

“Law” In Romans

Introduction

When Paul speaks of law in Romans, he is speaking of the OT law or Torah. For the Jew, this was not just sections of Deuteronomy or Leviticus where commands are stated. Nor was it just the first five books of the Bible or only the OT as we know it. The word “Torah” means “instruction. This included the Bible, as we know it, and other Jewish writings and interpretations of scripture plus oral traditions that had been handed down through generations. All of these sources were considered authoritative.

How Jews read and understood Torah is debated among scholars. The following gives some of the prominent views of how first century Jews read the Torah. Just as is true of Christians today, there was not one box into which first century Jews, or Jews of past generations, could be put. Therefore, the reality of how the Jews viewed Torah is more complex than this short document can address.

How Jews Historically Viewed Torah (Law)

The dominant view for centuries has been that the Jews were legalistic, believing one merits salvation and God’s favor through the keeping of law. A strict legalistic view attempts to put God in debt because of one’s obedience. “God has to bless me because I am obedient.” A less legalistic view believed in God’s gracious election but they also believed obedience was possible and equally a source of confidence in their eschatological future. Texts such as the Prodigal Son and laborers in the field parables are given to support this view. In these parables are a jealous older son and jealous early morning laborers. They were angry because they had always been obedient or had worked longer and yet others got rewarded. Before accepting this use of these parables too quickly, it needs to be pointed out that sometimes more is pulled out of a parable than the speaker intended. These views have been the dominant position since the Reformation. Although the idea of Jewish legalism has been challenged, it is still supported by many scholars.

The other, and growing view, is that the Jews were not legalistic. They understood their relationship with God originated from God’s grace. Hope was found in repentance and the sacrifices. “This covenant relationship was regulated by the law, not as a way of entering the covenant, or of gaining merit, but as the way of living within the covenant; and that included the provision of sacrifice and atonement for those who confessed their sins and thus repented (Dunn, Romans, pg. LXV).”

This second view believes Paul was addressing a nationalistic pride the Jews took in having been God’s elect and having been given the law. Being obedient to (written and oral) Torah commands and expectations became the means by which the Jews set themselves apart from Gentiles rather than as a way to merit God’s favor. While acknowledging sin, national pride led them to believe that God would treat them favorably simply because of their special relationship with God. This nationalistic pride would allow Gentiles to embrace Jewish religion, but it would never allow them to be full covenant members. This obedience was seen most quickly in a Jew’s observance of Sabbath, circumcision, and restrictions on foods and personal associations. These observances are often referred to as “identity markers.” These identity markers became increasingly important after times of captivity or during times of extreme domination at

the hands of a Gentile nation. Two very important such times prior to the first century that show how at least some Jews came to this position were the Babylonian captivity and later domination by the Seleucids after the breakup of the Greek empire. The Jews came to understand God brought the captivity and domination upon them because of their sin and a major aspect of that sin was their embracing of Gentile religion and lifestyle.

During the Seleucid domination Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrated the temple with pigs blood and according to 1 Maccabees 1:60-61 had women who had circumcised their children put to death and hung the infants from their mother's necks. This resulted in the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE. A great deal of honor was given to those Jews who chose to die rather than eat unclean food. And circumcision became an important way to show one's rebellion against the Seleucids. During this Greek domination many Jews were also heavily influenced by Greek culture. Those who wanted to hold on to their distinctive Jewish heritage were again drawn more closely to those teachings that visibly set them apart from Gentiles.

Identity markers even became points of separation between Jewish groups. Qumran writings speak of "works of law." These "works" were those identity markers that made membership in the Qumran community distinct from other Jewish groups. This group set themselves apart from the rest of Judaism to the point of not attending sacrifice and feast days at the temple in Jerusalem because they believed the priestly system was corrupt. Observing such deeds was the way community members showed their loyalty most clearly and the way they maintained membership in the community.

The Situation in Rome

Major issues developed as those (Jews and Gentile godfearers) who took pride in practicing Jewish identity markers were joined by new converts from the Gentile world who had had no relationship with Judaism. This produced many difficult questions. What does this mean for those who had seen their relationship with God through Torah? How do Torah and gospel relate? What does this mean for Gentile converts? There appeared to be a natural tension between Torah and Paul's presentation of the gospel. From a Jewish or Gentile godfearer's perspective, whatever the gospel might be, it had to fit within their view of Torah and the gospel could not eliminate the need for all (Jew and Gentile) to continue to follow Torah and those identity markers in order to be covenant people of God separate from the rest of the world. For Paul, practicing those identity markers and taking nationalistic pride in having been given the covenant and Torah were rubbish in comparison to knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7-11).

Whichever above view (or combination of views) was most prevalent in Rome, the issue was not with Torah itself. Paul attempted to ease some of the perceived tension between Torah and gospel when he stated that the gospel upholds the law (Rom. 3:31) and that the law is "holy and just and good" (7:12).

The real issue had to do with the way Torah was being read. Is Torah properly read through the lens/filter of "works;" that is, through readings that prioritize Jewish nationalism or seeks to merit God's favor through obeying moralistic instructions, or is it properly read through the lens/filter of "faithfulness;" that is, through readings that prioritize God's covenant-keeping faithfulness to "all nations" (Gen. 12:3). Such a reading would dispel the notion of Jewish nationalism and show the universally reaching

nature of God's purpose in the world. The Gospel is inherently unbiased. In its very essence, the gospel lacks any favoritism and destroys any basis for favoritism from God toward any individual or any group. It is equally offered to Jew and Gentile without any Jewish expectations of Gentiles. This is precisely the nub of the matter in Romans 3:27-31.

In order to make his point, Paul made statements proving the limitations of law and the power of sin. Paul personified sin as a living, powerful and destructive force in the world. While it may be thought that humanity has not only the obligation and the power to overcome sin on his/her own, Paul believed sin to be too powerful and oppressive for humans to do anything about it. Sin distorted and compromised God's law. Law, "seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me (all of us) and through it killed me (all of us) (Rom. 7:8). Sin and death not only held power over pagan Gentiles, but also over Jews who had the covenant and Torah. "Both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9). So to rely on law as a means for obtaining or maintaining a relationship with God is a ridiculous and futile position. Contrary to what some thought in the first century, as well as today, sin cannot be overcome by doing a better job of following God's commandments. "For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19)." This was radical thought for Jews.

Humankind is now set free from the law of sin and death because "God has done what the law could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned (destroyed) sin (Rom. 8:2,3). Sin can no longer destroy us or keep us from God. It no longer has dominion over us (Rom. 6:14).

Obedience remains important, but from a different perspective than has traditionally been held. Real trust in God does lead to obedient living. But obedience for obedience sake, obedience done to earn God's favor, or obedience that is thought to merit any percent of one's salvation is of no value. Such obedience is very shallow and gives no honor to God, which is the essence of what our lives are to do. This is where the Jews in the days of the prophets missed it. They did their Sabbath rituals but God was tired of all their religious activity because it did not grow out of their trust in Him. Trust in God would not have led to worshipping other gods, being unjust in court or in business dealings, or abusing the helpless for one's own personal gain. All things the prophets condemned Israel for doing. Trust in God leads to the opposite behaviors. Israel put their trust in doing ritual right without a heart for God. Faithfulness to the covenant (righteous living) occurs only when obedience flows from a circumcised heart that trusts in God (Rom. 2:15; Deut. 10:16; 30:6). This is the only kind of obedience that honors God.

Conclusion

Torah was a temporary guide for Jews for their role as "priests to the nations"-- a guide based on and which witnessed to God's own character, but which pointed beyond itself (Rom. 3:21; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). It pointed to the Christ. But the power of sin overwhelmed weak humanity and took advantage of humanity's inability to keep law. It also took advantage of both humanity's and law's inability to overcome sin, producing death to all.

Paul was not speaking against works, but against works not rooted in faith. Abraham was not reckoned a covenant partner with God because of his works. He was reckoned righteous because he trusted God in his heart. The same is true of David whose life was anything but pious from an outside perspective. It was David's heart that God looked at.

Relationship (covenant) with God is something that is given to us by a faithful God. It is not something that we co-manufacture with God through observing a proper series of steps, whatever they may be. God initiated, revealed, and will complete our salvation. We can do absolutely nothing to make any of that happen. God is the only guarantor of the covenant. In order to partake of the blessings of the covenant all we have to do is trust in God. Being reckoned righteous (made covenant partners with God) comes to all those who trust in God (not through works).

God still desires for us to live obedient lives because living within God's nature is a blessed life that gives honor to God. But sin no longer has any power over us when we fall short of giving God complete honor in our lives. Obedient living that honors God grows naturally out of a maturing trust in God rather than out of a contrived fruitless effort to transform our own lives. Growing in our trust, and therefore in obedient living, is being handled, not through our own efforts, but through the transforming power of God's Spirit in our lives (Rom. 8).

Relationship with God knows no nationalistic or ethnic boundaries. It is a universal gospel. This was true from the very beginning when God promised Abraham that His purpose in choosing Abraham was to bless the world (Gen. 12:3).