miracles.⁸ 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 traditions carried down over the centuries which gave explanation to the commandments. This Oral Law was later written in the 200s C.E. and is what we now largely know as the Mishnah.⁹ 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 were 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 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, *ani P'rush* (אֲנִי פְרוּשׁ, UBSHNT) or *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι)—“I am a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6). Surprisingly to some Paul does not say, “I *was* a Pharisee.”

⁷ Even though we surely partake of the New Covenant as Believers today (Hebrews 8:8-12), the New Covenant also involves a future return and restoration of the exiles of Israel to the Promised Land, as indicated by the wider context of Jeremiah 31.

⁸ Matthew 22:23; Acts 23:8.

⁹ It is said that the Oral Torah was given to Moses (m.*Avot* 1:1), but this is certainly debatable. Some oral teaching or instruction was certainly given to Moses that over time has been added to. The Mishnah (and similarly the Talmud and Midrash) contains valuable commentary on the Torah and historical information that should be consulted in theological exegesis, but should not be considered primary to the Biblical text itself.

For a further examination on ancient Rabbinical literature, consult Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York and Philadelphia: Meridian Books/Jewish Publication Society, 1959).

If you have an understanding of the First Century times in which Yeshua lived, and have committed yourself to Torah study, you will have a better background than most who read the Gospel narratives. William L. Lane indicates how often “NT statements critical of Judaism have to be interpreted within the context of intramural conflicts among Jews in the first century. These conflicts were rooted in divergent attitudes toward the Torah and halakhah.”¹⁰ So, you are likely to discover that when Yeshua debates with the Pharisees, it is most often over Torah interpretation and application—internal debates—not doing away with God’s commandments as is often viewed.

So what were Yeshua’s words on the matter of 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 with, 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 significant importance for those of us who believe that Yeshua is the Messiah and that He is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14)—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 His words*. The Apostle Paul concurs, “Whoever teaches” must “agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:3, NRSV). No matter how hard it may seem to be, or how unpopular it may be, common claims that the Torah has been done away and that it is no longer relevant for today *must be reconciled to Yeshua’s words*. That is, if Yeshua’s words are indeed final.

So what is Yeshua communicating? 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 Bible teachers may think. The Greek verb translated here as “abolish” is *kataluō* (καταλύω), meaning, “**to end the effect or validity of someth., put an end to**” (BDAG).¹¹ He says quite clearly “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets” (KJV).

Yeshua tells us what His precise intention was regarding the Torah: “I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” The Greek verb *plēroō* (πληρόω) means “*to make full, to fill, to fill up,*” “*to carry into effect, bring to realization, realize*” (Thayer).¹² What this means is that in “fulfilling” the Torah, Yeshua came to live it properly as our example, how we are to “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Many do not agree with this, and instead think that the Messiah “fulfilled” the Torah only in a prophetic sense, thus abolishing it, 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 intends His followers to understand:

“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 readers, because the KJV says “till all be fulfilled.” However, the verb translated as “fulfilled” in the KJV of v. 18 is not *plēroō*, which is used in v. 17, but is rather *gignomai* (γίγνομαι), “*to become*” (Thayer).¹³ “Fulfilled” is a misleading translation, because what the Messiah actually says is that until **all is accomplished** the smallest letter and stroke, or “jot and tittle” (KJV) of the Torah, will not pass away.

The Lord 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*?

¹⁰ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 1-8*, Vol. 47a (Nashville: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1991), cxxvi.

¹¹ BDAG, 522.

¹² Thayer, pp 517-518.

¹³ Ibid., 115.

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 eschatological rewards to those who keep the commandments of the Torah and teach them to others, and eschatological 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.”¹⁴ 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 God’s Kingdom?¹⁵

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.¹⁶

The Torah was given to God’s people to be a blessing. Those who follow His Torah and obey its commandments are to experience the rewards of obedience. Those who disregard the Torah and disobey its commandments will be penalized and/or 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 should we fall (1 John 1:9)—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).

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

What Christians Have Said About “Under the Law”

Before we examine the clause “under the Law” from a Messianic perspective, it is important that we understand what a great deal of Christian handling of “under the Law” has concluded, 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 phrase “under (the) Law” appears in eleven verses.¹⁷ (Further on I discuss how some of these verses cannot be literally translated with “under [the] Law.”) The example I have chosen to illustrate the standard Christian interpretation of “under the Law” is Romans 6:14-15, which says,

“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 that “The mention that believers are ‘under grace’ (v. 14) raised another aberrant idea that the apostle refuted. The question is, **Shall we sin**

¹⁴ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 561.

¹⁵ For a further discussion, consult author’s exegetical paper on Matthew 5:17-19, “Has the Law Been Fulfilled?” (forthcoming 2009).

¹⁶ It is at this point that it does need to be clarified that **many Christians** throughout history have made an appeal to what is commonly called the “moral law” of the Torah, and they will certainly not be considered “least.” (This is particularly true of the Reformed/Calvinist and Wesleyan/holiness traditions.)

One of my favorite theologians, Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser, agrees that Yeshua did not come to do away with the Torah. He says, “Only those laws from which Christ releases his church may be jettisoned” (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 312), meaning those things directly impacted by the Messiah’s sacrificial work. He and today’s Messianics actually have no disagreement on the validity of the Torah; we just differ on the matter of *how much* actually has changed with Yeshua’s arrival.

¹⁷ Romans 2:12; 3:19; 6:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:20-21; Galatians 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18.

because we are... under grace instead of the Law?... Paul’s response was the same as before (v. 2): **By no means!**¹⁸

This commentary equates being “under the Law” as observing the Torah, by using the description “under grace *instead of* Law.” It concludes that when Paul says that Believers are “under grace” they are no longer obligated to follow God’s Torah, but at the same time that Believers are not permitted to sin. If one does not follow God’s Law, is this not a license for sin? Something has to define sin, right? This commentary only says, “this can be done by following Paul’s instructions.”¹⁹ Certainly while Paul’s letters are important for anyone who considers the Bible authoritative, is this enough?

What does the good Apostle 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). **Sin is violation of God’s 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? All of humanity is subject to the penalties of breaking the Law (Romans 3:19b).

Equating “under the Law” as following God’s commandments comes up short because both the Apostle Paul and Apostle John testify that sin is defined by God’s Torah, and they admonish people to avoid lawlessness. As the Torah demonstrates, if you disobey its 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 God’s Torah—then Paul is actually telling Believers not to transgress the Law of Moses, contrary to what many of today’s Christians may believe.

Christian theologians need to do a better job of examining the whole of Scripture, especially if they tell 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 so to speak. He was quoting directly from God’s Torah.²⁰ And if Paul still upholds the commandments of the Torah as being valid and relevant instruction (or at least including valid instruction) for Believers, then what does “under the Law” really mean?

The standard Christian interpretation of “under the Law” as being forced to follow God’s Torah also comes up short because of the position of unbelievers in this paradigm. Are unbelievers who have rejected salvation in the Messiah “under the Law” or are they “under grace”? Considering that Paul’s letters were written to regions of the Roman Empire where the non-Jewish, non-believing populace were not following the Law of Moses, this is something that needs to be seriously considered. **Being “under grace” is something that is *only available* for those who know Messiah Yeshua and have been redeemed.** Keep in mind that when one disobeys God’s Torah a person will face punishment. Would not the non-believing pagans in the communities to which Paul was writing be cursed by their sin: their idolatry, fornication, homosexuality, etc.? Rather than being under grace, would they not instead find themselves under the condemnation of the Law?

If these pagans are not “under grace,” then what are they “under”? *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 find a satisfactory answer by many Bible teachers today.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Exodus 20:13ff; Deuteronomy 5:17ff; Leviticus 19:18.

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 to be encouraged in the Body of Messiah have had a substantial amount of contemporary 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 as 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 clause *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμου), which is translated as “under (the) Law” in most Bibles, more accurately means “in subjection to the system which results in perverting the *Torah* into legalism.”²¹ 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!” (CJB).

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,’”²² which leads him to conclude that the best translation of *nomos* (νόμος) is “legalism,” rather than just “Law” or “Torah.” While perverting the Torah of God into legalism is surely something that 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 it cannot be used as a prime source work in refuting any anti-Torah attitudes that one may encounter in today’s New Testament theology.

I believe that many Messianics have misdiagnosed the problem of why Christians they encounter can be hesitant to consider 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.’”²³ 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.”²⁴

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* (νόμος) in the Greek Scriptures should be translated as *Torah* and not “law.” We should not doubt that the Hebrew term *torah*—derived from the verb *yarah* (יָרָה), meaning to “throw, cast,” “shoot (arrows),” and “direct, teach, instruct” (BDB)²⁵—more accurately means “Teaching”²⁶ or “Instruction,” or just plain “Torah.” There have been some misunderstandings regarding its translation as “Law,” and some Christians might think that God’s Torah is just legalistic rules and regulations. Yet even with this clarification explained to various Christians, I cannot concur that this is the primary problem.

²¹ David H. Stern, trans., *Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), xxiv.

Here, Stern follows the conclusions of C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 853.

²² David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 374.

²³ Ariel and D’vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered* (Lakewood, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 1996), 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁵ BDB, 435.

²⁶ The NJPS version of the Tanach consistently renders *torah* as “Teaching,” and references to “Moses’ Teaching” are used throughout John Goldingay’s *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

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*. God’s Torah would be the ruling principles of a proper society. 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 modern Jewish Torah commentaries, and even the 1917 Jewish Press Society version to translate *torah*. Modern Jewish teachers do not seem to have a problem with the term “law” as much as some Messianics do. And it would not even occur to most Christian translators to possibly 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. (And it certainly gives me no pleasure to mention it, either.) **This reason is humanity’s inbred desire to disobey God**, which results in sin and being cursed just as the Torah tells us. Knowledge of God’s commandments can cause an unredeemed person to sin (Romans 7:13b), and if not dealt with assertively, can spread vociferously throughout a faith community. Consider what Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” This epistle was written in about 50-52 C.E., only 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 parts of 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 God’s commandments, but at the same time claim to know the Messiah, then they were speaking lies. And, most soberly for today, we must consider Yeshua’s own future word: “Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12).

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 (the) Law” is used in eleven verses in the NASU,²⁷ which is a widely used translation by many Christians, and is widely respected and used in the Messianic community as well. We will use the NASU as our base of comparison for properly understanding what this means.

In the Greek, the clause correctly rendered as “under (the) Law” is *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμου). The preposition *hupo* (ὑπό), when appearing with an accusative case noun (indicating direct object), can mean “under, below; under the authority of” (CGEDNT).²⁸ *Nomos* (νομός) is defined by AMG as “spoken in the NT mostly of the Mosaic statutes,”²⁹ meaning the Torah. Most thus conclude that *hupo nomon* equates to meaning “following the Law.”

But is this the only way that we can look at the phrase? We will examine each of the eleven references where “under (the) Law” is used in the NASU English text. I have listed them in their most likely order of composition (Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Romans). Is it possible for “under

²⁷ Romans 2:12; 3:19; 6:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:20-21; Galatians 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18.

²⁸ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 188.

²⁹ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1015.

the Law” to not mean being in obedience to God’s Torah, but instead being subject to the Torah’s condemnation upon sinners? Let us find out if this helps us make better sense of these passages.³⁰

Galatians 3:23

“But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law [*hupo nomon*, ὑπὸ νόμου], being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.”

Galatians 3:23, although usually interpreted that being “in custody” or “confined” (RSV) pertains to being Torah obedient, has much greater significance when viewed from the vantage point that being “under the Law” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties pronounced upon sinners. Galatians 3:23 speaks of the fact that before our faith in Messiah Yeshua came, we were “imprisoned and guarded” (NRSV),³¹ a direct consequence of sin. 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.”

Redeemed Believers are released from the condemnation they once experienced under the Law, but they are not released from God’s high standard of holiness. For born again Believers, the Torah no longer serves the same purpose as it did prior to their salvation experience, having once been a harsh disciplinarian for those on the way to faith (Galatians 3:24).³²

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 [*genomenon hupo nomon*, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμου], so that He might redeem those who were under the Law [*hupo nomon exagorasē*, ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ], that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

These verses are fairly straightforward because we can clearly see that being “under the Law” means being subject to the Torah’s penalties or its condemnation upon sinners.³³ Yeshua the Messiah came to “redeem those who were under the Law,” human beings who stood condemned because of their disobedience to God. Yeshua entered into the world as a man, to be sacrificed for us so that the Torah’s curse could be lifted for all (Galatians 3:13). Via the power of Yeshua and His atoning work, the curse of the Law has now been remitted for those who receive Him into their lives! Not being “under the Law” is directly tied to the redemption of human souls.

Galatians 4:21

“Tell me, you who want to be under law [*hupo nomon*, ὑπὸ νόμου], do you not listen to the law?”

Galatians 4:21 has been a cause of some misunderstanding, because the meaning of “under the Law” as being subject to the Torah’s punishments upon sinners is not often considered. When we understand the complex situation that Paul addresses in Galatians, it is not impossible for his admonition here to be understood in this light, but it does require us to reorient our approach to his letter. There was a sect of agitators in Galatia that said if you did not follow their “works of law,” being circumcised and converting to Judaism, that you could not be included among God’s

³⁰ New Testament theologian Douglas J. Moo does confirm how one possible interpretation of “under the Law” can be “under the condemnation pronounced by the law,” even though he considers it to be secondary at best (“The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 361).

³¹ Grk. *phroureō* (φρουρέω); meaning “to maintain a watch, guard” or “to provide security, guard, protect, keep” (BDAG, pp 1066-1067).

³² Consult the FAQ on the TNN website “Galatians 3:24-25” for a further analysis.

³³ John Wesley interpreted this as, “Ye are not under the law—Not under the curse or bondage of it; not under the guilt or power of sin” (*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint [Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000], 697).

people.³⁴ Some expositors have thought that these agitators could have been using a platform of Torah observance to promote errant teachings related to Jewish mysticism,³⁵ which would be strongly opposed by the Torah (cf. Galatians 6:13). 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?” His statement was used as a form of *ironic rebuke*.

Sadly, many theologians over the centuries have taken Paul’s letter to the Galatians out of its ancient Jewish context and have construed that this good Pharisee taught against God’s 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 proselyte conversion are the answers to their problems—then do not even think about it! He is not speaking to all people of all generations that circumcision is wrong, but places it in proper perspective, emphasizing that it is not a salvation issue.³⁶ Inclusion among the righteous occurs via faith in God, beginning with the example of Abraham (Romans 4:9-11).

Galatians 5:18

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law [*hupo nomon, ὑπὸ νόμου*].”

Knowing that “under the Law” can mean being subject to the Torah’s penalties allows this verse to make much more sense to us as Messianics. Those who are not led by God’s Spirit break God’s Law (Romans 8:7). But in contrast, those who are truly led by the Holy Spirit will not be led to disobey the Lord, which would cause them to stand under the Torah’s penalties. This is because people who are led by the Holy Spirit will naturally obey the Lord and be blessed—just as the Torah tells us, because the Spirit is to write God’s commandments onto the redeemed person’s heart (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The Holy Spirit does, though, *go beyond the Torah*, manifesting itself in the fruit of a Believer’s changed life (Galatians 5:22-23), providing discernment for life events where the Torah may not deliver any instruction. This is what James D.G. Dunn properly describes as “a spontaneity and adaptability to the demands of each specific situation which rules applied whatever the circumstances can never match.”³⁷ But the fruit of the Spirit is notably something “against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:23, RSV), as its virtues surely align with the righteous tenor of God’s commandments.

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 [*tois hupo nomon hōs hupo nomon, τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμου ὡς ὑπὸ νόμου*] though not being myself under the Law [*hupo nomon, ὑπὸ νόμου*], so that I might win those who are under the Law [*hupo nomon kerdēsō, ὑπὸ νόμου κερδήσω*]; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ [*ennomos Christou, ἔννομος Χριστοῦ*], so that I might win those who are without law.”

³⁴ Note how these “works of law” (Galatians 2:16[3x]; 3:2, 5, 10) are likely identity markers that would have defined an ancient Jewish religious sect, and how it followed the Torah (4QMMT).

For a further discussion, consult James W. Thompson, “Works,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1387; and the author’s article “What Are ‘Works of the Law’?”

³⁵ Cf. remarks by Samuel J. Mikolaski on Galatians 4:9, in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1100.

³⁶ 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*.

³⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *Black’s New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 288.

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 non-Jews? 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 in his remark “to the Jews I become as a Jew,” is that he did his best to understand the specialized needs of his audience. These were the Jews who stood under the condemnation of the Law, not being Believers in the Messiah redeemed from sin, something that Paul as a Jewish Believer was free from. Similarly, when Paul said “to those who are without law, as without law,” he did his best to relate to the pagans who did not know God’s Torah. This is probably best evident by Acts 17:22-23 when he was in Athens debating with the Athenians, making note of the Temple to the Unknown God which he viewed as a memorial to the Holy One of Israel (although the Athenians did not know it). Paul communicates that one must do his or her best to relate to an audience, to best present them with the good news of salvation in Yeshua.

So what about when Paul says that he is not “without the law of God but [is] under the law of Christ”? (Keep in mind that if Yeshua is indeed God, then the Torah of God is His Torah.) Sadly, the rendering 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,” but *hupo nomon Christou* (ὑπὸ νόμον Χριστοῦ) or “under the Law of Christ” is not what appears in v. 21. Rather, it is *ennomos Christou* (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ), which Young’s Literal Translation renders as “within law to Christ,” and could also be understood as “in-lawed to Christ.”³⁸

This can certainly change one’s evaluation of Paul’s thoughts. *Ennomos* (ἐννομος) means “what is within range of law and governed or determined by law” (AMG).³⁹ So by Paul saying that he is “within the Torah to Messiah” (my rendering), he is following the Torah as the Messiah demonstrated it (cf. Galatians 6:2). Paul’s 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), beginning with love for God and neighbor.⁴⁰ The same should be true of us as well, as we are to compose God’s Kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6)—serving as intermediaries between Him and the rest of the world.

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 [*en nomō, ἐν νόμῳ*] will be judged by the Law.”

Many 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).⁴¹ This describes a behavioral pattern of those who live without God’s Divine Law, and will thus die in this manner. Whether one knows the specifics of God’s Torah or not in this case is irrelevant. The person turned over to sinful behavior, knowing whether something is sin or not, is still going to be judged by the consequences of such 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.

³⁸ Or the CJB rendering, “within the framework of Torah as upheld by the Messiah.”

³⁹ Ibid., 591.

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28.

⁴¹ LS, 74.

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 from it know 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 (cf. Revelation 20:12-13).

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).⁴² 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 at all mean that we can be redeemed by our human works. But rather with the correct understanding, “faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself” (James 2:17), we see that works are natural evidence of our salvation experience, and they come naturally because of our love for the Lord. They testify to outsiders that we are His people. They also hold us accountable in that if we know God’s Torah, we will be held to its high standard—much more than those who do not know it.

Romans 3:19

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law [*en tō nomō, ἐν τῷ νόμῳ*], 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. Paul also says that the entire world is somehow “accountable” or “guilty” (NKJV) before God because of the Torah, likely because of basic principles of right and wrong impressed on the human psyche via His image, which the Torah details in its commandments. *Hupodikos* (ὑπόδικος) specifically means, “Under sentence, condemned, liable, subject to prosecution” (AMG)⁴³—a status for *pas ho kosmos* (πᾶς ὁ κόσμος) or the whole world.

Paul continues in the next verse, stating, “for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b). The Torah is to reveal the sin in one’s life, and will hold all to accountability. The Torah shows the world what it is guilty of and what it will be punished for, as “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*” (Romans 8:7). Yet, the mind set on the Spirit (Romans 8:5) is to subject itself to a spiritual Law from God (Romans 7:14). God’s Torah shows born again Believers the best way to get the most out of their relationship with Him *by obeying Him*.

Romans 6:14-15

“For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace [*ou gar este hupo nomon, all’ hupo charin, οὐ γάρ ἐστε ὑπὸ νόμον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ χάριν*]. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace [*ouk esmen hupo nomon, all’ hupo charin, οὐκ ἐσμεν ὑπὸ νόμον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ χάριν*]? May it never be!”

⁴² Thayer, 527.

⁴³ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1422.

Are we allowed to sin and break God's Torah because we are not “under law,” but instead “under grace” as redeemed saints? No. Prior to salvation, the master of the unredeemed is sin, a status which causes people to be “under law.” When Yeshua becomes a person's Master, he or she changes and is “under grace.” Born again Believers are not to find themselves “under law,” *precisely* because they are covered by the blood of the Messiah. We are no longer subject to the condemnation pronounced by the Torah upon sinners, because sin is no longer our lord.

Believers who are born again and redeemed are not subject to the Torah's punishments pronounced upon sinners—they 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 take to serious heart what Yeshua had to endure to take away the penalty of *our disobedience* to the Law via His sacrifice! Being redeemed from eternal punishment should be *good motivation* for us to obey God.

Our faith in Yeshua does not nullify our need to obey God, just as Paul has said, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31, RSV). Torah obedience comes as we emulate our Lord and Savior, and are transformed by God's love.

Are you “under the Law”?

Take notice of 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). “[T]he 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[ion] of one violating his relationship to God**” (TWOT).⁴⁴ When we violate the commandments of God's Torah and fail to abide by its guidelines, 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 that hangs over 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; Deuteronomy 21:23). 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, this certificate of debt is not God's 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 **do not sit under the penalty of the Law**, with the Torah ready to come crashing down on their heads. But even so, this gives us no reason to disobey God—for obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings curses. 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 condemnation of the Law?

In our day and age, our Heavenly Father is doing new and exciting things through the growth of the Messianic movement, as more and more Believers are drawn to their Hebraic Roots and a Torah obedient lifestyle. The prophecies tell us that when 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 each demonstrate our love for Him and obey Him: “Oh that they had such a

⁴⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, “אָרַר,” in TWOT, 1:75.

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 penalized? 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. Most importantly, make sure that you are a redeemed, born again Believer, who does not sit in fear under the Torah's condemnation.⁴⁵

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.

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⁴⁵ A more detailed exegetical analysis will be available in the Confronting Issues booklet *What Does "Under the Law" Really Mean? Expanded Edition* by TNN Press (planned for release late 2009), where Romans 3:9; 7:6, 14; Philippians 3:6; Hebrews 7:11; 9:15, 22 (all RSV) will be also be addressed.