

Article

# Jewish Law-Observance in Paul

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**Abstract:** Several statements in Paul’s letters have led scholars to conclude that Paul was not Law-observant and that he was at best indifferent, if not antagonistic, to Jewish Law-observance. This article challenges these views by situating supposedly “negative” statements on the Law within Paul’s discourse on justification (Gal 2) and freedom from the Law of sin and death (Rom 7), and argues that aspects of 1 Cor 7, Gal 2–3, and Rom 3–4 imply Paul expected even believing Jews to remain Law-observant.

**Keywords:** Gal 2:19; Romans 7; 1 Cor 7; 1 Corinthians 9:20–21; law-observance; Paul within Judaism

## 1. Introduction

“Paul, in his practice, was *selective* about the law. He regarded it as an *adiaphoron*, and he *treated* it as such, too. In Jewish eyes, such an attitude amounted, of course, to a rejection of the Law. The evidence is definitely against the view that Paul scrupulously observed the whole Torah throughout his life” (Räsänen 1986, p. 77). So concludes Heikki Räsänen in his monograph, *Paul and the Law*, concerning Paul’s own practice of the Law. Several scholars argue similarly, though of course the opinion pre-dates Räsänen. After all, in addition to claiming he is “not under the Law” (1 Cor 9:20), Paul says that the Law “kills” (2 Cor 3:6) and cannot “impart life” (Gal 3:21). Moreover, he says he “died to the Law” (Gal 2:19; cp. Rom 7:4) and has been “released from the law” (Rom 7:6).<sup>1</sup> Do these statements not imply that Paul ceased Law-observance and considered Jewish Law-observance a matter of complete indifference? Several interpreters have so construed them. Such Pauline sayings admittedly present a challenge to those who interpret Paul’s letters as endorsing Jewish Law-observance on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:17–20, as many now do so (Tomson 1990, pp. 271–72; Rudolph 2016, pp. 82–85; Tucker 2011, pp. 77–80; Thiessen 2016, pp. 8–11; Collman 2023, pp. 41–45; Collman 2023, p. 42 also cites Eisenbaum 2009, pp. 62–63; Bockmuehl 2000, pp. 170–72; Runesson 2013, pp. 216–19).

From the latter verses, many have inferred a Pauline “rule” for his assemblies in which he directs believers to remain in the social “condition”—circumcised or not—in which they believed the gospel, telling them to “walk” in the manner befitting that social location: “as God has called each, in this manner let him walk” (1 Cor 7:17). Because he later glosses this expectation in terms of his instruction to “keep the commandments of God” (1 Cor 7:19), many infer that one’s “walk” is expressed via the keeping of the commandments attendant to one’s social position. On this reading, 1 Corinthians 7 envisages the kind of arrangement depicted in Acts 15:<sup>2</sup> one set of commandments governing the circumcised, and another (presumably smaller) set of commandments governing the foreskinned.<sup>3</sup> However, for many, the above-quoted verses naming a “death to” and “release from” the Law overrule, indicating that for Paul continued Law-observance is completely *adiaphora*.

N.T. Wright is exemplary in this regard. He states that Paul’s assertion of having died to the Law (Gal 2:19) “remains strangely absent from the discussions of those who want to



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claim that Paul remained a ‘Torah-observant Jew’” (Wright 2013, p. 1429). After quoting Gal 2:19, Wright asks,

How much clearer do things need to be? I can understand people who are rightly concerned for Christian-Jewish relations today struggling with this text. I can understand people trying to imagine that it was maybe a rhetorical overstatement. What I cannot understand is people trying to make an argument that Paul was in some sense a Torah-observant Jew but not even mentioning this major piece of counter-evidence. Nor can I understand someone suggesting that for Paul to recognize Jesus as Messiah ‘did not mean any repudiation of the Torah.’ If ‘dying to something’ is not repudiating it, Paul’s words have no meaning. (Wright 2013, p. 1430)

Paul’s letters, I think, reveal his expectation that even believing Jews ought to continue keeping the Law. But Wright is justified in foregrounding these texts as potential challenges to that view. Thus, this short article seeks to fill a gap that Wright and others have noted.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Wright’s claim and those like it, these verses from Galatians and Romans simply do not speak to the question of continued Law-observance by Paul or other Jews. Moreover, a few verses not routinely interrogated along these lines (Rom 4:11–16) suggest that Paul continued to regard the Law and its keeping as a defining characteristic of Jewish social identity that he expected to perdure at least until the general resurrection. Such expected Law-keeping does not function at the soteriological register, as if Paul thought Jews merited salvation by Law-observance; rather, according to Paul’s reasoning, such Jewish Law-keeping expressed their belonging to those “of the circumcision”, a people whose existence and perdurance Paul regards as ordained by God as one of the nations comprising Abraham’s promised “seed”. To make this argument, I will address texts that seem to oppose the idea (Gal 2:19; Rom 7:6), disentangling his conviction about the Law’s inability to justify from a wholesale rejection of continued observance of the Law by Jews, and highlight elements within his teaching that imply, or even positively teach, an expectation of Jewish Law-observance.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Galatians 2:19: Through the Law I Died to the Law

Paul’s statement that he “died to the law” occurs after he recounts his episode with Peter at Antioch and its implications for the situation in Galatians. The discourse in Galatians 2–3 unfolds not around Jewish Law-keeping by itself, but Law as the basis for justification/eschatological righteousness. The particularity of this argument controls Paul’s meaning about “dying to the Law”. If Jewish Law-keeping in itself is not the issue, then Paul’s dying to the Law does not necessarily have implications for his or any other Jews’ continued observance, and it leaves open another value to Jewish Law-keeping that Paul’s letters imply. I will return to this point after addressing the negative arguments, beginning with Galatians 2.

Paul recounts his visit to Jerusalem wherein “the truth of the gospel” for the Galatians was said to have been maintained (2:5) by Titus’s not being compelled to be circumcised (2:3). Key to understanding the issue at stake in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia is Gal 3:8, wherein the “gospel” pre-announced to Abraham was that “all the nations” would be blessed in Abraham (3:8), in conjunction with 2:14, which implies that gentiles “Judaize”, i.e., become Jews to some degree, by doing the Law (2:14). But, if gentiles “Judaize” by circumcising and keeping other bodies of commandments, and if such Law-keeping by gentiles is required for justification and being reckoned “seed of Abraham”, then the truth of the gospel, which is explicitly described as the blessing of “the nations” (3:8), cannot obtain. Gentiles who Judaize by Law-keeping become Jews, and so God’s promise to

Abraham to bless the nations *qua* nations is compromised (*inter alia* Nanos 2015, pp. 105–52; see also Fredriksen 1991, pp. 532–64; 2000, pp. 232–52).

However, Paul notes that not even Titus, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised (2:3). Paul then claims that Peter and the other “pillars” affirmed the gospel he preaches to the nations (2:2–10), setting the stage for Paul’s frustration with Peter’s actions in Antioch. Peter had been happily eating with gentiles prior to the arrival of “some men from James” (2:12). But when they arrived, Peter withdrew. Paul recounts his words to Peter: “If you, being a Jew, live like the gentiles (ἔθνικῶς) and not like the Jews (οὐχὶ Ἰουδαϊκῶς), how is it that you compel the gentiles to Judaize?” (2:14).

It is not clear what Peter “living like a gentile” would entail. It does not require that he was eating non-permissible food, e.g., pork, given that Paul recounts Peter’s about-face not in terms of changing his diet but changing where and with whom he ate (2:12).<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the status of the wine was the object of contention, given that Jews customarily expressed disdain for gentile wine due to its probable association with libations to other gods.<sup>7</sup> However, probably at stake was the kind of shock reported in Acts 11:3, wherein “those from circumcision” (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) in Jerusalem (Acts 11:2) expressed surprise that Peter met with “men with foreskin and ate with them” (Acts 11:3). From their point of view, eating with “men with foreskin” implied acceptance of them as foreskinned men. A similar point seems to be at stake in Jesus’s eating with sinners: the point of conflict is not that Jesus in eating with sinners was eating forbidden food or was becoming impure (neither of which are accused by the Pharisees or defended against by Jesus),<sup>8</sup> rather, his eating with sinners suggested to the Pharisees Jesus’s acceptance of them as sinners. And it is just this supposition that Jesus refutes: he ate with them not to accept them as sinners but to call them to repentance (Luke 5:32; cf. this implicit point in Mark 2:17 and Matt 9:12–13). In the case of Acts, however, their foreskinned state, i.e., their status as gentiles, is just what God has approved, as Acts 10:15, 28 make clear. In other words, the men from Jerusalem (Acts 11:2), not yet knowing about the revelation given to Peter wherein God “cleansed” the gentiles,<sup>9</sup> object to his eating with gentiles due to the message it sent: acceptance of them as gentiles. Once Peter narrated to them God’s revelation concerning the gentiles’ “cleansed” state, the Jews from Jerusalem conceded and “glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18).<sup>10</sup>

It appears a similar situation obtained in the Antioch incident. Some, presumably from Jerusalem, expressed shock that Peter was “eating with gentiles”. Paul claims that Peter’s withdrawal was not walking “according to the truth of the gospel” (2:14), recalling his point that the non-circumcision of Titus, and thus his acceptability as a gentile, expressed “the truth of the gospel” (2:5). Paula Fredriksen disagrees, arguing that Peter eating with gentiles had not been the issue, because “James, Peter, and John had already agreed back in Jerusalem to the principles of a gentile mission (2.7–10)” (Fredriksen 2017, p. 96). But that is precisely the point: Paul presents the Antioch incident as betraying the principles they had just agreed on per Gal 2:1–10, which explains Paul’s surprise that Peter acted contrary to its decision.<sup>11</sup> By withdrawing, the action of Peter and “the rest of the Jews” (2:13) pressured the gentiles to Judaize, that is, adopt Jewish practices, in order to have table fellowship. But if gentiles must become Jews (or behave Jewishly) to participate in fellowship with Christ-believing Jews, it implies that God is only the god of the Jews (cf. Rom 3:29), and that his “gospel” promise to Abraham to bless the gentiles (3:8) is invalidated. This understanding of the situation contextualizes his subsequent claims about “justification on the basis of works of the Law” (2:16). Justification is not on the basis of works of the Law alone, as the Jews know (2:15–16).<sup>12</sup> Knowing this, Peter and Paul, being Jews, believed in Christ “so that we might be justified” (2:16). Consequently, the Law as the basis for justification is clearly the topic, not general Jewish Law-observance in itself. Thus, what Paul “tore down”

is not the Law in itself, but the Law as the basis of justification for Jews and gentiles (2:18). If the Law is the basis for justification, Paul has been transgressing (Gal 2:18), in that he has not been requiring circumcision and total Law-adherence of gentiles.<sup>13</sup>

Galatians 2:19 is then logically linked with 2:18, which itself expresses Paul's conviction that he tore down the Law as the basis of justification, implying that 2:19's "death to the Law" is not a death to Law-observance in itself, but a death to the Law as the basis of eschatological righteousness.<sup>14</sup> He states, "For through the Law I died to the Law (ἐγὼ γὰρ διὰ νόμου νόμῳ ἀπέθανον), that I might live to God" (2:19). This sentence is notoriously dense, but I think its basic sense can be retrieved. Notably, he does not yet say that he died to the Law through dying with Christ. Rather, he died to the Law "through the Law", implying the Law was instrumental in his death. Paul probably hereby reflects the Deuteronomic notion that Israel was given the Law and was promised "life and death" (τὴν ζωὴν καὶ τὸν θάνατον), respectively contingent on its keeping (Deut 30:15).<sup>15</sup> Having violated the Law, Israel received the promised punishment of "perishing" (Deut 30:18), and so "died" (Boakye 2017, pp. 112–13; see also Morales 2010, pp. 86–96; Staples 2023, pp. 68–106). This Deuteronomic imagery probably accounts for Ezekiel 37's graphic depiction of "Israel" as dead in the valley (Ezek 37:1–11), who only comes to life by the gift of God's "spirit" (Ezek 37:5–6, 14). Israel as "dead" because of their sin is reflected in some Second Temple literature (e.g., Baruch 3:3, 10–11; Luke 15:32), and is notoriously explored in 2 Cor 3, wherein "the letter kills" and the Mosaic ministry was one of "death" (2 Cor 3:6–7) (see Hafemann 2005; Staples 2023, pp. 68–100). Furthermore, that Paul names the Spirit as that which "resurrects" (2 Cor 3:6) and produces "life" (Gal 6:8) in contexts where he claims the "letter" or "Law" has killed (2 Cor 3:6; Gal 2:19) strongly implies dependence on Ezekiel 37's vision of God's "spirit" raising "dead" Israel back to life after their covenant violation (Ezek 37:5–6, 14) (Boakye 2017, pp. 112–15; Staples 2023, pp. 68–100). Significantly, Paul does not in Galatians or elsewhere blame the Law or criticize it for this function of "killing"; rather, like many Second Temple Jews, he interpreted Israel's history after the giving of the Law as one of disobedience and covenant violation that incurred the promised discipline, leading to Israel's "death" (Sloan 2023b; Staples 2023, pp. 85–100). Such punitive results were interpreted as the righteous work of God, manifesting God's faithfulness to the promises he made to Moses (see *inter alia* Dan 9:11–14). Consequently, Paul can say that he died "through the Law" because the Law sentenced Israel, of which Paul is a member, to "death" when they broke it.

Having died through the Law, Paul knows that the Law itself cannot be the means of justification. It was equipped to legislate Israel, atone for unintentional transgression, and codify Israel's punishments, but once it sentenced Israel to "death", it was not equipped to "resurrect" them. Mercifully, we do not have to guess at this meaning; it is precisely Paul's point in Galatians 3:21. If the Law could "resurrect" (ζωοποιῆσαι),<sup>16</sup> then righteousness would be based on the Law (ὄντως ἐκ νόμου ἂν ἦν ἡ δικαιοσύνη) (Gal 3:21), but such a Law was not given (Boakye 2017, pp. 109–12, 120–58). Thus, through the Law that killed him, Paul "died to the Law", that is, he died to the Law with reference to its capacity to justify or "resurrect" him. It was not able to make him "live to God" (Gal 2:19), and thus it is not the basis of justification, and he stopped pursuing it as if it were.<sup>17</sup> What Paul needed, he says, was to believe in Christ (2:16) and die with Christ so that he could "live to God" (Gal 2:19). Thus, "dying to the Law" does not require, or even obviously imply, a "death" to Law-observance post-faith (see related point in Wilson 2022b, p. 401); it can and should be completely explained with reference to a death to the Law as the means of restoration/righteousness and/or inclusion of the gentiles.<sup>18</sup>

Not only is "Law as basis of justification" the precise topic in Galatians 2:15–16, from which his claim in 2:19 flowers, but other Pauline passages require that it does not mean a

death to Law-observance completely. If the latter were Paul's meaning, requiring gentile believers to "fulfill the Law" through living according to one of its Levitical commandments ("love your neighbor as yourself") (Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8) would be not just superfluous but contradictory, as would requiring gentiles who receive circumcision to "do the whole Law" (Gal 5:3) and ruling that each person "keep the commandments" incumbent upon their social location (1 Cor 7:17–19). But this interpretation of Gal 2:19 does not yet prove that Paul assumed Jewish Law-observance post-faith was normative; it simply removes a barrier to that interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

### *A Brief Aside on Romans 7: We Have Been Released from the Law*

Space unfortunately precludes the kind of examination of Romans 7 that it and its scholarship deserves. But much of what has been said about Galatians 2–3 could be repeated here. Paul's claim that "we have been released from the Law" (Rom 7:6) does not speak to continued Jewish Law-observance post-faith as these words are employed not to end Jewish Law-observance but to explain the liberation from the captivity to sin and death with which the Law became entangled. As in Galatians, Paul's point is not that Jewish Law-keeping post-faith is a matter of indifference, but that the Law by itself was not equipped to liberate humans from "the body of death" (7:24). Though the commandment was meant "for life" (εἰς ζωὴν) (7:10), once again echoing the Deuteronomic notion that keeping the Law leads to "life" (τὴν ζωὴν) (Deut 30:15), it nonetheless resulted in "death" (Rom 7:10; cp. Deut 30:15) because "I" broke the commandment (Boakye 2017, p. 145; Staples 2023, pp. 85–89).<sup>20</sup>

Rather than simply distancing his audience from the Law in itself, Paul says that because the Law, experienced without the Spirit, entangles one with sin and thus with death, what is needed is liberation from "sin" (cf. 6:6–11) and "the Law of sin and death" (8:2), which is the commandment seized by sin that leads the one "in the flesh" to death (7:11–13). Significantly, Paul goes on to say that "dying to the Law" liberates one from sin and death, not "Law" generally or even the Mosaic Law specifically. This becomes clear at the closing of Romans 7 and the transition to Romans 8 (see King 2017), wherein the members of one's fleshly body were captive to "the Law of sin" (7:23), but with the gift of the Spirit, those in Christ who "walk according to the Spirit" can fulfill the Law's requirement (τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ νόμου) (8:4) (see Staples 2023, p. 89). Thus, having "died to the Law" (or possibly "by the Law") (7:4; cp. Gal 2:19) and having been "released from the Law" (7:6) most plausibly refer to the liberation from "the Law of sin", by which he means the Law as "seized" by "sin", which effects death (7:9–13). The problem surrounding the Law, then, was not "the Law" itself, but the fleshly composition of its recipients (8:3), who, when told not to covet, were not equipped to fulfill this demand.<sup>21</sup> That Paul proceeds to distinguish "the Law" as "the Law of sin" that leads to "death" (7:9–13, 23; 8:2) from "the Law of Spirit and life" (8:2), which those in Christ do keep, implies that being "released from the Law" cannot be interpreted as a wholesale release from Law-keeping. Quite the opposite: one is released from the Law that was seized by "sin", which captivated human flesh, so that (ἵνα) one can keep what the Law (of Spirit and life) requires (8:4) (see Staples 2023, p. 89).<sup>22</sup>

However, scholars who deny the good (or necessity) of a continued Law-keeping tend to ignore or misrepresent Romans 8:4, where Paul describes one of the purposes of God's sending of the Son as empowering "us", by the Spirit, to fulfill "the righteous requirement of the Law". Paul Foster, for example, defends calling Paul's gospel "Law-free" despite Paula Fredriksen's criticisms of the label.<sup>23</sup> He writes:

For Paul, Christ believers are no longer bound by the Law, they have been released from its restraining function. Instead, they possess a new mode of serving God, which Paul defines as 'newness of the Spirit.' The behaviours Paul expects from

these Christ believers align with standard Jewish expectations of ethical conduct. However, the basis is entirely different. It is entirely free from the observance of the Law, from which there is a release. Instead, it is predicated upon the newness and enabling presence of the Spirit. (Foster 2021, p. 5)

Foster then defends this view with his reading of Romans 8:1–4, saying, “this God-given holy Law had been weakened by the flesh (Rom 8.3), and was unable to empower those who followed it to live ethically fitting lives. For Paul, it is only through the sending of God’s son. . . and through a new mode of existence that he calls life in the Spirit that Christ believers are able finally to meet God’s righteous requirements” (Foster 2021, p. 5). Thus, ironically, Foster defends the phrase “Law-free” by referring to a text wherein Paul says that by the Spirit those in Christ keep the righteous requirement of the Law (τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ νόμου) (Rom 8:4). To arrive at this conclusion, Foster has shifted Paul’s language to “God’s righteous requirements”, removing Paul’s reference to the Law, and has collapsed the means of such obedience (the Spirit) and its content (the Law).

Admittedly, the degree to which the commandments of “the Law of Spirit and life” are coextensive with the commandments of “the Law of sin and death” is not stated by Paul, and the question seems underdetermined, though I explore it briefly below. However, Romans 7 itself does not provide the license necessary to distinguish the content of their commandments given that Paul chooses “coveting” as his example of a commandment “seized” by “sin” (7:7) and as a commandment to be fulfilled by the audience of Romans (13:8–9). The difference, then, is that the “I” of 7:7–13, for whom the prohibition resulted in “death”, was “in the flesh” and without Christ’s Spirit (7:5), while the addressee of Romans 8 and 13 is “in the Spirit”, inhabited by God’s/Christ’s Spirit (8:8). So empowered, they are not just able, but “obligated” (8:12; 13:8) to fulfill these legal requirements. Romans 7, then, is not a sturdy foundation upon which one easily constructs a house of “Law-observance is adiaphora”.

But can anything else be said about the potential difference between the obligating content of “the Law of spirit and life” and “the Law of sin and death” (8:2)? Though requiring a longer treatment in its own right (see now Novenson 2024), it is important to recognize that given the Law’s incapacity to resurrect (Gal 3:21), and given Paul’s conviction that human bodies will become immortal in the resurrection (1 Cor 15:42–53), it may be that some of the Law’s commandments cease to function then (in the resurrection) as they do now (see Novenson 2024, pp. 200–45). The difference between the ages, their respective bodies, and the commandments, though, lies not in the insignificance of the Law in Paul’s thought, but due to the supposition that the Law given to Israel regulates mortal bodies subject to impurity and death (Novenson 2024, pp. 200–1). However, once resurrected and immortal, humans will possess bodies no longer subject to decay and impurity, and as such, laws that regulate such impurity will cease to be of significance (see also Moffitt 2019, pp. 89–103). Without death and dying, purity regulations cease to be needed. Thus, it is not “the impurity laws” themselves that cease, but impurity. This kind of legal reasoning is evident in Luke 20, wherein the Sadducees present Jesus with the scenario of one woman having married several brothers before asking, “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will she be?” (Luke 20:33). Jesus’s response is telling: “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage, for neither can they die anymore, for they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:34–36). The change in the material quality of the resurrection body impacts a law that legislates marriage not because the “law” is insignificant but because it legislates a condition (mortal bodies that must procreate, the context of which is marriage in Jesus’s

setting) that no longer obtains in the resurrection given the deathlessness of the bodies of that age.

Rabbinic tradition records comparable convictions about the Law and its governance over mortal bodies. When the angels object to God giving the Law to humans, the response is that the Law's regulations would not suitably regulate the angelic condition: "The Torah cannot be taught to you [angels], for there is no procreation among you, no uncleanness, no death, and no disease. All of you are holy" (Midrash Tehillim 8:2; see also b. Shabbat 88b–89a concerning the "moral" difference).<sup>24</sup> The implication from these passages is that the material and moral difference between angels and humans does not require the Law that itself regulates mortality and transgression to apply to the angels who are free from such conditions. If Paul shared such a view of the Law and its givenness for transgression and mortality, which Galatians 3:19 supports, Paul may envisage the obsolescence of the keeping of some commandments after the general resurrection not due to a relativization of "Jewishness" or the Law itself but to the obsolescence of the bodily state (mortality and sinfulness) that the Law regulates.

However, given the perdurance of the distinction between Jews and the nations now and in the eschaton, Paul seemingly assumes as normative Jewish Law-keeping as an action that still rightfully distinguishes Jews from non-Jews within the divine economy. I turn now to a passage that implies such an expectation by Paul, namely, that even believing Jews continue to be distinguished from believing gentiles by their Law-adherence.

#### *Romans 4: "Of the Law" Inheritors*

In Romans 3:28–31, Paul asserts that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law because the alternative (justification through works of the Law) would imply that God was the god of Jews only. Significantly, Paul's rhetorical question in 3:29 implies that "works of the Law" characterizes Jews qua Jews and for this reason justification is by faith apart from such works because God is not just the god of the Jews but also the gentiles (3:29). But because God is one, he will justify both groups—Jews and gentiles, "circumcision" and "foreskin"—on the same basis, faith. This supposition establishes the Law's own teaching on the matter (3:31). Romans 4 then interrogates whether Abraham's story falsifies this position, concluding, naturally, that it does not.<sup>25</sup>

Rather, Romans 4 establishes the assertion made in 3:28–31 by using Abraham as a paradigm both for believing gentiles and believers "of the circumcision", arguing that Abraham was reckoned righteous through faith while possessing a foreskin (4:9–10) so that he could become the father of all who believe while possessing foreskin, i.e., gentiles (4:11), and that he received circumcision as a seal of the righteousness reckoned to him through faith so that he could become (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν; 4:11) the father of those who are circumcised and "follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had in foreskin" (4:12) (Moo 1996, pp. 270–71). He then makes a point comparable to those surveyed above in Galatians 2–3, namely, that the Law is not the basis of being established as an inheritor (4:13–15). If it were, the promise to Abraham would only be secure for one part of his "seed" (Jews) and the divine promise that he would be the father of "many nations" (4:17) could not obtain because Law-keeping by gentiles would Judaize them, and thus God would only be "the god of the Jews" (3:29) and Abraham would only be the father of one nation (Thielman 2018, p. 246). However, so that the promise of inheritance could be secured "for all the seed" (4:16), righteousness is reckoned through faith (4:13), which is equally the basis for gentiles and those who are "of the Law" (ἐκ τοῦ νόμου) (4:16), so that "all the seed" (Jews and the nations) can possess Abraham as "father" (4:16), fulfilling God's promise that he would make Abraham "the father of many nations" (4:17).

Significantly, in this section, he uses "foreskin" and "circumcision" to refer to bodily attributes and to metonymize people groups (Neutel 2021, p. 64; Rodríguez 2023, p. 285).

This point ought not be missed. If faith without respect of ethnic inflection were all that mattered, it is odd that Paul then says that Abraham was circumcised so that he could become the father of the circumcision who have faith. But on Paul's reading of Genesis, God commanded Abraham's circumcision to ensure the existence of "the circumcision" people. As Matthew Thiessen states:

Through uncircumcision and then the subsequent reception of the sign of circumcision, Abraham could become the father of both the uncircumcised and the circumcised, gentiles and Jews. . . . Abraham's belated circumcision still matters: even though it is not strictly covenantal, it has value in distinguishing Jews from non-Jews. . . . Abraham needs to be circumcised in order to be the father of the Jews, a fact that suggests that Paul believed the rite to be of abiding significance for Jewish identity—even for those who are in Christ. (Thiessen 2016, pp. 83–84)<sup>26</sup>

Notably, Paul then changes his description of this people from "the circumcision" to those who are "of the Law" (4:16). By his non-pejorative description of the people group who inherit with Abraham, provided they have faith, as those "of the Law", Paul positively characterizes this group via the fact that they possess and keep the Law. How they could be described as "of the Law" but not Law-adherent is unclear to me; a view that assumes it refers only to their possession of the Law would mean that Paul only used the phrase "of the Law" to refer to the fact that they are the people to whom it was given. However, this cuts against the way Paul employs Abraham, to whom a commandment (circumcision) was given whose keeping creates the people "of the circumcision". If one "receives" the circumcision commandment but does not keep it, the "circumcision" people do not exist; similarly, to receive the Law but not keep it does not successfully create a group who is plausibly characterized as those "of the Law".<sup>27</sup> And because Paul's point is to show how God is justifying both groups, "the foreskin and the circumcision", and because he interchangeably characterizes the latter group as "those of the Law", Paul implies the latter group keeps the Law as that which distinguishes them from the nations. This supposition is both in keeping with one of the Law's own stated purposes, e.g., Lev 20:25–26, and Paul's own reasoning: if gentiles must not keep the Law so that they remain gentiles so that Abraham can be the father of gentiles qua gentiles, so Jews, whom Paul characterizes as those "of the Law", must keep the Law to be distinguished as Jews, so that they too can regard Abraham, who was circumcised to become their father, as their father.<sup>28</sup> As Kathy Ehrensperger says, "Paul advocates the necessity of the retention of Jewish identity in Christ in as much as he advocates the retention of the diverse identities of the nations (1 Cor. 7:17–24)" (Ehrensperger 2015, p. 159). Put simply, if God will justify "the circumcision", they must circumcise; for believers "of the Law" to inherit with their father, who believed and kept the law given to him, assumes they keep the Law given to them (Novakovic 2021, p. 111). This characterization of Jews, it seems to me, provides plausible evidence that Paul assumed as normative Jewish Law-keeping even among those who have faith.

### 3. Conclusions

The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as keeping the Law, teaching the Law, and requiring his Jewish disciples to continue keeping it after his resurrection.<sup>29</sup> Acts depicts Paul, the Jewish apostles, and other Jewish believers as continuing Law-observance not simply as a missiological strategy but as their assumed way of life. Paul's letters have often been interpreted to be exceptional in this regard, understanding Paul to be antagonistic or at best indifferent to observance of the Law by Jewish believers. But this essay has attempted to show that passages so taken (Gal 2:11–21; Rom 7) simply do not speak to the issue, that one passage assumes Law-observance by Jewish believers (Rom 4:11–16), and that one plausibly requires it (1 Cor 7:17–20).



The mistake occasionally made by Pauline interpreters, I think, is collapsing Paul's arguments about what the Law cannot do into wholesale rejections of the Law for any other purposes. Thus, a Pauline statement to the effect that the Law does not justify or resurrect is erroneously interpreted to imply that Paul assigned no positive, even obligatory, value to any kind of Torah-observance and regarded it as a matter of *complete* indifference. However, such a construal fails to recognize the rather obvious point that denying something as a means to a first-order good, i.e., the Law as the path to justification, does not entail a denial of it as a means for other goods, goods that Paul himself describes as God-ordained realities (see also [Wilson 2022a](#)). Thus, Paul denies that justification is through works of the Law, but he implies that a continued observance of the Law by Jews marks them out as Jews and that their distinction as Jews is something that God himself ordained and desires. This is the point missed (or dismissed) by those who deny that Paul continued to consider Jewish Law-keeping as good and intended.

For example, in addressing scholars (Peter Tomson, Mark Nanos, and David Rudolph) who argue for a revisionist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9 that sees Paul as Torah-observant, N.T. Wright states, "What neither Tomson nor Rudolph nor Nanos seem able to grasp is that for Paul something radically new had happened, something which was at the same time the radical fulfilment of Israel's ancient hopes. Paul would only appear inconsistent to one who was looking, not through the spectacles of eschatological messianism, but through the distorting lens of comparative religion" ([Wright 2013](#), p. 1443). On the contrary, it is Wright who seems "unable to grasp" that the restoration wrought by God through Christ does not completely efface one's previous identity. The failure in readings like Wright's is the failure of ignoring the ethnic inflection of Paul's "eschatological messianism", in which gentiles and Jews become part of the "one seed" and do so without compromising that ethnic particularity and the customs that express them. For Paul, one way that ethnic particularity is expressed is by *not doing* (gentiles) or *doing* (Jews) the Mosaic Law. Though that Law-keeping (or not) does not save, it marks them out as those whom God has saved *as Jews* (or gentiles). Said differently: such Torah-observance by Jews did not earn their salvation, but it was the expected practice of Jews whose Law-keeping expresses their Jewish nature, which God did save. That is, God through Christ is saving gentiles as gentiles, and he is saving Jews as Jews. Consequently, gentiles ought not Judaize by circumcision, and the logic that compels Paul to prohibit gentile Judaizing by circumcising specifically and whole-Torah-observance generally, which is partially based on God's promise to save the gentiles *qua* gentiles, likewise compels him to expect Jewish Law-observance as a second-order good that expresses their Jewish nature in view of his conviction that God will justify "the circumcision" and those "of the Law", i.e., Jews, as Jews.

If the conclusions of this brief article have merit, then they invite further study not simply of the topic of "Paul and the Law", a favorite chestnut of New Testament scholars, but of Paul's halakhic reasoning in his letters. The assumption that Law-observance is completely irrelevant to Paul has often closed the door on such examinations, with some exceptions (*inter alia* [Tomson 1990](#); partially [Bockmuehl 2000](#)), but the time is beyond ripe for additional, detailed study of what may be termed Paul's "eschatological nomism", that is, his ethical/legal reasoning as conditioned not just by his announcement of the Messiah, but by his interpretation of the Law as conditioned by Paul's understanding of the Messiah's accomplishments and Paul's own role as the Messiah's commissioned herald.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Translations from NASB unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>2</sup> On Acts 15 applying differing aspects of the Law to believing Jews and believing Gentiles, see (Bauckham 1995, pp. 450–62; Thiessen 2011, p. 141; Oliver 2013, pp. 370–98; Sloan 2025 (forthcoming)).
- <sup>3</sup> The Pauline school now operating with the label *Paul within Judaism* argues that Paul remained Torah-observant and expected Jews to do so as well. For an introduction to the school, see (M. Zetterholm 2015, pp. 31–52; 2020, pp. 171–93; Fredriksen 2022, pp. 359–80). For the flexibility of Torah observance in the first century, see (K. H. Zetterholm 2015, pp. 79–103). For critical responses to the school, see essays by Pitre, Dunn, Das, and Barclay in (McKnight and Oropeza 2020, pp. 194–215).
- <sup>4</sup> Naturally, not all Pauline passages on the Law can be explored in this short essay. 1 Corinthians 9 is briefly addressed in note 5 below. And it must presently suffice to point readers interested in Romans 14, which has often been taken to indicate Paul’s indifference to dietary laws and Sabbath, to a paper by Paul T. Sloan and Logan A. Williams—“Avodah Zarah and the Roman Messiah-Assembly: Anxiety about Pagan Days and Food Offered to Images”—which argues that all of Romans 14 pertains to food potentially offered to images. Paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature, 2024.
- <sup>5</sup> Space unfortunately precludes an examination of 1 Corinthians 9, which I will explore in a separate article. But it does not falsify the position to be presented below. On that text, in short: Paul’s exposition of his practice in 1 Cor 9 is fully explicable within a pattern of halakhic reasoning that exempts persons engaged in authorized behavior from the fulfillment of other commandments when engaged in that authorized action. Though this practice and the legal reasoning that supports it pre-dates Paul (e.g., Jub 50.10–11; 1 Macc 2:41; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.277; Matt 12:5; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.113; cf. CD-A 11.13–14, 16–17), it is mostly succinctly stated in the words of b. Sukkah 26a: “One who is engaged in a commandment is exempt from another commandment”. The legal logic assumes that the Law prescribes a number of commandments, and occasionally, the keeping of one commandment will preclude the keeping of another. For example, the priests are commanded to make certain offerings every day of the week, and yet the Law also prohibits working on the Sabbath. But because the priests are engaged in divinely authorized work, they are permitted to profane the Sabbath to do the work required of them. In their case, they do something that presents as transgression—work on the Sabbath—and yet they do so innocently, because they work by divine commission (cf. Matt 12:5). Such reasoning supplies the category of halakhic logic requisite for interpreting Paul’s statements in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul is able to do things that present as transgression to those “under the Law”—say, drink gentile wine—and yet do so innocently, that is, without actually transgressing the Law of God, because his work of preaching the gospel is divinely authorized and required (1 Cor 9:16). As such, Paul denies that he transgresses the Law (μη ὦν ἄνομος θεοῦ) because he is ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, i.e., he is “lawful before [or “because of”] Christ” (1 Cor 9:21). Thus, it is not that he “keeps” the Law only as a missiological strategy (contra Wright 2013, p. 1436). The opposite is true. He only “breaks” the Law missiologically, and even then he clarifies it is not actual Law-breaking; his actions are “lawful” because of his duty.
- <sup>6</sup> See discussion in (Nanos 2002, pp. 282–318; see also Rudolph 2016, p. 47; Sanders 2016, pp. 287–308). For discussion of the Antioch incident specifically, see (Nanos 2016; Willitts 2016; M. Zetterholm 2016). Given Paul’s stance on his Law-keeping when on mission to the gentiles (see note 5 above), wherein he permissibly violates commandments that might hinder his mission, Paul would consequently accept the permissibility of Peter’s living ἐθνικῶς, whatever that entails with respect to the Law, on the same grounds. But the latter would be considered “lawful” (ἔννομος), not “transgressive” (ἄνομος).
- <sup>7</sup> LXX Esther 14:17; Dan 1:8; 5:1-4; Joseph and Aseneth 8:5; 10:14; Judith 12:1–2; m. Avodah Zarah 4–5. Fredriksen 2017, pp. 95–98, locates the problem in venue (gentile households that might contain idols/images) and wine that may have been offered.
- <sup>8</sup> Additionally, contracting impurity is not transgression. Common food did not need to be eaten in a state of purity. See discussion of these synoptic scenes in (Wassen 2016a, pp. 137–57; 2016b, pp. 11–36).
- <sup>9</sup> Peter’s vision in Acts 10 does not convey God’s “cleansing”, i.e., nullification, of the Jewish food laws. See (Oliver 2013, pp. 352–55; Thiessen 2016, pp. 136–37; Staples 2019, pp. 3–17; Sloan 2025 (forthcoming)). The vision is explicitly interpreted to refer to the “cleansing” of the gentiles (Acts 10:28), and the latter would have no necessary effect on Israel’s dietary laws. Only a failure of historical imagination and ignorance of Acts 15, which assumes that Jews continue to abide by the Law, requires considering the acceptability of the gentiles as altering the perpetuity of Israel’s food laws.
- <sup>10</sup> My translation.
- <sup>11</sup> Fredriksen may still be correct, though, that the Antioch situation arising from “certain men from James” (Gal 2:17) does not signal a disagreement between James and Paul or that James had “reneged on the agreement in Jerusalem” (Fredriksen 2017, p. 97). As she states, they may have implicitly pressured a withdrawal because “they felt that such behavior [by Peter] would compromise the Jewish mission” (p. 98). In either case, the incident does not require, or even suggest, that Peter had been eating food forbidden by Lev 11/Deut 14.
- <sup>12</sup> On the significance of Paul claiming that it is “Jews” who know that justification is not from “works of the Law”, see (Novenson 2024, pp. 50–71).

- 13 Additionally, if the Law as the basis of justification is in place, some of Paul's eating habits, e.g., comfortably drinking wine potentially sacrificed to idols in the course of his mission to gentiles, may make him a transgressor. See note 5 above.
- 14 For a discussion of the relation of Gal 2:19 to the discourse on forensic justification in 2:16–17, see (Cowan 2018, pp. 453–72).
- 15 For exploration of the use of Deut 28–32 in Paul's letters along the restoration-eschatological lines as I have described them, see (Staples 2023, pp. 68–106). For the theme of a continuing exile or need for restoration in 2TJ and NT, see (Scott 1993; Evans 1997; Wright 2013, pp. 139–63).
- 16 Outside of this usage in Gal 3, this term (from ζωοποιέω) is used seven times in the New Testament, six of which are from Paul (Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36, 45; 2 Cor 3:6). In each it refers to God's action of raising someone from the dead.
- 17 This is probably Paul's point in Rom 9:30–33 as well, wherein Israel sought participation in the restoration "from works" rather than faith in the Messiah. Paul's point is not that they were wrong historically to do the works the Law prescribed; they erred, in his view, in pursuing the Law's "righteousness", i.e., the status necessary for restoration, on the basis of its works, not realizing (10:3) that God had provided a means—the stone, Christ—through which God's faithfulness to restore was manifest (9:32–10:11).
- 18 Philippians 3 similarly is not counter-evidence. Paul does not disavow law-observance but "the righteousness that comes from the law" (Phil 3:9). Like in Galatians 2–3, any supposed righteousness from the Law does not resurrect Paul—only Christ/the Spirit is able (Phil 3:10–11). Within a distinct but related argument (concerning the overlap between Stoic and Pauline flexibility with respect to conventional law), (Annalisa Phillips Wilson 2022b, p. 400, n. 76) writes: "In other words, Paul could regard torah observance as 'appropriate' for Jews (but not contributing directly to salvation) but not 'appropriate' for gentiles (it was not 'naturally' their national law). He seems to have surmised that Jews who obligated believing gentiles to the law—or gentiles who considered it necessary to proselytize—treated torah observance as a first-order good." See also her broader study, (Wilson 2022a).
- 19 (Pitre et al. 2019, pp. 50–52), argue that the allegory of Gal 4:21–5:1, wherein Paul says that "the present Jerusalem" is in slavery indicates that believing Jews and Gentiles are no longer "under law" (p. 50) and are "free with respect to the torah of Moses" (p. 52), by which they mean not obligated to the Law's commandments. However, Gal 4:21–5:1 does not threaten the supposition that Jewish believers rightfully keep the Law. Paul includes himself within "the children of the free woman" (4:31), implying that "the present Jerusalem" in "slavery" (4:25) corresponds not to Jews in general or believing Jews, but, in keeping with his argument that the Law without Christ dispenses the punitive "curse" (3:10–13), to unbelieving Jews who are still "captive" due to the punitive discipline occasioned by transgression of the covenant, which names "captivity" as one of the promised punishments (Deut 28:64; cf. 2 Chron 36:20; Isa 52:2–3; Jer 16:13; Lam 1:3; Ezra 9:9; Neh 9:36). Accordingly, Paul is not juxtaposing Christ/faith with law-observance in itself, but two bases of justification: Christ/spirit/faith, on the one hand, and the Law (without Christ) on the other. He creates this binary not because faith and Law-observance in themselves are intrinsically opposed but because of the way he frames that which the agitators are pressuring the gentiles to do: keep the Law for justification. But to keep the Law for justification/righteousness, Paul argues, implies that Christ died needlessly (2:21). Thus, in response to the opponents who claim gentiles must circumcise and keep the Law, Paul frames their message as denying the efficacy or significance of Christ's death and God's grace. Thus, for gentiles to adopt the Law for justification/righteousness is to deny the sufficiency of Christ for that purpose, indicating that the issue at hand is not Jewish Law-observance among believing Jews, which may be unaffected, but the basis or grounds of righteousness (for both Gentiles and Jews). But for believing Jews to continue to keep the Law as a necessary sign of their God-given distinctiveness does not threaten Christ/faith as the sole basis of their justification and is simply not the topic of discussion in 4:21–5:1. For a fruitful comparison, see Acts 15, which denies the need for gentiles to keep the Law *to be saved* (15:1), asserting that both Jews and gentiles are saved "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (15:11), all while assuming that Jews continue to keep the whole Law and concluding that gentiles keep only select Levitical commands (15:20). On the obligations for gentiles deriving from Lev 17–18, see (Bauckham 1995, pp. 450–62; Oliver 2013, pp. 370–98; Sloan 2025 (forthcoming)).
- 20 The precise identity of the "I" does not affect the points I make here, though I follow (Timmins 2017; Holloway, forthcoming), at least in their conclusion that the "I" is likely Paul. In my reading, the verses describe Paul's pre-Christ experience of the Law, and he presents this experience as paradigmatic of "fleshly" existence; what was true for Paul he presents as true of all, not because everyone in fact had the same experience with the Law, but because he is extrapolating from the way the Law entangles human flesh with sin. The identity of the "I" and the "timing" of the person's experience is of course notoriously contested, and my lack of engagement with the debate results only from its irrelevance (as I understand it) to the point I am currently making.
- 21 Paul does not here deny in principle the efficacy of Law's sacrificial system, I think, as if he thought that one transgression rendered one a Law-breaker subject to eschatological death. His point in Romans 7 is controlled by the broader argument he's making, namely, that the Law by itself is not equipped to rescue one from sin and death.
- 22 (Nanos 2009, pp. 1–21; Fredriksen 2015, pp. 637–50) also problematize a "law-free" reading of Paul and/or his message, though without accentuating the restoration-eschatological themes basic to Paul's law discourse as does Staples.
- 23 See (Foster 2021, p. 5), in part of an exchange between Paula Fredriksen and Foster following the latter's review of (Fredriksen 2017).
- 24 See further discussion in (Hayes 2017, pp. 123–60; Novenson 2024, pp. 221–26).
- 25 For this and some grammatical reasons, I translate Rom 4:1, "What then shall we say we have found about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?" This translation implies Paul's fictive addressee in Rom 2–4 is Jewish, and they discuss

- Abraham because his story could appear to (but does not) falsify Paul's claim in 3:28–31. (Hays 1985, pp. 76–98), though he translates Rom 4:1 differently from I, also sees Romans 4 expanding his assertion in 3:30. Against Hays' translation of 4:1, see (Sloan 2023a, pp. 559–62).
- 26 On Paul's claim, "we are the circumcision" (Phil. 3:3), see (Collman 2023, pp. 142–46), who argues that the "we" refers to the Jewish authors (Paul and Timothy) over against the non-Jewish opponents with whom he contrasts himself in Phil. 3:1, 4–6. Moreover, even if Paul in Phil. 3 uses "circumcision" metaphorically to include gentile believers, such a metaphorical usage would not compromise the way he employs the physical, exterior rite in Rom. 4 to characterize native-born Jews. Relatedly, I do not think Paul "redefines" what it means to be a "Jew" in Rom. 2:28–29. On this, see (Thiessen 2016, p. 58; and see Sloan 2024), who modifies this proposal while maintaining the basic thrust.
- 27 See a comparable point in a distinct but related argument in (Stowers 1994, pp. 243–44).
- 28 (Rodríguez 2023, pp. 284–305) provides a comparable reading of Romans 4 in which Paul preserves the distinction between Jews and gentiles even while arguing for the inclusion of gentiles into Abraham's seed. And though we read Paul's discourse about "faith" in parts of Romans 4 differently, see also (Young 2015, pp. 30–51).
- 29 This naturally cannot be proven here. For the full argument, see (Oliver 2013; Sloan 2025 (forthcoming)).

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