

## The Mystery of Galatians

# *Just What Do You Mean, “The Works of the Law”?*

Millions of people have wondered what the expression, “works of the law” means as used by the apostle Paul. What are they? Are works of law the Ten Commandments? Are they the Law of Moses? Or something else? Paul said “a man is not justified by the works of the law,” and that “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal.2:16). What did he mean? What is the Christian’s relationship to “works of the law”?

William F. Dankenbring

Anti-Law ministers’ favorite book seems to be the book of Galatians. Anti-Law advocates most often quote from this book in their attempt to “do away with God’s law.”

At first glance, it may seem that they have a point. Some of the expressions used by the apostle Paul in this book may appear to be saying, on the surface, that the ‘Law’ is a “curse,” or a temporary “schoolmaster,” and that those who are of “the works of the Law” are condemned and foolish!

Would the apostle Paul praise and bless God’s Law in one place, and blast and condemn it in another? Was he double-minded? After hearing him discourse on faith and judgment, the Roman governor Festus exclaimed to Paul, “You are out of your mind, Paul. Your great learning has driven you insane” (Acts 26:24, NIV). Paul replied, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable” (v.25).

The apostle Peter himself said of Paul’s writings, “His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (II Peter 3:16).

The book of Galatians is a case in point. This book has been greatly misunderstood, twisted, distorted, and misquoted. What is Paul really saying in Galatians? What is behind the mystery of the book of Galatians?

How could Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, possibly say the Law of God is not for

Christians or believers when he says elsewhere, in his epistles, that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom.7:12)? How could he call the Law a curse, when he says, “Do we make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we ESTABLISH the Law” (Rom.3:31).

The apostle Paul wrote, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (I Cor.11:1). He declared to the Corinthians, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received” (I Cor.15:3). Paul preached the very same gospel and message that Christ Himself preached with no variation! So he said himself! He didn’t alter anything!

Therefore, to know how Paul viewed the Law of God, let’s see how Christ Himself viewed it! Notice just a few Scriptures.

### *Christ’s View of the Law*

Christ Himself declared on this matter, to a young nobleman, “If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*” (Matt.19:17). He went on to show which “Law” of commandments He was talking about – the Ten Commandments and the Torah – the Law of God (verses 18-21).

Christ also declared, plainly, in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I have come to do away with or undo the Law or the Prophets . . . . For truly I tell you, until the sky and earth pass away and perish, not one smallest letter nor one little hook [identifying certain Hebrew letters] will pass from the Law until all things . . . are accomplished” (Matt.5:17-18).

Christ taught obedience to God’s Law. Paul said he imitated Christ, and taught the same gospel which he received from Christ – therefore he taught obedience to God’s Law as well. And Christ said “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Paul said, “ALL Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (II Tim.3:16). It cannot therefore contradict itself!

So why, then, does it *appear* in some instances that Paul does contradict himself? Why does he sometimes appear to say the Law was temporary, done away, a curse, and the “works” of the Law are anathema? Paul was not deranged; he was not a schizophrenic personality.

Let’s take a closer look at the book of Galatians, and the “works of the Law” Paul was talking about, and solve this mind-numbing difficulty once and for all.

### *The Book of Galatians*

In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul makes it plain that a true Christian is not justified by “works of the law,” or made righteous in God’s sight by them. Paul declared, “Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the *works of the law*, or by the hearing of faith” (Gal.3:5).

Paul went on, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the CURSE: for it is written, Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of

the law, to do them” (Gal.3:10). What are these “works of the law”? What was Paul talking about?

Most so-called Christian ministers, preachers, and teachers claim that these “works” refer to the commandments of the law of Moses – the entire Law of God given to Israel at Mount Sinai – including the Ten Commandments, statutes, judgments, as well as the Temple rituals and ceremonies of the Law.

But is this assumption true? Just what teaching is the apostle Paul countering in the letter to the Galatians? Who was the enemy? What were they teaching? Was Paul condemning those who taught the laws of God, the Ten Commandments, should be obeyed?

### *The Church Council of Acts 15*

The Law which the legalistic Pharisees tried to bind on the brethren was called “the Law of Moses.” We read that a great controversy arose in the New Testament Church which involved the “law of Moses” and the matter of “circumcision.” Luke wrote in Acts, chapter 15, “But some of the *sect of the Pharisees* who believed rose up” – these were Pharisees who believed Jesus was the Messiah – “saying, ‘It is necessary to *circumcise them [Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses*’” (Acts 15:5). What was the real problem here?

In verse 6 we read, “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.” After much discussion, the apostles ruled that God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles who believed on Christ, “and made no distinction between us and them [Jews and Gentiles], purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a YOKE on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (Acts 15:5-11).

Let's understand this! These Pharisees were arguing that Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be physically circumcised, and to “*convert to Judaism!*” They claimed that Gentiles had to become “physical Jews” by undergoing the rite of circumcision, as well as baptism, and come under the obligation to obey all Jewish religious law – the whole “law of Moses,” which, in that day, included the observation of all the Jewish “halachah” – the rules and restrictions added by generations of Rabbis from the time of Ezra down to the very day of the apostles! This included all the minutiae, and detailed 39 laws of “Sabbath” restrictions, and washings and the “traditions of the elders” – things which were a “YOKE,” in the words of the apostle Peter! (Acts 15:10). Paul speaks of it as a “yoke of bondage” in Galatians 5:1.

In other words, the Pharisee believers were teaching that Gentiles had to become “Jews” first, before they could become “Christians”! They had to *first convert to Judaism*, and only then could they become acknowledged as believers in Christ! They had to obey ALL the Jewish legal requirements established by generations of Rabbis, and their interpretations of the fine points of the Torah, and Jewish tradition!

But Christ Himself had already ruled on these points, in actuality. The Pharisees accused His disciples of breaking the law of Moses by transgressing the “traditions of the elders”

(Matt.15:1-2). However, Jesus hurled their accusation back into their own teeth, saying, “Why do you also transgress the law of God *by your tradition?*” (verse 3). He went on to say, “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect *by your tradition*” (v.6).

In other words, the Jews over time had added so many “halachic” principles and rules, in their legislation, in interpreting the Law of Moses, that they had strayed from the very Law itself and had developed a legal system which, in reality, was contrary to and in violation of the spirit of the original Torah, or law of God!

The argument, then, was not over the law of God itself – called the “law of Moses” in the Scriptures, because it was first codified and laid out in full during the time of Moses, and through the revelation God gave to His servant Moses (see Ezra 7:6, 10). It was over the “traditions” the Pharisees added to the Law, and their perversions of the Law!

Now, let us continue the story in Acts 15. After considering this matter fully, the apostles decided that the Pharisaical believers were *dead wrong!* Conversion to Judaism, indicated by requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised and keep the entire law of Moses (including the traditions of the elders), was NOT necessary for salvation!

But notice. After making this fundamental, paramount decision, the apostles then decided to write a general letter to the Gentile believers throughout the Roman Empire, a very pointed epistle. James, the brother of Christ, and the apostle over the Jerusalem church, declared, “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. *For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, BEING READ IN THE SYNAGOGUES EVERY SABBATH DAY*” (Acts 15:19-21).

What is this? Why did James stress only these commandments? Was he ignoring or neglecting the laws against murder, stealing, taking God’s name in vain, coveting, bearing false witness, Sabbath breaking – many of the very Ten Commandments? Of course not! When we read this entire passage IN CONTEXT, we see that first of all, James is singling out *specific issues which Gentile brethren would be confronted with in their local communities!* In Gentile society, in those days, idolatrous pollutions were rampant, sexual immorality and promiscuity were also very commonplace, and meats containing blood – improperly killed – were the norm. God forbids His people to get involved in any sort of idol worship, sexual promiscuity, and His dietary laws were the first thing He stressed to ancient Israel as to how they were to be “different” from Gentile nations – how they were to be “holy” and set apart as a holy nation unto God (Lev.7:27; 11:1-47). Since these things were so common in Gentile society, James felt it advisable to give special prominence to warning the Gentile brethren to avoid these sorts of contaminations and spiritual pollutions.

But notice, now! James went on to explain WHY it was unnecessary to mention all the other laws of God, which also should be observed, because, as he said, *these other laws were already being preached EVERY SABBATH DAY, in the synagogues throughout the Empires, which both converted Jews and Gentiles were then attending!*

James literally said that the law of Moses – that is, the law of God – was being “read in the synagogue every sabbath day” (Acts 15:21). Why would he even bring this up, unless the point he is making is that the Gentile brethren would be HEARING this instruction from the rest of the law of God *every Sabbath day, in the synagogue?*

### ***The Galatians’ Problem***

This same problem of some believers insisting Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep all the requirements of Judaism, surfaced also in the province of Galatia. The apostle Paul was deeply concerned about this “Judaizing” problem, this "yoke of bondage" being forced upon Gentile believers by false brethren from the Pharisee party (Gal.5:1). He lamented to the Galatians, saying “there be some that trouble you, and would *pervert* the gospel of Christ” (Gal.1:7).

What was Paul talking about?

Notice! Paul points out to them that 14 years after his own conversion and calling (Gal.2:1), he had to go up to Jerusalem, as Paul put it, “because false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, *that they might bring us into bondage*).” These Pharisees said the new converts had to be circumcised, and to keep all the halachic principles of Rabbinic teaching, and their legalistic interpretations of the Law of God! (Gal.2:4). Paul did not put up with this nonsense for one minute (verse 5).

The Galatians, unfortunately, had been subjected to this false teaching of salvation through physical circumcision and the keeping of the law, and were in danger of falling away from the truth of God. Therefore, Paul felt constrained to write to them about the problem, and in doing so, he explained the TRUTH about the “Law” and its place in our lives. Notice!

The apostle Paul wrote: “And this I say, that the Law, *which was 430 years later*, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect” (Gal.3:17).

Paul was here speaking clearly of some aspect of the law of Moses. What was this which was “added”?

### ***The Law of Moses***

Let’s go back into the days of Moses, for a moment, and see.

Moses, you will remember, was the one whom God used to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. He was a type of Christ, who delivered us from sin. After crossing the Red Sea in awesome glory, the Israelites came to the Arabian desert, and the hot sweltering sun. They began to murmur and complain, bellyache and grumble. It was not long before men openly began complaining and plotting rebellion against Moses, and against God (Exo.16:2-8). They were riled up, and in a flagrantly sinful attitude of mind!

What does God say? Notice!

“And the Lord said unto Moses, How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” (verse 28).

*Notice!* This was two whole weeks BEFORE they came to Mount Sinai! Yet, already, plainly, God’s laws were in force – and the Israelites were found breaking the Sabbath commandment, and being disobedient and rebellious.

Consequently, God did two things. He reiterated the basic spiritual Laws He had given mankind – the Ten Commandments, and statutes and judgments (Gen.26:5). Then He added an entirely NEW Law – a law involving the Levitical Priesthood, which He brought into service, and laws concerning rituals, sacrifices, washings, and ordinances involving the Sanctuary or Temple. This law was added because of DISOBEDIENCE to God’s spiritual Law – it was added to TEACH them the habit of OBEDIENCE, and LESSONS regarding the enormity of sin, and its forgiveness.

The entire body of Law was called “the Law of Moses,” because God used Moses as His mediator with Israel. The whole body or corpus of Law came through Moses. However, it was divided into two distinct parts – one consisting of statutes and civil laws for the community, based on the Ten Commandments. The other was the ceremonial laws involving the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices offerings, and rituals. Thus there were TWO PARTS to the Law given at Mount Sinai – the Ethical Law, or Moral Law, governing man’s relationship with God and his neighbor – and an “ADDED” part of the Law – the part relating to rituals and sacrifices!

The sacrificial part of the law consisted of ceremonial washings, various laws of sin offerings and sacrifices, and carnal, physical ordinances enjoined upon the people and the Levitical Priesthood. It was not a spiritual law. It could save no one. Speaking of it, the apostle Paul declared in the book of Hebrews, “It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks [offerings], various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed UNTIL the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:9-10, NKJV).

That part of the Law was a temporary law, imposed until the “time of reformation.” So why was it given to ancient Israel? Let the apostle Paul give us the answer! [What purpose did the ritual law serve?] “It was *added because of transgressions*, till the seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” (Galatians 3:19).

Did you catch that? That Law which was added – the Levitical Priesthood with all the sacrifices and rituals – was added – “BECAUSE OF TRANSGRESSIONS”!

For one law to be “added” because of “transgressions,” then means that there had to be another Law which was *being transgressed*, being broken, by the Israelites! What Law?

Remember, God had said, “How long do you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?” (Exodus 16:28). They had been breaking God’s eternal spiritual law, the Ten Commandments – as well as all those Laws which are based on and derived from the Ten Commandments! Specifically, they broke the SABBATH commandment (Exo.16:23-27).

Because Israel had been breaking God’s Law, He *added another special law* – the laws involving the whole Levitical Priesthood, sacrifices and offerings! WHY? – to teach them the *lesson of repentance and of obedience!* To teach them to acknowledge their sins, He gave them certain ceremonial washings, sin and other offerings, and commanded sacrifices, and carnal ordinances, as a *foreshadow* of things to come. What things? The coming of the true sacrifice for our sins, Christ Jesus Himself! And the Holy Spirit which cleans us up spiritually within. These duties, sacrifices, washings, taught them their need for a coming Savior and God’s Holy Spirit.

As Paul tells us in Hebrews, this new law “stood only in meats and drinks [meal and drink offerings], and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them UNTIL *THE TIME OF REFORMATION*” (Hebrews 9:10, KJV). These rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices were “a FIGURE for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience” (Heb.9:9).

Paul also wrote of this sacrificial law, “For the law having a *SHADOW* of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not cease to be offered? because that the worshipers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. *For in those sacrifices there is a REMEMBRANCE again made of SINS every year*” (Hebrews 10:1-3).

The sacrificial law did not atone for sin – but it REMINDED THE PEOPLE of their sins, and their need for proper, true atonement!

Paul goes on: “*For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*” (Heb.10:4). Rather, the sacrifices of the law pointed to the one supreme sacrifice – the sacrifice of Jesus Christ Himself, the “Lamb of God”! (Heb.10:5-13).

### ***What about the “Schoolmaster” or “Tutor”?***

Paul goes on, in Galatians, saying, “But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.”

“Therefore the law was our tutor (KJV, “*schoolmaster*”) to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are *no longer under a tutor (schoolmaster)*” (Galatians 3:24-25, NKJV). The Greek word for “schoolmaster” or “tutor” here is *paidagogos*, meaning a “boy leader”, i.e. a servant whose office it was to take the children to school. By implication, a “tutor,” “instructor,” “schoolmaster” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, #3807). The NKJV translates the word as “tutor.”

Says Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon, “a leader, a tutor, i.e. a guide and guardian of

boys. Among the Greeks and Romans the name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the better class. The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them before arriving at the age of manhood.”

*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* says of *paidagogos*: “ ‘a guide’ or ‘guardian’ or ‘trainer of boys,’ lit., ‘a child-leader’ (*pais*, ‘a boy, or child,’ *ago*, ‘to lead’), ‘a tutor,’ is translated ‘instructors’ in I Cor.4:15, KJV (RV, ‘tutors’).”

So the “Law” Paul said was a “tutor,” “instructor,” or “teacher” – a “guide” for the children of Israel. It “showed the way” to go. It was a “protector,” and “guardian” to save them from troubles, danger, or perils.

Therefore, the “Law” was like a tutor or guardian for ancient Israel, to guard and protect them from danger, to safeguard their moral conduct, to teach them proper conduct and the enormity of sin and its severe penalty. In this respect, we are speaking of the entire “Law” of Moses, including the rituals, washings, and sacrifices.

Now that Christ has come, we are no longer guided by the precepts of the Law alone – we are NOW guided by Christ Himself, and by the Holy Spirit of God!

That is the meaning here. This does not mean the Law of God is done away with – but now, added to it, is CHRIST – the Saviour and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit – which God sends upon those who accept and believe in Christ (Acts 5:32).

### *The Paidagogos Mystery*

Interestingly, the term *paidagogos* is also used in the Jewish Targums, ancient commentaries on the Scriptures. Targum fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls show the usage of written targums in pre-Christian times. In the Targums, God Himself is referred to as our *paidagogos*! Likewise, so are Moses, Aaron and Miriam. To the Hebrews, the term *paidagogos* carried the meaning of loving, caring, nursing father, as well as “teacher.” The Targums of Jonathan and Jerusalem interpret the word for “nursing father” in Numbers 11:12, by “pedagogue” (derived from *paidagogos*, obviously).

The New King James has this, “as a GUARDIAN carries a nursing child.” In the Torah in Numbers 11:12, the term translated “father” is *chathan*, #2859, and means, “contract affinity by marriage, join in affinity, father in law,” thus a relative in marriage. Says *Gesenius Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, “to give one’s daughter in marriage, hence, a father-in-law, the wife’s father,” also, “he who takes one’s daughter in marriage,” a bridegroom [see Psalm 19:6, Isaiah 62:5],” etc.

Moses says to God, “Have I conceived all this people? Have I brought them forth, that You should say to me, Carry them in your bosom, as a nursing father [*paidagogos*] carries a sucking child . . .?” (Num.11:12, Amplified Parallel Bible).

In Old Testament times, Israel did not KNOW the Messiah; He had not yet come. But they had the LAW of God as their teacher, tutor, guide and guardian. And it would have performed that function, IF THEY HAD KEPT, OBEYED, AND OBSERVED IT FAITHFULLY!

However, they did not – therefore, as a further “teacher,” “guide,” and “guardian,” God gave them the Levitical Priesthood, and the law of sacrifices, rituals, and diverse washings.

What Paul is saying here is that we are no longer under the sole jurisdiction of the LAW itself being our instructor, guide and tutor – NOW WE HAVE CHRIST! He is our instructor, guide and tutor! Also, now that He has come, we no longer need the “types” and rituals of the Levitical priesthood, which were a GUIDE, and a Lesson Plan, teaching the people the need for forgiveness of sin, the need for a Mediator, and the coming Messiah, who Himself would fulfill many of these “types” and “figures,” reconciling us to God through His own sacrifice of Himself as our Passover Lamb and as an offering for sin (I Cor.5:7; II Cor.5:21).

Paul is not here saying the Law is done away, or is no longer a tutor, or instructive. He is saying we now have a new supreme tutor, guide and instructor – Christ Himself.

Galatians 3:25 poses an interesting problem. In the New King James, it says, “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” It is translated as a declarative sentence. As such, however, the statement would be untrue – for Christ and the Holy Spirit are our tutors! Yeshua declared, in fact, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will TEACH you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I have said to you” (John 14:26). And He also said, “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will GUIDE you into all truth” (John 16:13).

Christ and the Holy Spirit are now our tutors, and THEY explain and expound to us the LAW of God itself, so we can understand it, and THEY enable us also to OBEY it (Rom.7:24-25; 8:1-2; verse 9).

We are all still considered as “children.” We still need “instruction” and “tutors.” Peter says, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (I Pet.2:2). Paul says in the very next verse, “For you are all *sons* of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal.3:26). Consequently, we STILL need instruction!

Therefore, taking a new look at verse 25, it becomes evident that this verse SHOULD be translated as a QUESTION – that is, “But after faith has come, *are we no longer under a tutor?*”

### ***The Original Law***

The Law of Moses did not originally contain laws of sacrifice. God said to Jeremiah the prophet, “For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of Egypt, concerning BURNT OFFERINGS OR SACRIFICES. But this is what I commanded them, saying, OBEY MY VOICE, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And WALK in all the ways that I have COMMANDED you, that it may be well with

you” (Jeremiah 7:22-23).

The sacrifices were added later, because of disobedience! Over time, the Jewish rabbis added MUCH MORE to the original commandments, in the form of many added halachic rules and decrees made by the Rabbis, which became a veritable “yoke of bondage” upon the people, by the time of Christ and Paul. Originally these sacrificial laws had been put upon the ancient Israelites, because they refused to keep God’s spiritual laws and commandments! They were to teach the people by physical means the lessons of sin, forgiveness, repentance, and importance of obedience.

But by the time of Christ, the Pharisees had added so many additional Sabbath laws, and washings, and laws affecting every aspect of life, that they had created a Monster in itself of TRADITION and Rabbinic RULINGS, which the people were commanded to obey!

Are Christians, today, required to keep the sacrificial, ritualistic aspects of the “law of Moses”?

No – clearly, we are not expected to do sacrifices, or rituals, or those things which were “temporary” and not a part of God’s eternal spiritual Law. As Paul said, “. . . we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”

Paul also wrote, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). “But in those sacrifices there is a *remembrance* [a recalling, not a forgiving] again *made of sins every year*” (verse 3).

These animal sacrifices, washings and such were hard physical work. They could be considered as some of the “works of the law” that couldn’t save anyone. But besides them, there were as well the added “traditions” and Jewish, Rabbinical halachic laws and rules which were added to the Law of Moses by men and handed down by the Pharisees. These were a “yoke of bondage” to the people (Galatians 2:16; 5:1).

The rituals and sacrifices, of course, are not obligatory on true Christians, today. They clearly were types – typifying the coming of the supreme sacrifice, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They were but a type of the spiritual, and were given to a carnal, fleshly people, to help them understand. They are not necessary for salvation!

The sacrifices of the Old Testament times could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:11). “But this man” – Jesus Christ – “after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God” (verse 12).

### *The “CURSE of the LAW”*

But what about “the curse of the law.” In Galatians 3:13, Paul wrote, “Christ hath redeemed us from the *curse of the law*, being made a curse for us: for it is written, *Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.*” Does that mean the Law of God is to be considered a “CURSE,” as some people claim today?

How could that be? Paul also referred to the Law of God as “HOLY, and the commandment HOLY, just and good” (Rom.7:12). He called it “spiritual” (Rom.7:14).

What is the “curse of the Law”? It is simply the curse which results from the *penalty* of Law – that is, from *breaking* the Law! Hanging on a tree, being put to death, is a CURSE! It is not the Law that is the curse. Christ redeemed us *from* the curse of the Law. Exactly what did Christ redeem us from? From the *penalty of sin*: that is, the *death penalty*! Sin brings a curse. When you sin you bring upon yourself the penalty of sin – the curse of the Law – the death penalty! The curse comes when one BREAKS God’s Law!

Because of our sins, we were all sentenced to death (Romans 6:23). But Christ paid the penalty for us, in our stead. He redeemed us from death! Christ DIED for us! He took the curse, which we incurred through disobedience, upon Himself! “For He [God] made Him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (II Cor.5:21).

God promised ancient Israel blessings for obeying His Law (Deut.28:1-14). Innumerable blessings! He also promised curses would come upon them if they disobeyed His commandments (Deut.28:15-68). The punishment which results from breaking God’s spiritual law is death – plain and simple – destruction of life, soul and body, in the Lake of Gehenna Fire (Matt.25:41). Yeshua – Jesus Christ – redeemed us from the penalty of that death, reconciling us to God the Father, by dying for us, in our place, in our stead!

Why is it so many misunderstand? Why can’t we see that Christ came to redeem us from the wages of sin – the death penalty? Why can’t we see that it is SIN – wickedness, disobedience – that separates us from God? And what is “sin”? SIN IS, by definition, “the *transgression* of the LAW” of God (I John 3:4)!!!

### **“The PERFECT LAW”**

The apostle James, the brother of Christ, made it about as plain as a person could make it. He proclaimed, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. *Do what it says*. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the PERFECT LAW that gives freedom [God’s true Law, which guarantees everybody’s freedom from slavery and bondage!], and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but DOING it –he will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22-25).

Isn’t this plain speaking? But James goes even further. He wrote: “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the WHOLE LAW and yet *stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking ALL of it*. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become A LAWBREAKER. Speak and act as those who are going to

be JUDGED by the law that gives freedom” (James 2:8-12).

Clearly, God’s Law is eternal. David the prophet and king of Israel wrote in the Psalms, “The works of his hands are verity and judgment; *all his commandments are sure*. They stand fast FOR EVER AND EVER, and are done in truth and uprightness” (Psalm 111:7-8).

Any who come to you and claim that “God’s Law is done away with,” is merely repeating that age-old lie of Satan the devil when he told Eve in the Garden of Eden, in effect, “Salvation is a free gift. No ‘works’ are involved at all. Just eat the fruit of the nice-looking tree of knowledge of good and evil. It will make you wise like God, and you will easily and quickly become as God is. See how simple it is? Here, have a taste of this delicious, beautiful, delectable fruit!”

But the tree Satan manipulated and seduced Eve to eat of was the tree of the “knowledge [i.e., “experience”] of good *and evil*” – a mixture of good and evil, good mixed with lethal poison – in other words, the tree of DEATH!

And Eve fell for his sucker line of super-salesmanship -- she listened to the snake -- just like generations of mankind have done ever since!

### ***A New Look at the “Works of the Law”***

The title of an obscure Dead Sea Scroll is MMT, which stands for *Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah*. This phrase was originally translated “Some of the Precepts of the Torah,” by Dead Sea Scholars Strugnell and Qimron. However, the word *miqsat* does not just mean “some.” The same word is used in Genesis 47:2 where Joseph presents five of his brothers before Pharaoh – where the word could be translated as most important, select, or choice brothers.

More importantly, however, is the rest of the phrase – *ma-ase ha-Torah*. Strugnell and Qimron translated this as “precepts of Torah.” However, the most common GREEK word for *ma-ase* is *ergon* – which in the New Testament is usually translated “works.” The Hebrew word Torah is usually translated as *nomos*, which in the New Testament is generally translated “law.” Thus the expression *ma-ase ha-Torah* then simply means “works of the law.” This would be a very excellent translation. The Septuagint version of the Old Testament leaves no doubt – it translated the Hebrew expression *ma-ase ha-Torah* by the Greek *ergon nomou*. This Greek expression is commonly translated in the New Testament as “works of the law.” This expression is found in Romans 3:20,28, and Galatians 2:16, 3:2,5, and 10.

Interestingly, when the British Bible Society translated the New Testament into modern Hebrew in 1976, when the text of the MMT Dead Sea Scroll was known only to a few scholars, they translated the Greek *ergon nomou* (works of the law) as *ma-ase ha-Torah*.

Says Martin Abegg, author of an article entitled “Paul, ‘Works of the Law’ and MMT,” in the November-December 1994 *Biblical Archaeological Review*,

“In short, *ma-ase ha-torah* is equivalent to what we know in English from Paul’s letters as ‘works of the law.’ This Dead Sea scroll and Paul

use the very same phrase. The connection is emphasized by the fact that this phrase appears *nowhere* in rabbinic literature of the first and second centuries A.D. – *only* in Paul and in MMT.

“The works of the law that the Qumran text refers to are obviously typified by the 20 or so religious precepts (*halakkah*) detailed in the body of the text. For the first time we can really understand what Paul is writing about. Here is a document detailing works of the law” (p.53, *BAR*, 11-12/94 issue).

Finally, then we can put to rest the question, just what are the “works of the law” that Paul wrote about! Finally, an argument which has raged for centuries, and still rages today, can be settled by clear evidence from the first century!

Let’s take a look at this mysterious document MMT, and see what it is all about.

### *The Dead Sea Scroll MMT*

The MMT scroll records the remains of nearly two dozen legal issues. Perhaps another dozen issues perished. The scroll calls attention to the subject of boundaries between what was to be considered pure and impure. The phrase *rohorat haquodesh*, “purity of the holy,” sums up the contents of the scroll and its purpose. Says Abegg, this means, “Do not allow the holy to be profaned by what is impure.” The issues, says Abegg, were:

“The issues include bringing Gentile corn into the Temple, the presentation of Gentile offerings, and the cooking of sacrificial meat in unfit (impure) vessels. Other rulings concern cleansing of lepers, admitting the blind and the deaf into the Temple; and permitting intermarriage with Ammonite and Moabite converts, long forbidden to enter the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3). Other issues involve the transmission of impurity by a flow of water (*musaq*), the intermixture of wool and linen (*sha-atnez*) and perhaps the climax of the discussion: the intermarriage of priests with the common people.

“Most of the rulings espoused by the author of MMT are based directly upon Biblical law (for example, the prohibition against plowing with unlike animals in Deuteronomy 22:10). *A few others are interpretations or amplifications of Mosaic prescriptions* (for example, bans on Gentile offerings and dogs in the Temple). The list clearly reflects a conservative reaction against a relaxation of Torah precepts” (*ibid.*, p.53-54).

Notice! These “rulings” or “works of the law” included “INTERPRETATIONS OR AMPLIFICATIONS OF MOSAIC PRESCRIPTIONS.”

The Qumran sect spurned the “rabbinic extensions called *Talmud*, which effectively built a fence around the Torah, successive layers of which have become codified in the rabbinic works of the Mishnah and the two Talmuds.”

Notice again! The “RABBINIC EXTENSIONS” reflected in the Talmud – that corpus of Jewish religious and rabbinic literature accumulated over the centuries, known as the Babylonian

and Jerusalem Talmuds – was spurned by the writers of the MMT Dead Sea Scroll. They developed their own interpretations, expansions, and halakkah. But both systems came under the over-all description of “works of the law” – both included various rabbinic-style interpretations, amplifications, and extensions of the Law of Moses as it was applied to Jewish life during the first century.

The expression *miqsat ma-ase ha-torah* – “pertinent works of the law” – nowhere appears in rabbinic literature. However, clearly the Qumranites, like the apostle Paul, were against the rabbinic “works of the law,” though from a different point of view. They were against them because they were espousing their own version of the “works of the law.”

Paul, very clearly, condemns in no uncertain terms ALL these human-devised “works of the law” in the books of Romans and Galatians!

Writes Abegg:

“Looking at Galatians and Romans in the light of MMT, it seems clear that Paul, using the same terminology, is rebutting the theology of documents such as MMT. I do not mean to suggest that Paul knew of MMT or of the zealous members of the Qumran community, but simply that Paul was reacting to the kind of theology espoused by MMT, perhaps even by some Christian converts who were committed to the kind of thinking reflecting in MMT.”

Clearly, even in Paul’s day, the Jewish scribes and Pharisees and various groups, and even supposed Christian “converts,” were building “fences” around the law of God, and making it into a burden – a “yoke of bondage” (Gal.5:1). Paul warned of “false brethren SECRETLY BROUGHT IN”, who entered the church “BY STEALTH to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into BONDAGE” (Gal.2:4). He warned the Galatians that we are not justified before God by such “works of law” (Gal.2:16).

Paul was clearly very upset, disturbed, about the reports he had received concerning such ministers and teachers. He wrote, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?” (Gal.3:1). He asked them, “This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by *the works of law*, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?” (Gal.3:2-3).

Paul urged the Galatians not to become entangled in the “works of the law” – the deeds and decisions and rulings of rabbinic Judaism or its offshoots. He wrote, “Stand fast therefore in the LIBERTY wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the *yoke of bondage*” (Gal.5:1).

Writes Martin Abegg in *Biblical Archaeology Review*:

“Some scholars have suggested that Paul misunderstood the Jewish teaching of his day or, at the very least, that he created a straw man to bolster his own teaching regarding faith versus law. In the past, this view was supported by

the fact that the phrase ‘works of the law’ nowhere appears in the foundational books of rabbinic Judaism. MMT, however, provides the ‘smoking gun’ for which students have been searching for generations, not from the pages of rabbinic literature, but from the sectarian teachings of Qumran. MMT demonstrates that Paul was not jousting with windmills, but was indeed squared off in a dramatic duel – not with mainstream Judaism but with a sectarian theology – that ultimately defined Christianity. If I have understood rightly, the importance of MMT for New Testament research is nothing short of revolutionary” (*ibid.*, p.55).

Clearly, in Romans and Galatians Paul taught against all types of “legalism” and legalistic, authoritarian “additions” to the Law of God!

This principle doesn’t just refer to Jewish or Rabbinical “additions.” On the other hand, we also need to be careful not to come under the “bondage” to the “oral law” or “decrees” of various Christian-professing churches, who create their own rules, regulations, prescriptions, and dogmas – traditions of “men” which Jesus clearly rejected – which violate the written Word and Law of God.

It is interesting that those churches which seem to object the strongest against the Jewish “oral law” themselves create their own “oral law,” although they do not call it that. Historically, even the Sadducees, who rejected the “oral law” preserved by the Pharisees, found it necessary to create their own “oral tradition,” in order to exercise their own authority over the church members! However, any “tradition” or “church custom” which contradicts the Word of God – Torah, or divine Revelation of the Scriptures – must itself be rejected and avoided.

The bottom line, therefore, is that Christ Himself has the last word – He is the Prophet like unto Moses, who has FINAL AUTHORITY to interpret the Mosaic Law -- and provide a true and full interpretation of the Law (see Matthew 5-7). He came to “fill full” the Law, and make it complete (Matt.5:17-19) – to MAGNIFY it (Isaiah 42:21)..

To really understand God’s Law, therefore, and its application to Christians, and the New Covenant, we need to search the Scriptures, and the words of Christ. We need to avoid all the “works of the law,” or man-made religious taboos and constraints, which men have added from time to time, for one reason or another, to the Scriptures, leading into a yoke of heavy-handed authoritarian bondage and spiritual slavery.

The “works of the law” that Christ and Paul condemned were the human additions to God’s Law which made it a system of bondage and misery.

### ***Laws of God Vs. Traditions of Men***

We know that the Pharisees were hypocrites, and false teachers, in Christ’s time (see Matthew 23:13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 33). They, as a whole, had become a “generation of vipers.”

We know that they added many human “do’s and don’t’s” to the law of God, and human

traditions, making the law of God of no effect – such as the “washing of cups, pitchers and kettles” (Mark 7:4). We know that Christ declared, “Take heed and beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt.16:6; Luke 12:1).

Jesus rebuked them powerfully, saying, “And in VAIN they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of MEN. For laying ASIDE the commandments of God, you hold the *tradition of men* – the washing of pitchers and cups:, and many other such things you do. He said to them, *All to well you REJECT the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition*” (Mark 7:7-9).

These “traditions” – called “halacha” by the Rabbis – were “added” to the laws of God, as a sort of “fence” to prevent the laws being trampled. But the FENCE often replaced the Law itself, becoming an even more important LAW!

Their “traditions of men,” therefore, were not binding upon the people. God never gave the scribes and Pharisees authority to ADD TO His law – merely to explain and interpret it correctly!

Jesus rebuked them severely for this excess and abuse and over-stepping of their God-given authority. He castigated them for sometimes supplanting their own traditions of men for the commandments of God (Matt.5, 15; Mark 7).

In other words, the Pharisees were guilty of SIN – breaking God’s Law (I John 3:4) – because they ADDED to God’s Laws their OWN legal requirements as hedges around the Law of God, and many other additional laws and regulations, which were a heavy and grievous YOKE of bondage over the people! They violated God’s commandment in Deuteronomy, where He said plainly: “*You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may KEEP the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you*” (Deut.4:2, NKJV).

This principle is SO important, that God said it TWICE! He declared in chapter 12 of Deuteronomy, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe IT; *you shall not ADD TO it nor take away from it*” (Deut.12:32).

The Pharisees were guilty of BOTH! They not only added many self-righteous regulations to the simple Sabbath commandment to REST on that day, they proceeded to enumerate many technical, different kinds of “work” which was, according to them, prohibited. As Jesus Christ said, they were, “Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Matt.23:24).

But not only did they ADD their own rigorous requirements and legal absurdities, the Pharisees also abrogated and rescinded parts of God’s Law. Jesus Himself pointed out how they in effect rescinded the commandment “Honor thy father and thy mother” by their interpretations concerning gifts their children might give to the priests, nullifying their responsibilities to their parents.

A famous example of a nullification of God’s Law perpetrated by the Pharisees was a

commandment of God which was rescinded by the famous Pharisee leader Hillel, who is highly admired by all Orthodox Jews. Hillel in the decades before Christ, saw that the people were not obeying God's law to lend to the poor, especially as the Jubilee year of debt "release" approached (see Lev.25:14-17). Hillel therefore abrogated the Divine commandment, thinking that if the debts would not be forgiven in the 50<sup>th</sup> year, then lenders would be more apt to lend to the poor!

### *The Calendar Itself Altered*

An example of this occurred in 357 A.D. Rabbi Hillel II (aptly named, since he followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Hillel I, who changed God's laws by his halachic ruling regarding the "year of release") also made a very significant "change" in the laws of God. He changed the CALENDAR of God from a visual, observational calendar, to one which no longer involved physical observation of the NEW MOON each month, but relied instead only upon calendar calculations which utilized mathematical means and averages to determine the beginning of each month. Thus the modern Jewish calendar, which was invented by him and his cohorts, is often a day or so early or late, in beginning a month, as compared to the visual sighting of the New Moons from Jerusalem!

Not only did Hillel II change the nature of the calendar in this respect, however. He also added unbiblical and completely unjustified "POSTPONEMENTS" to the calendar, that is, new laws which regulated when the Feast of Trumpets, Atonement, and Hoshana Rabbah (the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles) might fall. According to Hillel II's new laws, the Day of Atonement could not fall immediately before or after a weekly Sabbath (which thereby meant Trumpets could not fall on a Sunday or Wednesday). Hillel II reasoned that for the Day of Fasting to occur right before or after a weekly Sabbath "feast" day was inappropriate and difficult; going from fasting to feasting or feasting to fasting was not "proper," and caused interference with the observation of the Fast, or the weekly Sabbath feast. Therefore his new laws SEPARATED the Day of Atonement from proximity to the weekly Sabbath!

What "authority" did he have to make this CHANGE in the revealed laws of God, given to Moses? NONE WHATSOEVER! But the rabbis of later generations, who followed in the footsteps of the Pharisees, also added even *MORE* unbiblical commandments and traditions, contradicting the Law of God itself!

Because of these man-made alterations and changes, no wonder God says in His Word, to the Jews, "*Your* New Moons, and *your* appointed feasts, My soul *hates*; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will NOT hear" (Isaiah 1:14-15, NKJV).

### *Evidence from the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*

New evidence to help resolve this ancient controversy concerning "the works of the law" has come to light. That evidence is found in the Shem-Tov's Hebrew Gospel of Matthew. Let's take a good look!

### *Matthew's Hebrew Gospel*

The amazing fact is that the complete Hebrew text of Matthew's gospel was preserved in the body of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Jewish polemical treatise entitled *Evan Bohar*. The author of the treatise, one by the name of Shem Tov Ben Isaac Ben Shaprut, completed his work in 1385 A.D. and revised it several times afterwards. He utilized nine different Hebrew manuscripts of the preserved Gospel of Matthew to compile his translation.

Ben Shaprut was no Christian. He was a Jewish rabbi who was writing to defend his faith against the encroachments of Christian theologians. To counter-act the teachings of Matthew, he used Matthew's original Hebrew Gospel, and carefully compiled his translation.

Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew is the earliest complete Hebrew text we now have of Matthew's gospel. However, Jewish and anti-Christian writings prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> century often quote excerpts from Matthew in Hebrew, in a Shem-Tov type form.

### *The Seat of Moses Vs. Pharisaical Authority*

Let us, therefore, examine the text of Shem-Tov's Matthew, in Matthew 23, where the controversy arises as to just what Matthew was recording concerning the "seat of Moses," upon which the scribes and Pharisees "sat."

A fascinating book by Nehemia Gordon, a Karaite Jew living in Israel, who used to be an Orthodox Jew, sheds new light and understanding on the "seat of Moses" discussed in Shem-Tov's Hebrew gospel of Matthew. Entitled *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus: New Light on the Seat of Moses from Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew*, this new book is a trenchant, cogent, concise new translation of the Hebrew of Shem-Tov's Matthew.

Gordon points out where the rabbis of the first century and others, including the Christians, vehemently disagreed. He states that a major fundamental precept of "Rabbinic/Pharisaic Judaism is the belief that the Rabbis have **absolute authority** [his emphasis!] to interpret Scripture, and what they say in religious matters is binding even if it is known to be factually untrue. This is best expressed by the Rabbinic doctrine that if the Rabbis say right is left or left is right you must obey them" (page 14). This, he relates, was a problem he faced daily when growing up. He had questions about places where the Talmud seemed to make statements that flew in the face of explicit words of Scripture. He says, "I was told time and time again that the Rabbis have interpreted it this way and we had no right to question it" (*ibid.*).

The Midrash states on the subject of Rabbinic interpretation, "Even if they instruct you that right is left or left is right, you must obey them" (see same page).

What is their reasoning? Says Gordon, "My rabbi's conclusion from all this was that **the interpretation of the Rabbis even superceded a direct decree from God Himself**, so who was I to question them" (p.16). He says he knew right them that this was "not of God."

### *Where Rabbis Went Wrong*

Gordon points out that the rabbis equated customs and traditions with Laws of God, making them equal to divine decrees. The rabbis have a saying, “A custom of Israel is a law.” Or, literally, “A custom of Israel is Torah”! He states, “A classic example of this is the wearing of the *kippah* or skullcap. This was a practice unknown in Talmudic times. In the Middle Ages a custom developed to cover the head and after a few hundred years this custom became binding. Today one of the most basic Rabbinic laws is that a man may not walk four cubits without his head covered” (p.20).

Gordon declares, “By keeping the nation busy with their man-made laws, the Rabbis were distancing people from the Torah. This is a message that rings as true today as it did 2000 years ago.” He explains, “In essence, by requiring these man-made laws, the Rabbis are driving people away from Torah” (p.22).

Rebuking this nonsense, Yeshua declared in plain, unequivocal words: “Do not think that I have come to do away with or undo the Law or the Prophets . . . For truly I tell you, until the sky and earth pass away and perish, not one smallest letter or one little hook [identifying certain Hebrew letters] will pass from the Law until all things [it foreshadows] are accomplished. Whoever then breaks or does away with or relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least [unimportant] in the kingdom of heaven, but he who practices them and teaches others to do so shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt.5:17-19, Amplified Parallel Bible).

### *Moses’ Seat Revealed*

Now notice Matthew 23:2-3 in Shem-Tov’s Hebrew Matthew.

The King James Version states: “The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.”

Shem-Tov, however, is slightly different – but with a whole lot of difference in meaning! It says, translated into English:

“The Pharisees and sages sit upon the seat of Moses. Therefore all that **he** says to you, diligently do, but according to **their** reforms (*takanot* תְּקוּנוֹת) and **their** precedents (*ma’asim* מַעֲשִׂים) do not do, because they talk but they do not do.”

Says Nehemia Gordon, “In the Hebrew Matthew, Yeshua is telling his disciples *not* to obey the Pharisees. If their claim to authority is that they sit in *Moses’ seat*, **then diligently do as Moses says!**” (page 48, his emphasis).

The Greek differs from the Hebrew here. The Greek says “they,” and can be misunderstood. The Hebrew says “he,” referring to Moses himself! In Hebrew, Yeshua told His disciples to obey “all that *he [Moses]* says to do, in the Torah!

These are two fundamentally different messages – “they” versus “he.” But amazing as it sounds, in the Hebrew there is a difference of only *one single letter!* In Hebrew, “he says” is *yomar*. But “they say,” in Hebrew, is *yomru*. The only difference in the Hebrew text is the addition of a single *vav* [ו]!!!

Notice:

“he says”	<i>yomar</i>	יאמר
“they say”	<i>yomru</i>	יאמרו

Such a simple difference! It is easy to see how the *vav* may have been left out of the Greek translation from the Hebrew somewhere along the line by a copyist.

The point is, however, this interpretation adds so much more insight and meaning and relevance to the passage of Scripture in Matthew 23:2-3.

The Hebrew word *takanot* means “**enactments, reforms,**” specifically, “reforms that change biblical law,” Nehemiah Gordon points out. The rabbis distinguished between Biblical law and their own invented laws which they called by the term *takanot*, “reforms.”

Says Gordon, “If Shem-Tov’s text of Matthew is correct, then Yeshua was warning his disciples not to follow the *takanot* or man-made laws of the Rabbis. . . Yeshua accused the Pharisees of putting their own invented laws above the law of the Torah” (p.50). Interestingly, says Gordon, the very word Yeshua used for “traditions” of the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3 is the same very word – *takanot*.

Yeshua also warned His disciples about the *ma’asim* of the Pharisees. This word means “precedents” or “acts or deeds that serve as precedents” (Gordon, p.51). The term is unique to Phariseeism. They reasoned that if one of their teachers did an act, it must have been what the Oral Law required. (The Oral Law is that law handed down by oral communication, from generation to generation, rabbi to rabbi, later written down in the Mishnah).

The phrase *ma’asei hatorah* in Hebrew also means “**works of the law,**” something that the apostle Paul condemned in the book of Galatians in no unclear language. It also means “**precedents,**” as obtained from Rabbinic interpretations of the law, which could often negate the very law of God itself

However, Gordon notes, the phrase used by Yeshua was not *ma’asei hatorah* but rather *ma’asim* alone, a plural word. Thus, the word alone can refer to “precedents” or “works” of the Pharisees – in essence, the “works” of the Pharisees which Christ denounced *were their very “precedents”* which became legal obligations for the community, in their eyes.

Clearly, whether we use the Greek or the Hebrew text, however, Christ was by no means telling His disciples to “do what the Pharisees said to do,” UNLESS what they said to do came from the very Torah or Law of God itself! He clearly said NOT to do “according to their works,” but to obey God’s Law always (Matt.19:17; 5:17-19).

Gordon sums up, “According to the Hebrew Matthew, Yeshua is warning his disciples not to look to the *ma’asim*, the precedents of the Rabbis, as the standard for perfect behavior. Nor are they to follow the *takanot*, the invented laws of the Rabbis. Instead they are to listen to what Moses says, because after all the Rabbis claim to authority is that they sit in Moses’ seat. This is reminiscent of the teaching concerning the coin with the picture of Caesar on it (Matt.22:20-21). If it is Caesar’s coin, give it to Caesar. If it is Moses’ seat, do what Moses says” (p.52-53).

Yeshua ended His statement saying, “But do not according to their works, for they say, but do not [obey the Law].” Boiled down to its essence, Gordon says, “Yeshua was saying that like the Samaritans of old, the Pharisees have their own statutes and judgments which they follow, while at the same time they talk Torah but they do not do Torah” (p.59).

### ***EXTREME Error***

How far did the Rabbis stray from the Word of God? In adding their enactments, precedents, and interpretations which nullified Torah, they caused the people to transgress the Laws of God (see Matt.15:3-9; Mark 7:6-13).

This was sometimes carried to the extreme. Maimonides in the 12<sup>th</sup> century went so far as to say, dogmatically, “If there are 1000 prophets, all of them of the stature of Elijah and Elisha, giving a certain interpretation, you shall ‘incline after the majority’ (Exodus 23:2) and the law is according to the 1001 rabbis, not according to the 1000 venerable prophets.”

He went on, “Thus God did not permit us to learn from the prophets, only from the Rabbis who are men of logic and reason” (Maimonides, pp.27-28, quoted by Gordon on page 84).

Can you believe it? No wonder that Yeshua was furious with them and their works! If you carefully read the Scripture Maimonides cited (Exodus 23:2), you will see that it said the very opposite of his statement! It says: “You shall NOT follow a majority in wrongdoing . . . you shall NOT side with a majority to pervert justice.” God often sends prophets to WARN a “majority” when they are WRONG and going ASTRAY!

The Jewish Talmud itself, in the Mishna, the written form of the “Oral Torah,” declared in incredible effrontery and brash arrogance:

“Greater stringency applies to the [observance of] the Scribes than to [the observance of] the words of the [written] Law” (Sanhedrin 11:3, *The Mishnah*, translated by Herbert Danby, p.400).

Or, as Jacob Neusner translates it in *The Mishnah: A New Translation*,

“A more strict rule applies to the teachings of scribes *than to the teachings of Torah*” (p.608).

And the result was, as the Messiah Yeshua declared, “You have let go of the commands of God but are holding on to the traditions of men. . . You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!” (Mark 7:8-9, NIV). He added, “Thus you NULLIFY the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (Mark 7:13).

### ***The Danger and Peril Today***

What is the real message, then, concerning “the works of the law,” for all of us, today? Human “works” or “additions” to the Law of God are invalid and not binding. But works of obedience to the Law of God as given in the Word of God are absolutely required for salvation.

It is simply this. If we put it into an equation, it would be thus:

FAITH – WORKS = 0 = DEATH

WORKS – FAITH = 0 = DEATH

FAITH + WORKS = SALVATION

WORKS + FAITH = SALVATION

Or, to say it another way:

***FAITH + OBEDIENCE = ETERNAL LIFE!***

Christians have gone off the track by accepting Christ but rejecting God’s Law.

Jews have gone off the track by creating human “works” and “requirements” added to the Law AND by rejecting Christ the Messiah!

Either way, the end result is DEATH! As Solomon wrote in Proverbs, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12, NIV).

### ***What It All Means***

These facts should serve as a frightening warning – a serious reminder – that disobedience to God’s Law, His authority, His way, leads to serious consequences – DEATH. But obedience without faith in Christ is an empty shell, nothing but human efforts toward self righteousness, which are like filthy rags to God. Without faith in Christ, “we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6, NKJV).

BEWARE of false ministers, or supposedly “true” ministers, who claim to teach the Word of God, and who lead people astray by stressing their *own* authority, their own teachings and doctrines, but who pervert, twist, and distort the truth of Scripture and reject the Laws and Commandments of God!

To follow men and ignore God’s plain Word, and to reject His Law, is to commit IDOLATRY! Such a course of action is ultimately a veritable short-cut to hell – the fiery flames of Gehenna, which will destroy and blot out forever the lives of the wicked!

There should be no confusion, or divided sense of loyalty. Christ rejected the authority of the Pharisees, and all men and churches, even their modern-day, end-time descendants, when they imperiously and callously reject the LAWS of God! God thunders, “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also *reject* you. . . . Because you have *ignored the law* of your God, I also will ignore your children” (Hosea 4:6, NIV).

The Messiah rejected every interpretation, enactment or tradition the Pharisees and scribes introduced which “abolished” or “changed” the real intended purpose of the eternal law of God. This includes their additions to the Sabbath command, and their fretting over gnats, and swallowing camels. This includes their rejection of God’s true calendar, and introduction of unbiblical “postponements.”

Isn’t it about time we quit following the many hypocrites and false ministers, today, who reject the Law of God, the Torah? Isn’t it about time we choose, instead, to follow Paul as He followed Christ and to obey the Law of God in its entirety, as it applies to us?

Jesus Christ, Yeshua the Messiah, said: “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). How precious is the truth of God to you? Do you fear and tremble before it? Do you love it with all your heart and soul?

How many churches in our day and age have professed to be guardians of God’s Law, and teachers of the truth – but have also compromised with false teaching, refused to repent when shown error, and plunged into sin, all the while maintaining to all who would listen: “Don’t worry – we are in charge – just follow us!”

The apostle Paul warns us to BEWARE of such men, ministers, rabbis, and churches! He declared: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION, *WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING*; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil.2:12-13, NKJV)..

What should we do? Jesus said of God, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Yeshua added, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by EVERY WORD that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt.4:4; Luke 4:4). Let us strive and “*contend for the faith* that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

