

## Just What Are 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"?

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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, "He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he 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 that continueth not 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"?

In his translation, Ferrar Fenton refers to them as "rituals of the law." Most Christians, Protestants and others, think they refer to the "deeds" of the law of Moses -- the entire Law of God given to Israel at Mount Sinai -- including the Ten Commandments, statutes, judgments, and Temple rituals and ceremonies of the Law.

But is this assumption true?

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, and 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 discussed, 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. The Qumranites were the 'Bible only' group of their day" (page 54).

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 came under the over-all description of "works of the law" -- and included various rabbinic interpretations, amplifications, and extensions of the Law of Moses 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 these rabbinic "works of the law," though from a different point of view. They were espousing their own version of the "works of the law."

Paul, very clearly, condemns in no uncertain terms these "works of the law" in both 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."

What does this all mean? Clearly, even in Paul's day, the Jewish scribes and Pharisees 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 unawares brought in, who came in privily 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 "works of law" (Gal.2:16).

Paul was upset, disturbed, about the reports he had received concerning them. 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 "legalism" and the teaching that one could be saved and achieve salvation through the Law of Moses -- which was the Jewish teaching of the time. Rabbinic Judaism still teaches today that obedience to the LAW is the way to salvation -- that the Torah is the key to eternal life. Yet they reject the Messiah, and the atoning work of the Messiah, as of no consequence and unnecessary for salvation.

They have seriously missed the boat. Paul makes that issue crystal clear in Romans and Galatians. Clearly, there can be no salvation, and no eternal life, apart from Jesus Christ our Lord! And in following Christ, we should not become burdened by or under the bondage of "the works of the law" of rabbinic halakkah and traditions, rulings, precepts, and extensions of the Torah, as it is in the Scriptures.

On the other hand, we also need to be careful not to come under the "bondage" to the "oral law" or "halakkah" 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 "halakkah" and "oral tradition," in order to expound the Scriptures. 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 "second Moses," the Prophet like unto Moses, who had FINAL AUTHORITY to "interpret" the Mosaic Law -- and provide a new "halakkah" of true interpretation and obedience (see Matthew 5-7). He came to "fill full" the Law, and make it complete (Matt.5:17-19).

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. Neither of them were condemning the keeping of God's commandments or referring to obedience to God's Law as "works of the law" -- not at all!

Let's thank God for this precious truth and revelation -- and for the beauty of His Torah Law and Revelation!