

“WAS JESUS A DEVOUT TORAH-OBSERVANT JEW?”

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The Hebrew word “Torah” is the general OT term for divine instruction and guidance. Like most words, it’s meaning morphed over time. Initially it referred to God’s instruction given by priestly and prophetic oracle ([Deut. 33: 8-11](#)). It came also to mean the substance of the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses), *contra* the rest of the prophetic writings. It later also took on a very technical and legal meaning by stipulating the national obligations as directed by the Law of Moses in covenant with Israel.

So, does our question ask whether Jesus believed what Moses wrote in the Pentateuch? (Obviously the answer is he did, for he said even the smallest Hebrew letter or punctuation marks would remain until the present heavens and earth pass away.) Does it ask if Jesus lived by and fulfilled all the prophets predicted concerning himself? (Obviously the NT states Jesus fulfilled all that Moses and the prophets predicted concerning himself ([Lk. 24:27](#).) Does it ask if Jesus obeyed all the legal and covenantal obligations of the Law of Moses? If so, as I will shortly show, the answer is that Jesus was **not** a devout legalist after the letter of the Law of Moses.

So, not knowing exactly which nuance is in the mind of this questioner, I am hazarding a guess they are really asking “Did Jesus keep the *letter* of the Law of Moses?” For, you will note, the emphasis is on the word in italics --- *devout*.

A DISTURBING EMAIL

Coincidentally, as I was starting to answer the question, I received another email on the same topic. The burden of this email was to suggest that “Jesus was born to be a Torah-observant Jew”. In support of his contention, it was suggested our modern translations of [Galatians chapter 4](#) are based on corrupted manuscripts and are therefore, in need of urgent overhaul.

It was urged that there is one reliable manuscript which alone faithfully records Paul’s pen on [Galatians 4: 4](#) (*sic*) and, it is known as P46. P46 according to this writer, “removes a lot of the subtle and insidious pagan corruptions and distortion that have crept into the presuppositional mindsets of the modern translators and their translation that have been based on versions dating to many, many centuries removed in time from the autograph, whereas P46 (circa 170CE) is possibly as much as only 1 transcription & translation from the autograph (original)”, and so should be our standard. Here is how this author wants us to read [Galatians 4:4-7](#) based on P46;

4 "And so in due course, when the time was ripe, G-d sent His son, born out from a woman, to become responsible to Torah-law,

5 so as to buy time for those responsible to Torah-law, in order for them to acquire the status of being adopted.

6 And that, because when you are becoming sons, G-d sends His Spirit into our hearts, which calls out “Abba,” the Father,

7 so that no longer are you existing as a servant, but rather as a son, and if as a son, also as an heir through G-d." ¹

¹ The email writer is citing the passage as translated by Uriel ben Mordechai.

The email went on to say the usual translation of **Galatians 4: 4** teaches “the heresy of the virgin birth”!? When I first read this, my eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets! Surely I had misread this revised “take”? For, according to this re-translation --- allegedly based on the only surviving uncorrupted text (again *sic!*)--- Jesus was born with a mission **to become responsible to Torah-law.**

Please find me a devout Jew who did not feel that was and is his or her calling in life anyway! This makes Jesus no different to any other Jew who wished to honour God in any generation since Moses! Did Jesus have no higher mission than to model Torah *devoutly*?

But that’s not all. One error often leads to another. Did you notice how this novel translation goes on to say it was the purpose of God’s Son **to buy time for those responsible to Torah-law, in order for them to acquire the status of being adopted.**

It goes without saying this is a radical shift from what we currently read in our Bibles! Is it warranted? I think not, and will show it is a corruption of what Paul wrote! I say this confidently for one simple and convincing reason: **Context.**

GENERAL CONTEXT

I suggest we stand back, and take an overview --- get the big picture first.

The stated purpose for Paul’s writing **Galatians** is to counter false teachers who were teaching **another Gospel (Gal.1: 6f)**. . Certain Judaizers were insisting that, unless a Christian submits to the Law (i.e. Torah of Moses) in addition to faith in Christ Jesus, they could not be members of the community of the saved. For them, Torah-obedience meant being circumcised, being initiated into the legal and moral obligations of the covenant of Moses.

Paul’s response is a vehement polemic against anything that threatens the bedrock of the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ’s all-sufficiency apart from Torah observance. The central idea is not what a man can do for God, but what God has done for man in His Son, Jesus Christ. Indeed, the **Letter to the Galatians** has been called the Christian *Magna Carta*, for if the Torah-promoters had won the debate, then Christianity would have been consigned to being just another Jewish sect, instead of appealing to the nations of the world.

This general context is the first reason why our novel translation is askew. It’s saying something entirely contradictory to the rest of Galatians!

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

The immediate context of **Galatians 4** illustrates,

... the contrast between the age of immaturity, characterized by the supervision of the law, and the age of maturity, which is the age of living by God’s Spirit received by means of faith in Jesus Christ. God’s people have moved in Christ into a new dynamic with respect to relationships between themselves and God and with one another in Christ.

No longer under the tutelage of the Mosaic legislation, which Paul identified as the temporary extension of the Abrahamic covenant, Jewish and Gentile believers who replicate Abraham’s faith enter in the age of maturity before the Father. ²

This immediate context is the second reason why our revised translation cannot be correct. Paul is

² *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Revised Edition) Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, General Editors, Zondervan, Vol. 11, *Romans -- Galatians*, 2008, p603.

actually saying that with the arrival of Christ, God's redemptive history has moved from one age (that of immaturity and subservience to the Torah of Moses) to the next age (that of maturity and freedom in the Spirit).

For Paul --- note how he includes himself as a previous Torah-observant Jew *before he met Christ* (**we were children, we were in slavery under the elements of the world!**) --- to keep the letter of the Law was to remain in a state of immature infancy and to be held in custody to enslaving elements of the world (Gal. 4: 1-3). ³

However, with the coming of Abraham's promised Seed --- Jesus the Messiah --- God is now making believers in Christ into His **sons** through faith. Believers in Christ now **receive the full rights of sons**, being able to function as mature persons in relationship to God arising out of an inner transformation by the Spirit --- and not by external compulsion imposed by the Law.

Believers have thus received the **Spirit of His Son, by which we cry 'Abba'**. ⁴ Thus, the whole wider context and the immediate context of **Galatians 4: 4-7** scream to us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ apart from Torah-observance is the true expression of faith in God in the new covenant sealed by Jesus' blood.

Christian believers who have been set free by this Gospel-word of Christ must not go back under bondage to the elementary principles of the world of the letter of Torah! Not to be too crass, that's like putting our dummy back in our mouth (pacifier for you Americans who read this!) and putting our nappies back on (diapers for my American friends who insist on being so different to the rest of us!).

AN EARLY CONFSSIONAL FORMULA

Here's another interesting observation. Many accredited Bible scholars have noted that Paul incorporates into his argument an early confessional formula from the early church. **Galatians 4: 4-5** in other words, was a well-known confessional creed on the lips of the first century Christians:

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.

Compare that powerfully straight forward confession with the bold change by our novel translator: **G-d sent His son, born out from a woman, to become responsible to Torah-law, so as to buy time for those responsible to Torah-law ...** This new translation is stunningly audacious, is it not? If you believe the new rendition, Jesus came to keep Torah-law himself that he might, **buy time for those responsible to Torah-law** --- presumably to give the Jews of that generation opportunity to become God's adopted sons and for the rest of us to start keeping the Torah of Moses?

It's hard to imagine how this confession could have turned the world upside down in that First Century!?! No, no. The rest of the NT witness is that Jesus Christ redeemed **us** to God by the shedding of his own blood at Calvary. Jesus did not buy back *time*, he redeemed *mankind* for God's Kingdom!

This "cowboy" translation is saying the exact opposite to the rest of the NT Gospel witness. This is a translation that corrupts, distorts, and subverts the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Is anybody else round here starting to smell a rat?)

AS A YOUNG MAN JESUS DID GROW UP UNDER THE LAW, A TORAH-OBSERVANT JEW.

³ The word for 'children' here is actually the word for **infants** or **small children** (**nepios**).

⁴ The Aramaic term *Abba* is **not** a casual term akin to the English "daddy" as is popularly believed. It is a term of deep respect, even if used intimately of filial relationship. *Ibid* p 607

Taking the standard reading to be contextually and grammatically right, it's clear that, **being born under the Law** describes a Jewish lad growing up in a *devout* Jewish home in the First Century of our "Common Era". ⁵

We know that according to the Law, Jesus was taken by his parents to be circumcised the 8th day, and that **when they had performed all things according to the Law of the LORD, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth (Lk. 2: 39).**

We also know that as a lad of 12 years, his parents took Jesus up to Jerusalem and the Temple to keep **the feast of the Passover (Lk. 2: 41)** according to the Torah of Moses. Now, in the Jewish world, when a boy had reached his twelfth birthday, on the first Sabbath after it, the father took the lad to the Synagogue, where he became *A Son of the Law*.

The father uttered this benediction, **"Blessed be Thou, O God, who has taken from me the responsibility for this boy."**

The boy then prayed a prayer, **"O my God and the God of my fathers! On this solemn and sacred day, which marks my passage from boyhood to manhood, I humbly raise my eyes unto Thee, and declare with sincerity and truth, that henceforth I will keep Thy commandments, and undertake and bear the responsibility of mine actions towards Thee."**

There was a clear dividing line between being a boy and a man. The Romans also had a custom that on the day a boy or girl grew up, the boy offered his ball and the girl offered her doll up to the god Apollo to show that he or she had put away childish things.

It's clear that Jesus, as the 12 year old boy in Jerusalem, now took his new manhood before his Father God very seriously. For he became so immersed in his discussions with the Jewish doctors of the Law, that he had not realised his parents were already on their way back home to Galilee without him.

When they had finally returned and found him in the Temple some days later, Jesus was incredulous that his mother Mary and Joseph were beside themselves with anxiety over their missing boy. (Where had he slept those couple of nights? Surely he realised he was alone away from his family?) Answering his mother's obvious distress, Jesus gave the first public notice that his "zeal" for God his Father would set him on a very unique career:

"Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know I must be in My Father's affairs" (Lk. 2: 49)?

Key Moment: Jesus was *devoted* to His heavenly Father --- as any *devout* Jew would want to be! He was **born under the Law Gal. 4:4**). That's why he returned home and for the next how many years was obedient to his parents (**Lk. 2: 51**). According to the Torah of Moses, this *devout* Jewish young man honoured his father and his mother. Not necessarily any conflict of interest here.

Next key moment: A multitude of Biblical commentators recognize the baptism of Jesus was pivotal in his mission and identity as the Jewish Messiah. God's heavenly testimony was that this Jesus was anointed to be the LORD'S Messiah for Israel and the Gentile peoples of the world. Parallels between his anointing and the Israelites under Moses in the wilderness abound: Red Sea crossing = Jesus' baptism. Forty days of testing in the desert = 40 years of Israel's trials. Jesus calling 12 disciples = Israel's 12 tribes. Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" = Moses on Mt Sinai, etc.

⁵ "Being born" may be faithfully rendered as "coming to be" (*genomenon*), thus describing the beginning of Jesus' existence, and is very likely a reference to Paul's belief that Jesus was uniquely virgin born.

However, right from his opening *manifesto* when he came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, it's clear that Jesus believed himself to have received a higher authority and office than Moses.

Indeed, we have the express statement from the lips of Jesus himself that, **the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John [the Baptist]; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached ... (Lk. 16: 16)**. So, Jesus was aware that the Torah-law of Moses and the Prophets had run its course! Jesus was not preaching Torah-observance. He was preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom --- something the Law foreshadowed and the Prophets predicted but could not deliver.

The Book of Hebrews summarises this shift between the old covenant of Torah-law by saying that Moses was a **faithful servant in all God's house**, but that Jesus as **God's Son is the heir of the whole house** (**Heb. 3: 1ff**)! *Jesus did not come to serve Moses!*

How absurd then, for our novel translator to suggest Jesus came **to become responsible to Torah-law** so as to **buy [more] time** for us to keep the Law!? This is a critical failure to understand Jesus and his Gospel mission.

Jesus did not come to reinforce Moses by calling the people back to the letter of the Law. Although he stated he had no intention of **destroying the Law**, Jesus made it clear he had come to **fulfill the Law**.

What does fulfill the Law mean? ⁶

If it means Jesus kept all the written letter of the Torah, then he actually *failed* his brief! For Jesus broke the letter of the Law of Moses in a number of very critical points.

Foods. Does not the Law of Moses forbid the eating of certain foods, declaring certain meats for instance, **unclean**? But Jesus declared to **all the people**, **"Listen to me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from outside a man, which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile him"** (Mk. 7: 14-15).

The inspired apostolic commentary goes on to say, **Thus Jesus declared all foods clean"** (Mk. 7:19)! Now that does not sound like Jesus was keeping the letter of the Law of Moses at all! In fact, it sounds awfully much as though Jesus is trumping the Torah of Moses.

It took his own apostles a long time to work out the implications of Jesus' radical re-ordering of Moses (see Peter in **Acts 10**; **Gal. 2** but observe the apostle Paul agreed by acknowledging, **I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself ... For the kingdom of God is not in [regulated laws of] eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in a holy spirit (Rom. 14: 14, 17)**).

Divorce. Jesus even cut right across Moses' law on divorce, going so far as to state that Moses' law on divorce was only **temporary!** Jesus appealed to the prior order of God's created intention for man and woman, saying, **"I say unto you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery"** (Mat. 19: 9).

So, Moses **permitted**, but Jesus over-rode Moses' letter! (**Matt. 19: 3ff**). In this regard, Jesus was not a *devout* Torah observer. And when the woman caught in the very act of adultery was brought before him, Jesus disregarded the clear Mosaic law to stone such immoral men and women (**Deut. 22: 22**).

⁶ For a fuller discussion of this theme see my article in the section, *Should We Keep The Sabbath? 5. Jesus and the Law*.

Sabbath. The Torah of Moses clearly directed every *devout* Jew to do no work, nor to travel, nor to light fires and to cook food, **nor even to go out of his own place on the Sabbath day (Ex. 16:23-26, 29).** But Jesus did not keep the letter of this Law of Torah either. He and his disciples were out walking on the Sabbath day, picking and harvesting grain. And certainly Jesus did not insist on the death penalty for anybody picking up sticks on the Sabbath as the old Law modelled! ⁷

We ask again: *What does this mean?* Obviously, Jesus did not keep the letter of the Law. In this sense Jesus was not a *devout* Torah-observant Jew. It's very clear that Jesus inaugurated a **new** Torah based on the dynamic of the Spirit. ⁸

The Temple. And can you imagine any Torah-observant Jew claiming that he was greater than the Temple? The Temple of course, is where the whole Levitical Priesthood, according to the Law of Moses, functioned on God's behalf. The Temple was where the very Shekinah Glory of God dwelt on earth. Yet, Jesus claimed superior authority, greater precedence over the Temple itself.

Shock! Horror! This is definitely not the attitude of a Torah-observant Jew!

Was Jesus a *devout* observer of Torah? This is a profound question that delves to the very depths of our understanding of Jesus' self-identity and of his calling. For if by that question is meant, did Jesus keep the letter of the Torah of Moses, the answer is clearly, no.

But if the question asks, did Jesus devoutly fulfill the will of the God of Moses, the God of Abraham, the God of Israel, the will of God his Father, then the answer is yes. He always said and did those things that pleased His Father. He loved His God and Father with all his heart, mind, soul and body. He walked in faith in the promises of God to himself as Messiah. And that is the essence of Torah-observance --- to walk in the Spirit of sonship.

So no. God did not send Jesus **to become responsible to Torah-law**, just so he could **buy time for those responsible to Torah-law to become sons of God**. Jesus did not come to keep the letter of the Law just so he could be an even higher model for us to emulate.

If Jesus came only to be my model for keeping Torah-law, then I am doomed. For if Moses said I should not commit adultery, but Jesus says I should not even look on a woman with lustful desire, then Jesus is speaking of a higher, inner, and spiritual standard for my heart before God. My guilt as a sinner is worse if Jesus only came to buy me more time to get my life in order!?

If Jesus came only to be my model for keeping Torah-law, then I am condemned. For if Moses said, I shall not commit murder, but Jesus says I should not even call my fellow human being 'fool', then Jesus is speaking of a higher, inner, and spiritual standard for my heart before God. My guilt is worse if Jesus was born just to buy me more time to get it right!?

If jumping over the barbed wire fence is challenging enough, how am I going to go leaping over the moon? The Bible says, although God's commandment is holy and righteous and good, nevertheless **the commandment cannot impart *life*** (Gal. 3: 21). Only God's risen and living Son can do that for us.

Thank God for the Gospel of salvation by God's grace through faith in Christ **apart from Torah-keeping!** We are saved by grace through faith in what Christ has accomplished apart from any

⁷ For a fuller discussion of this theme see my article in the section, *Should We Keep the Sabbath? 4. Jesus and the Sabbath.*

⁸ For a fuller discussion of this theme see my article in the section, *Should We Keep the Sabbath? 10. Love Fulfills the Law.*

merit of our own. We do not receive the Spirit by keeping the letter of the Law, but by **the hearing of faith**. Salvation in Christ is being joined to the very life of God Himself in union with Christ.

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10: 4). Which is to say, with the advent of the Son of God, the purpose of the Law has reached its desired end. When Christ died, the Law's purpose was fulfilled and thus its demands and hold over us are cancelled. The believer in Messiah is no longer under obligation to observe the letter of Moses' Torah. ⁹

Does this mean I am now free to live an antinomian life? Not at all. Christ has by his Gospel-word transformed the whole inner dynamic of my life. I *want* to live for my Lord. I *love* God my heavenly Father! I *desire* to love my fellow human beings with the love by which I have been loved. For the Spirit of God's Son dwells in me.

I could not summarise this question any better than in Professor Anthony Buzzard's words:

The key issue is this: Is Christianity to be based on Jesus or not?
If Jesus kept the law of Moses in the letter then we have to also, to follow Jesus.

That means we all have to be Torah-in-the-letter people. But we know from **I Cor 9:20** that Paul the ideal Christian was **not under the law**.

So to say that Jesus kept all the words of Moses in the letter means that Paul was not following Jesus. The only solution is that Jesus gave his own new Torah of Messiah which is not an exact copy of Moses.

The important thing is to define Christianity as the religion taught by Jesus. Otherwise everything falls into chaos, as it has! ¹⁰

Precisely. Why would anybody want to continue to be tyrannised by the letter of Torah-law when the freedom of manhood in Christ Jesus beckons? Jesus has redeemed us from the elementary teachings of Torah-law. We are now full-grown sons indwelt by the Spirit and we look up in our new relationship and sigh with deep gratitude: ***Abba!***

⁹ This is really a huge subject and I have dealt with it comprehensively in the **ARTICLES** section *Should We Keep the Sabbath?* on this website: www.thebiblejesus.com

¹⁰ Private email received on Saturday 24th Nov. 2018.