

## JESUS, PAUL, AND THE TORAH

The first century proved to be a watershed for the Jewish community. The teachings of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection, drew many Jews away from traditional Judaism into a new way of thinking about God, the temple, the Torah, and the holy land. Even for the majority of Jews



*These excavated stones from the wall of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple were knocked down onto the 1<sup>st</sup> century street by Roman battering rams in AD 70.*

who did not follow this new path, the destruction of the temple in AD 70 forced them to reassess how they would follow their religion. Some of the Jewish sects, like the Sadducees and Essenes, largely disappeared following the tragic fall of Jerusalem. The freedom-fighters, who were energized by the heroic memories of Judas Maccabeus, survived for a few decades, but after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jewish Revolt in the 130s, zealotry came to a hard stop, and the legacy of the Pharisees became the dominant voice in Judaism.

For those Jews who had joined the Christian movement, Jesus already had prepared them for the loss of the temple by predicting its destruction and by offering a different pathway into the future. These Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts were charting new waters, but even so, the significance and role of the Torah remained a central concern. Christians fully accepted the Hebrew canon of Scripture, but in light of their faith that Christ had fulfilled the Torah, they still had to grapple with how it was to be understood and used in the context of the Christian faith. It was the teachings of Jesus about the Torah, and later, the teachings of Paul, that helped them navigate these troubled waters.

Both Jesus and Paul lived as Torah-observant Jews. Both, however, also built a theological foundation for affirming the Torah without following the path of traditional Judaism.

### Jesus and the Torah

That Jesus was thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly Torah-observant has not always been appreciated by Christians. Still, he grew up in a Torah-observant home in Galilee, and it is evident in his public teaching as a local rabbi that he knew the Torah extremely well. Even as a precocious youngster at the age of 12 he was posing and answering the hard questions (Lk. 2:46-47). His public ministry began with the announcement, “The kingdom of God is near” (Mk. 1:15), but his “take” on the Scriptures seemed decidedly different than was true of most rabbis. He “taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mk. 1:22), which probably means that he did not teach

## TORAH SURVEY

by citing the opinions of previous rabbis about the Torah but was entirely comfortable in offering his own judgments. Still, Jesus was clear: his mission was not to undercut the Torah but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17-20). However, his affirmation that the Torah was to be “fulfilled” immediately cast the Torah as something other than an end in itself. His teaching on the Torah was certainly compatible with the predictions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel that a new day would come when the laws of the Torah would be deeply internalized (Je.31:33-34; Eze. 36:26-27). This internalization meant, among other things, raising the bar for the familiar commandments on murder, adultery, divorce, oath-taking, the *lex talionis*, and loving one’s neighbor (Mt. 5:21-48). Still, Jesus was unambiguous: “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments” (Mt. 19:17).

In various ways, the New Testament shows that Jesus was Torah-observant. He attended the required festivals in Jerusalem (Jn. 2:13, 23; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2, 8-10; 11:55; 21:1, 12; cf. Ex. 23:14-19; 34:22-23; Dt. 16:16). Indeed, his credibility as a rabbi would have required his full adherence to and respect for the Torah. After healing lepers, for instance, he instructed them to go to a priest for examination and offer the appropriate sacrifices, something required in the Torah (Lk. 5:13-14; 17:12-14; cf. Lv. 13:18-23; 14:1-32). On the Sabbath, he was to be found in one or another of the synagogues in Galilee, and on one occasion in his home town, he was selected to give the reading for the day (Lk. 4:16-21). He recognized the tri-partite collection of written scriptures which were canonical (Mt. 23:35; Lk. 24:44).<sup>1</sup>

#### THE ORAL TORAH

*Pharisees believed the law of Moses was twofold, both written and oral. They emphasized the binding force of the Oral Torah, what in the New Testament gospels is called “the tradition of the elders” (Mk. 7:3-5), the belief that an oral tradition originating from Moses had been handed down faithfully from generation to generation. (This oral tradition would later be codified in the Mishnah in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.) They even advocated a “fence” (חומרה) around the Torah, which is to say, additional prohibitions that were more than the basic requirements.*

One area about which Jesus emphatically disagreed with the Pharisees was concerning their views on the oral-Torah, sometimes called the “tradition of the elders.” The Pharisees championed the idea that, in addition to the written Torah, there also was an oral Torah handed down from Moses, and its expansions of the written Torah were obligatory. Here, Jesus clearly parted ways, dismissing the oral Torah as entirely a human production (Mk. 7:5-13). Regularly, Jesus used the expression, “It is written,” by which he meant the written Torah (Mt. 4:4, 6-7, 10, etc.). He certainly upheld the encoded texts of God’s laws, urging that even the very least commandment should be observed (Mt. 5:19-20; Lk. 16:17). He applied it to issues of divorce (Mt. 19:3-9//Mk. 10:2-12), the care of aged parents (Mk. 7:9-13; cf. Ex. 20:12; Dt. 5:16), and issues concerning death (Mk. 12:24-27; Lk. 16:29-31; 37-39). He even argued that anyone who believed the writings of Moses would accept him (Jn. 5:45-47). Hence, he regularly came into conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees over the oral Torah, especially concerning things like their additions of oral law to Sabbath observance (Mt. 12:1-8//Lk. 6:1-11; Jn. 5:8-16;

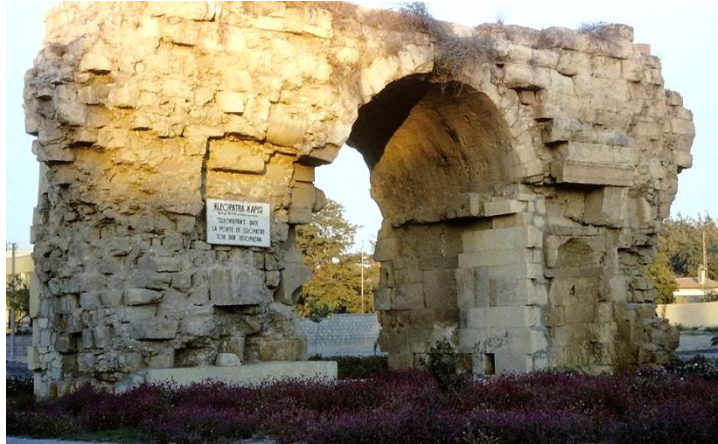
<sup>1</sup> By referencing Abel and Zechariah ben Berakiah/Jehoiada, Jesus was citing two individuals who served as “bookends” to the Hebrew Scriptures, Abel from the first book (Ge. 4:8) and Zechariah from the last book (2 Chr. 24:20-22). In referencing the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms, Jesus implicitly embraced the three collections of Scriptures, the *Torah*, the *Nebiim* (prophets), and the *Kethubim* (Writings).

## TORAH SURVEY

9:13-34) and the ceremonial baptism/washing of hands (Mk. 7:1-8; Mt. 15:1-9).

### Paul and the Torah

Like Jesus, Paul also was reared in a Torah-observant home (Ac. 26:4-5). Even though living within the Diaspora Jewish community in Cilicia, he considered himself a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” which at



*Cleopatra's gate, one of three Roman gates in Tarsus, Cilicia, Paul's home city, has survived. Paul was justly proud of his birthplace, which he described as “no ordinary city” (Acts 21:39).*

the very least meant that he was not only Greek-speaking, but Hebrew and Aramaic speaking (Ac. 21:40). He was justly proud of his Israelite heritage with a clear pedigree in the Benjamite tribe (Phil. 3:4-6). One might suppose that it was hubris that made him say, “As for righteousness according to the Torah, I was blameless” (Phil. 3:6b), but he wasn't merely bragging when he said this—he was accentuating what he gave up in order to become a Christian (Phil. 3:7; Ro. 11:1).

Paul also belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, what he calls “the strictest sect of our religion” (Ac. 26:5). Indeed, even after he was a Christian, he

continued to identify himself with the Pharisees (Ac. 23:6). His family had sent him to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, one of the most well-known Pharisees of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, where he candidly states that he was “thoroughly trained in the Torah” (Ac. 22:3) and “zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Ga. 1:14). Unfortunately, his Pharisaic zeal prompted him to regard Jesus of Nazareth as a false prophet, and he aggressively sought out those remaining Jewish disciples of Jesus, extraditing them from far-flung synagogues and bringing them to heresy trials in Jerusalem (Ac. 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:9-11; Phil. 3:6a). Paul's view of the oral Torah is unknown, but as a non-Christian Pharisee, he likely upheld it, though later, as a Christian, he likely did not. In his writings, he quotes regularly from the Torah, both in its Hebrew version as well as its Greek version (the Septuagint).

When Paul was confronted with a vision of Christ on the Damascus Road, his religious world-view changed abruptly (Ac. 9:3-19; 22:6-21; 26:12-18). From a violent persecutor of Christians, a religious crime that he never forgot (1 Co. 15:9; Ga. 1:13; 1 Ti. 1:13), he turned into one of the foremost advocates of the Christian faith, one of its first missionaries, and the author of about a quarter of the New Testament. Given his conversion to Christianity, one might suppose that he would simply turn away from the Torah altogether, but in fact, this was not the case. Like many Jewish Christians who continued to be Torah-observant (Ac. 21:20), Paul was no exception. While he seems to be somewhat ambivalent about kosher food laws (Ro. 14:2, 14; 15:1), he continued to uphold circumcision for Jewish Christians due to their Jewishness (Ac. 16:3). Still, he was equally adamant that circumcision was not required for non-Jewish Christians (Ac. 15:1-2; 1 Co. 7:18; Ro. 4:11; Ga. 2:3-5; 5:2; 6:12-15; Phil. 3:2-3). As a Jew, he even took a Nazirite vow for a period of time, a form of special dedication to God (Ac. 18:18), and he completed this vow in the Jerusalem temple along with other Jewish Christians to demonstrate that he was Torah-observant (21:23-24; cf. Nu. 6:1-21).



### THE TORAH AS THE LAW

*English Bible translators consistently translate the Greek term νόμος in the New Testament as “law,” which is the word that in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) is used to render the Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (= Torah). Usually when Paul uses this word, he refers to the first section of the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). What is most important is that when he speaks of “the law,” he is not referring to law as a general principle (i.e., he is not referring to Roman law), but rather, to the laws of Moses as found in the Pentateuch.*

As a Christian leader, Paul remained positive toward the Torah. It was “holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Ro. 7:12). In the Torah was the “embodiment of knowledge and truth” (Ro. 2:20). Without hesitation, Paul could say that he believed in everything that agreed with the Torah (Ac. 24:14b). He held that the Torah was spiritual (Ro. 7:14a). He certainly upheld the Ten Commandments, though he also affirmed, almost certainly on the basis of the teachings of Christ, that they are fulfilled in the Levitical command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Ro. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:14; cf. Mt. 22:36-40; Mk. 12:28-34; Lk. 10:25-28; Lv. 19:18). Even in adjudicating an issue such as whether or not Christian ministers should be supported by those among whom they worked, he could appeal to the law in the Torah that said, “Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” (1 Co. 9:8-10; cf. Dt. 25:4).

Even though Paul was accused by some of teaching Jews to abandon the Torah (Ac. 21:21), this report was a fallacy. Paul was not anti-Torah. At the same time, it is equally true that Paul came to some striking conclusions about the role of the Torah in Christian life, conclusions that were certainly new and ground-breaking. Foremost among them was that the law of Moses was never intended to be an end in itself. While most Pharisees and indeed most Jews viewed Moses’ law as the final revelation of God’s will, Paul, to the contrary, urged that the law was an intermediate guide between God’s promises to Abraham and the coming of Christ. The primary role of the law, according to Paul, was to define sin (Ro. 3:20b; 5:13; 7:7, 13). Its purpose was to identify sin until the coming of Christ (Ga. 3:19, 22). Indeed, using the metaphor of a child being chaperoned to day-school by a slave, Paul says the role of the law was that of a slave-custodian to bring us to Christ (Ga. 3:24-25).<sup>2</sup>

### What the Law Could Not Do

As such, the Torah in itself could not impart spiritual life (Gal. 3:21). To be sure, complete obedience to the Torah had been set forth as a choice toward life (cf. Dt. 30:15, 19), but the stubborn fact remained that human fallibility was a deeply embedded flaw preventing full obedience (Dt. 31:24-29). There were no exceptions: all humans, Jew and non-Jew alike, had sinned and fallen short (Ro. 3:23). Hence, Paul urged that there was something the Torah simply could not do. What it was powerless to do, Christ did through his death on the cross and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ro. 8:3-4). Does the Torah, then, still have a role for Christians? Paul says, yes! All those ancient texts continue to serve as a teaching instrument (Ro. 15:4). They challenge Christians to avoid setting their hearts on what is evil; they are warnings for Christians (1 Co. 10:6-13). Still, with respect to salvation, Christians are under grace, not under law (Ro. 3:24-26; 5:1-2, 6-11; 6:14; Gal. 2:19-21).

<sup>22</sup> The Greek term παιδαγωγός that Paul uses here refers to a slave-attendant (literally a “boy-leader”), whose duty was to superintend the conduct of the boys in the family to which he was attached. The older KJV rendering of this word as “schoolmaster” is close but not entirely adequate.