

Law as a Problematic Aspect of Religion
Paul's Skepticism in a Broader Jewish Context
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I INTRODUCTION

In his pioneering studies, E. P. Sanders described late Second Temple Judaism as “covenantal *nomism*” in the sense that while the demands of the law as derived from the Torah constitute a core element of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, the covenant is not exhausted by its law-centered aspect. It includes additional foundational components like election, God’s faithfulness, his mercy, and mechanisms of atonement and reconciliation. As the title of his book where the term was first introduced indicates,¹ it is in conversation with views found in the epistles of Paul, penned mostly during the 50s of the first century CE, that the scholar was able to portray this more nuanced picture of the contemporaneous Judaism. No wonder – Paul, a member of the nascent Jesus movement, a messianic offshoot of broader Judaism, provides many examples of coping with the law-centered tenets of religion juxtaposed to those of God’s mercy revealed in messianic redemption. This chapter attempts to further clarify certain aspects of Sanders’ important intuition.

Paul uses extensively the term *nomos* (law) with a variety of meanings: sometimes this may refer to a universal law, archetypal law of the cosmos, which, as already the Hellenistic Jewish second-century BCE *Letter of Aristeas* argued, essentially overlaps with the law revealed in the Torah.² I, however, focus here on the cases where the particular Jewish meaning of *nomos* as related to Torah is clearly indicated by the context. This focus will allow to revisit the issue of Paul’s grasp of the interactions between various parts of the Torah-centered law and their standing vis-à-vis other aspects of the covenant. Contextualizing Paul’s strategies against the backdrop of the

¹ Ed P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). See also Ed P. Sanders, “A Covenant to the People, a Light to the Nations’: Universalism, Exceptionalism, and the Problem of Chosenness in Jewish Thought,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16.1 (2009): 23–55.

² The equation that would be later propagated by Philo, see discussion in Christine Hayes, *What Is Divine about Divine Law?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 122–24. That the outlines of universal law were available to the Gentiles without the Torah and thus they are responsible for fulfilling it, seems to be indicated in Rom 2:12: “All those who sinned without the law/Torah will also perish without the law/Torah.”

variety of early Jewish thought patterns, I would argue that while propagating a singular, Jesus-centered, message – in many cases explicitly directed at Gentile fellow-travelers – Paul also addresses concerns of his implicit Jewish audience. His arguments thus echo and bear witness to a broader intra-Jewish awareness of the problematic aspect of the notion of religion as first and foremost law.

II TORAH AND THE WORKS OF THE TORAH

Scholars have long recognized nascent Christianity's multifaceted nature reflected in various, sometimes contradictory, emphases found within the Jesus movement during the first decades of its history. Attitudes to the demands of Jewish religious law, as expressed, on the one hand, in the Book of Acts, and, on the other hand, in Paul's authentic letters provide a telling example of such unresolved tension. According to Acts, in the times of messianic redemption those Gentiles who become part of the Jesus movement are exempt from embracing some ritual markers of belonging to Judaism. However, the continuing faithfulness of Jewish believers in Jesus to these precepts is never questioned, but rather presented as harmonious with their adherence to Jesus the Messiah (Acts 15:1–29; 21:18–25).³ As a matter of fact, it seems that even Gentiles willing to embrace some positive Mosaic ritual prescriptions, preached in the Diaspora synagogues, are welcome to do so or, at least, not reprimanded for this inclination.⁴

Paul's writings, however, are distinguished by a different and clearly polemical emphasis, unequivocally denying the capacity of Judaism's ritual prescriptions to contribute to the cleansing of the hearts. These prescriptions might have had such

³ Thus the author characteristically insists – in a balancing act compensating for the tragic Stephen episode in Acts 7 – that not only the first Jerusalem-based apostles but also Paul, returning to the city in the wake of his praiseworthy missionary successes among the non-Jews in the Diaspora, remained faithful to the Temple, undoubtedly the core element of Jewish ritual observance of the day (Acts 2:46; 21:26). See Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 24. For discussion of the narrative strategies throughout Acts, see, for example, Steven G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Robert L. Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987); Serge Ruzer, "Crucifixion: The Search for a Meaning vis-à-vis Biblical Prophecy. From Luke to Acts," in *Mapping the New Testament: Early Christian Writings as a Witness for Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 187–99. See also Justin Taylor, "Paul and the Jewish Leaders at Rome: Acts 28:17–31," in *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, eds. Thomas G. Casey and Justin Taylor (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2011), 311–26. But cf. Martin Hengel, "The Beginnings of Christianity as a Jewish-Messianic and Universalistic Movement," in *The Beginnings of Christianity: A Collection of Articles*, eds. J. Pastor and M. Mor (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), 85–100; Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981). In Hengel's view, the insight that the fulfillment of Torah ritual demands in general (and, more specifically, those connected to Temple worship) has lost its ability to effect forgiveness of sins and a place in the world-to-come, constituted a salient marker of the early Jesus movement as a whole almost from its inception, and thus distinguished it from broader Judaism.

⁴ See Acts 15:21.

a capacity in the past; but in the messianic era, it is exclusively identification with and “sharing” in the Messiah’s expiating death, and belief in his resurrection, that constitute the path leading to salvation – by grace and not by acquired merit. It is in this either-or context characterizing the Epistle to the Galatians that Paul comes to view those “external” precepts as harmful, as blocking the way to individual justification in the eyes of God through grace (Gal. 2:21, cf. Rom. 3:20): “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law (*nomos*, Torah?), then Christ died to no purpose.” Moreover, those who still put their hope in the “works of the law (Torah)” are bringing upon themselves “law’s/Torah’s curse” (Gal 3:10–11, 6:15). The argument in chapter 2 of the epistle, where the phrase the “works of the *nomos*,” obviously central for Paul’s thinking there, is used repeatedly and emphatically, strengthens the understanding that *nomos* here means specifically the Torah of Israel (Gal. 2:15–16):⁵

We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου), but through faith in Jesus Christ/the Messiah, even we have believed in Christ/the Messiah Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου), because by works of the law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου) shall no one be justified.

The Epistle to the Galatians is explicitly addressed to Gentile followers of Jesus in Galatia, who are under pressure from some representatives of the Jewish section of the movement to embrace Judaism’s ritual practices, first of all circumcision so that the Jews and the Gentiles of the messianic group can become one community, for example, eat together (Gal. 2:11–14).⁶ One then is justified in viewing the “works of the Torah” language as belonging to the discussion of that core issue – in other words, the phrase seems to designate the ritual markers of Jewish tradition. Therefore, the “works of the law, ἔργα νόμου,” that Paul expresses doubts with regard to their effectiveness (Gal. 2:15–21) should be understood in this context in a limited sense – namely, as designating those practices prescribed by the Torah that serve as “identity badges” separating Jews from their Gentile neighbors. They are thus distinguished from the “core commandments” defining God’s covenant with Israel or the Torah (*νόμος*) proper, such as the Decalogue and Leviticus 19:18 – passages that indisputably retain their centrality in the apostle’s interpretation of the messianic salvation in Jesus, as forcefully expressed, e.g., in Gal 5:14.⁷ Such an understanding of the “works of the law” finds corroboration in the מעשי התורה (*ma’asei ha-torah*, the works of the Torah) usage attested in 4QMMT from

⁵ The English quotations from the Old and New Testaments throughout this chapter are from the RSV.

⁶ For discussion of the nature of the “Galatian crisis,” see, for example, Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2007), 100–08.

⁷ See James D. G. Dunn, “Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3:10–4),” *NTS* 31.4 (1985): 523–42. For a criticism of Dunn’s thesis, see Charles E. B. Cranfield, “The Works of the Law in the Epistle to the Romans,” *JSNT* 43 (1991): 89–101; Dunn’s response is found in his “Yet Once More ‘The Works of the Law’: A Response,” *JSNT* 46 (1992): 99–117.

Qumran, where the phrase denotes ritual precepts, marking the proper observance of the Temple cult, corrupted according to the composers of the document by the current priestly leadership.⁸ This ritual understanding is further confirmed when Paul reiterates the core opposition mentioned above (Gal. 5:2): “Now, I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah/Christ will be of no advantage to you.”

Such a reading, highlighting the Gentiles within the Jesus movement as Paul’s intended audience, supports the interpretation suggested by a number of influential scholars subscribing to what is now customarily called the New Perspective on Paul. Among them Krister Stendahl, John Gager, and Paula Fredriksen, who emphasized the specific context in which Paul’s harsh statements concerning the (works of the) Torah were meant to resonate – namely, the non-Jewish addressees of the apostle’s writings.⁹ It was argued, moreover, that Paul’s claim that pious Gentiles do not have to observe the positive ritual precepts of the Torah, for example, perform circumcision (whereas the prohibition of participating in idol worship was emphatically upheld by Paul with regard to the Gentile fellow travelers too),¹⁰ in fact followed an accepted, particularly in the Hellenistic Diaspora, Jewish perception. Namely, even in the last days, the Gentiles will join the redemption in accordance with the pattern found in the biblical prophecy, that is, as Gentiles, without blurring the borderline between Israel and the nations. Following Isaiah’s prophecy, the nations will come to the mountain of the Lord to serve him together with the Jews and become privy to the core messages of God’s Torah, while remaining ethnically and culturally distinct from the people of Israel.¹¹ According to this influential approach,

⁸ 4Q398 (4QMMT e), Frags. 14–17, 2:2–8; 4Q399 (4QMMT f), 1:11. See Dunn, “Works of the Law”; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Paul’s Jewish Background and the Deeds of the Law,” in *According to Paul: Studies in the Theology of the Apostle* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 8–35, esp. 21–23. For a variety of appraisals – mostly differing from Dunn’s – of the link observed here between Paul and 4QMMT, see Martin G. Abegg, Jr., “Paul, ‘Works of the Law’ and MMT,” *BAR* 20:6 (1994): 52–61, 82; idem, “4QMMT, Paul, and ‘Works of the Law,’” in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, ed. Peter W. Flint (Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 203–16, esp. 205–06; Tom N. Wright, “Paul and Qumran,” *BR* 14.5 (1998): 18–54, esp. 54; Jacqueline C. R. de Roo, “The Concept of ‘Works of the Law’ in Jewish and Christian Literature,” in *Christian-Jewish Relationships through the Centuries*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Brook W. R. Pearson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 116–47. It deserves notice that it is in this context that Paul moves to talk about Abraham, for whom his faith “was reckoned as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6) long before he was circumcised (Gal. 3:6–9).

⁹ See, for example, Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–75; Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” *JTS* 42 (1991): 532–64.

¹⁰ As, for example, in 1 Cor. 10:14–22.

¹¹ See Isa. 2:1–4; Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles.” Correspondingly those are, in fact, Paul’s opponents within the Jesus movement, insisting on “Judaizing” Gentiles who have embraced Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, who act as innovators here. Their stance may be seen as a reaction to the perceived delay in the arrival of the end and the corresponding changes in the projected redemption scenario – a longer historical perspective or, alternatively, the upcoming catastrophic phase of wars and disasters – with both perspectives engendering a need for socially consolidating the Jesus movement (*ibid.*, pp. 558–61).

the demands to Gentiles wishing to become part of Israel's vocation are basically two: abandoning idol worship for the sake of worshipping the one God and adopting a truly moral behavior derived from the allegiance to the Creator.¹² Paul therefore followed here a beaten track, and since he addressed Gentiles only, he obviously did not intend to introduce any drastic reevaluation of the Torah vis-à-vis Jews.¹³

This new view of Paul clearly has its merits. However, as I argued elsewhere, the context of Galatians indicates that besides the Gentile fellow-travelers Paul must have had an additional, hidden, audience in mind – namely, those Jewish propagandists from within the movement, whose pressure on the Gentile members of the community prompted the apostle's response.¹⁴ In fact, the opening line of the passage under discussion too points to a supposed intra-Jewish logic of the argument (Gal. 2:15–16): “We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners . . . know that a man is not justified by the works of the Torah . . .” One is therefore prompted to ask if the apostle's collation of a hierarchical distinction between the hard-core commandments of the Torah and the peripheral “ritual markers” of Judaism with the claim that those ritual “works of the Torah” do not actually contribute to achieving the righteousness epitomized in the Torah's foundational precepts, could resonate within the Jewish milieu too.

As noted above, this kind of outlook was somehow reflected in the general Hellenistic Jewish attitude toward Gentile sympathizers. The awareness of the hierarchical relationships between ritual markers of Judaism and its moral precepts is expressed in the second century BCE *Letter of Aristeas*. The Jewish sages there, also addressing Gentile audience, both emphasize the shared ethical values of the Torah and general Hellenistic outlook and try to argue for the usefulness – though they are not obligatory for the Gentiles – of Jewish ritual prescriptions as “helping devices” in educating our souls in their path to moral perfection.¹⁵ It seems, however, that the hierarchical division – based on a variety of principles and with a different outcome – was applied to intra-Jewish religious discourse too, as aptly expressed in a well-known passage from the famous first century CE Jewish Hellenistic author, Philo of Alexandria:

There are some who, taking the laws in their literal sense as symbols of intelligible realities, are over-precise in their investigation of the symbol, while frivolously

¹² This is, apropos, the approach reflected in Romans 1.

¹³ According to this new approach, the age-long erroneous perception of Paul as a rebel against the Torah is a result of an anachronistic reading of his epistles in light of a later Christian outlook that emerged in different socio-historical circumstances of a clear-cut division and border marking. For example, Fredriksen has highlighted that some later notions emerging in the wake of and as a reaction to the destruction of the Temple, with Jewish followers of Jesus being gradually marginalized, were completely foreign to Paul's thinking. See Paula Fredriksen, “Paul, Purity, and the ‘Ekklesia’ of the Gentiles,” in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, eds. J. Pastor and M. Mor (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2005) 205–17, esp. 215–16.

¹⁴ See Serge Ruzer, “Paul's Stance on the Torah Revisited: Gentile Addressees and the Jewish Setting,” in *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, eds. Thomas G. Casey and Justin Taylor (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 75–97.

¹⁵ See R. H. Charles (ed.), *Letter of Aristeas* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), 139–68.

neglecting the letter. Such people I, for my part, should blame for their cool indifference, for they ought to have cultivated both a more precise investigation of things invisible and an unexceptionable stewardship of things visible. As it is, as if living alone by themselves in a wilderness, or as if they had become discarnate souls, knowing neither city nor village nor household nor any company of humans at all, transcending what is approved by the crowd, they track the absolute truth in its naked self. These men are taught by Sacred Scripture to be concerned with public opinion, and to abolish no part of the customs ordained by inspired men, greater than those of our own day.

For all that the Seventh Day teaches us the power of the un-originate and the non-action of created beings, let us by no means annul the laws laid down for its observance, kindling fire, tilling the earth, carrying burdens, instituting changes, sitting in judgment, demanding the return of deposits, recovering loans, or doing all else that is permitted in non-festal seasons. And though it is true that the Feast is a symbol of spiritual joy and of thankfulness to God, let us not bid adieu to the annual seasonal gatherings. And though it is true that circumcision indicates the excision of pleasure and all passions and the removal of the godless conceit under which the mind supposed itself capable of engendering through its own powers, let us not abrogate the law laid down for circumcising. For we shall be neglecting the Temple service and a thousand other things if we are to pay sole regard to that which is revealed by the inner meaning. We ought rather to look on the outward observances as resembling the body, and their inner meaning as resembling the soul. Just as we then provide for the body, inasmuch as it is the abode of the soul, so we must attend to the letter of the laws. *If we keep these, we shall obtain an understanding of those things of which they are symbols*, and in addition, we shall escape the censure and accusations of the multitude.¹⁶

Philo tellingly attests to a variety of Jewish attitudes toward the “external” precepts of the Torah – from neglecting to upholding them – all of which acknowledge the above division and share the conviction that the true meaning of the commandments is the “internal” one. Philo himself clearly ascribes to this consensual appraisal and confirms the priority of the inner meaning of the Torah precepts. Unlike some of his Jewish contemporaries, however, whom he criticizes for their readiness to drop ritual observance altogether and deal directly with the mending of their “inner man,”¹⁷ Philo – a responsible member of the community who recognizes the constraints of our physical and social existence – upholds the validity of the ritual side of Jewish tradition as befitting external means for “gradually educating one’s soul.” Nevertheless, the problematic tension between the two divisions (or interpretations) of the law lingers: As aptly observed by Christine Hayes, while Philo’s move aspired to strengthen the ritual aspect of the Mosaic Law, it could inadvertently “*enable precisely that which Philo here protests.*”¹⁸

¹⁶ Philo, *Migration of Abraham* 89–93 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89–93.

¹⁸ Hayes, *What is Divine about Divine Law?*, 124 (emphasis in original).

Such dichotomist perceptions seem to have not been limited to the Greco-Roman Diaspora only. Though evidence concerning the early proto-rabbinic tradition is scarce and relatively late, it may indicate that the idea of a twofold partition of the bulk of religious precepts was known and duly discussed in the Land of Israel too. Suffice it to quote a tradition ascribed to none other than the second-century codifier of the Mishnaic law himself (*m. Abot* 2.1):¹⁹

R. Judah the Prince said: Which is the proper course that a man should choose for himself? That which is an honor to him and elicits honor from his fellow men. Be as scrupulous about a light precept (*מצוה קלה*) as of a weighty one (*כהמורה*), for you do not know the reward allotted for each precept. Balance the loss incurred by the fulfillment of a precept against the gain and the accruing from a transgression against the loss it involves. Reflect on three things and you will never come to sin: Know what is above you – a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and all your deeds recorded in a book.²⁰

One notes a partial overlap of terminology between our early third-century Mishnah and Matthew 5:19 (*τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων*, “the least of these/ the light commandments”) – an overlap that points to the terminology’s early provenance. Moreover, not unlike Philo (and Jesus in Matthew 5:19!),²¹ the Mishnah votes for the importance of the efforts to fulfill precepts ostensibly not belonging to the core of the Torah. Though the reasons may be different, the “peripheral” commandments are seen here too as being in the final account expedient for a person’s “balance of merits.” And again, like Philo, the Mishnah mirrors an alternative approach, which it polemically rejects. Finally, while the dichotomy itself emerges as a shared feature of a whole spectrum of traditions, its character – namely, what commandments are seen as belonging to either category – may vary considerably. Thus, as distinct from Philo with his dichotomy between internal/spiritual and external meaning of the commandment, the Mishnah – similarly, for example, to Jesus’ stance in Matthew 23:23 – seems to understand both categories as pertaining to the realm of deeds.²²

¹⁹ Cf. Matt. 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

²⁰ The English translation of Mishnaic material in this paper follows Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

²¹ “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

²² Matt. 23:23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” Cf. *Abot* 1.1, 3.13 (“the fence around the Torah”). The nature of the dichotomy – or hierarchy – indicated in Matthew 5 warrants further discussion. See Serge Ruzer, “Antitheses in Matthew 5: Midrashic Aspects of Exegetical Techniques,” in Serge Ruzer, *Mapping the New Testament: Early Christian Writings as a Witness for Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 11–34.

If in the tractate 'Abot the "light" commandments are presented as *potentially* expedient for God's approval, another telling Mishnaic tradition speaks of the fateful eschatological transformation of the individual – that is, the gift of the holy Spirit and the resurrection – as *conditioned* by the sequence of efforts at fulfilling, inter alia, ritual (external, secondary) observances (*m. Sotah* 9.15):

R. Pinhas son of Yair says: "Expediency brings to cleanness, cleanness brings to purity, purity brings to chastity, chastity brings to holiness, holiness brings to meekness, meekness brings to the fear of sin, fear of sin brings to righteousness, righteousness brings to the spirit of holiness (holy spirit), and the holy spirit brings to the resurrection of the dead, and the resurrection of the dead comes through Elijah of blessed memory. Amen."

The historical context here is that of the destruction of the Temple and anticipation of redemption. Yet it stands to reason that the singling out of certain ritual observances as crucial for obtaining righteousness and eventually redemption is linked and point to an older topic – as does the previously discussed mishnaic passage.

To sum up, all the reviewed sources express awareness of one or another kind of distinction between primary and secondary (meaning of) Torah precepts, thus allowing to contextualize Paul's arguments within broader Jewish trends. While in the final account these sources uphold the validity of the secondary, for example, ritual, commandments, they indirectly attest to the possibility of an alternative tendency to dismiss those commandments as not crucial – an attitude they polemicize against.²³ Paul in Galatians therefore may be viewed as reflecting that alternative tendency; and his daring move could have been helped by the fact that he first came to discuss the issue while addressing a non-Jewish audience, which as noted, was perceived from the beginning as not obliged to the ritual identity markers of Judaism.

III THE CORE DEMANDS OF THE TORAH LAW

Having rejected the auxiliary value of the ritual precepts, Paul states explicitly what constitutes the true core of the Torah law, unswervingly obliging in the Messianic era – namely, Leviticus 19:18 precept "love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14–15): "For the whole law (ὁ γὰρ πᾶς νόμος) is fulfilled in one saying (ἐν ἐνὶ λόγῳ), 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.'" Further on, in Galatians 5:22–23, the apostle clarifies the expectations from interpersonal relations, derived from the Leviticus 19:18 directive: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; with regard to such there is no measure (limitations)."²⁴

²³ At least in the case of Philo, it is clear that we are not dealing with a polemical response to Paul, but in my opinion the same goes, e.g., for the ruling from *m. 'Avot* 2.1.

²⁴ Supposedly, an early reflection of the Rabbinic terminology of אין שיעור (no measure/limitations) – e.g., in *y. Yoma* 5.4.

It turns out, however, that Paul is not only pessimistic with regard to the ritual exercises' capacity to help one achieve the perfection of the great love command, but in fact denies the ability to fulfill it through any efforts of our own. According to the apostle, the very nature of the foundational demands of the religious law is such that we are unable to satisfy them however hard we try – it is only through the intervention of the divine agency of the Spirit that the mission can be accomplished. In other words, our only hope to achieve the true righteousness propagated by law, namely, to fulfil the above lofty aspects of the Lev 19:18 precept – is to be endowed with the Spirit (Gal. 5:5–16, 22, 24–25):

For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. . . . But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . . And those who belong to the Messiah Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. [emphasis added]

Thus, whereas the validity (usefulness) of the “secondary” law precepts is questioned, with regard to the indisputable core elements of the Torah-related righteousness it is our ability to fulfill them that is negated. We will return below to the motif of the Spirit as the great enabler, as well as to that of Jesus’s atoning death, but for now suffice it to note that such an appraisal appears to undermine the whole function of the Torah as covenantal law.

It is possible to try interpreting this deeply seated skepticism in Galatians too as directed specifically at the Gentiles – in accordance with a broader Jewish perspective on Gentiles as “sinful by nature,” reflected, as we have seen, in Galatians 2:15 (“We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners”). According to this interpretation, therefore, it is only through the intervention of the Spirit that the “Gentile nature” could be reformed and the Gentiles become capable of fulfilling the Torah’s great commandment. However, as already the beginning of the slightly later Epistle to the Romans testifies, ostensibly addressing concerns of both Gentile and Jewish segments of the community in Rome,²⁵ that basic inability to cope with the Torah as law was viewed by the apostle as characteristic of Jews as well.²⁶

In Romans, that “final account” of Paul’s writing,²⁷ characteristically, the issue of ritual markers so central to Galatians takes a back seat,²⁸ with the epistle focusing

²⁵ See, for example, John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), xviii–xxii; Norman Perring and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (San Diego et al.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 187; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Chapman, 1992), 31–34; cf. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 101, who while believing – in accordance with the New Approach tendency – that Romans likewise targets exclusively the Gentile audience, concedes that this epistle does speak “about Jews” too.

²⁶ See Romans 2.

²⁷ See Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁸ See, for example, Rom. 3:20.

instead on the basic incapacity of both Gentiles and Jews to properly respond to the core demands of God's law.²⁹ The Gentiles' failure is explained already in Romans 1 as resulting – in accordance with broader patterns of Jewish propaganda – from betrayal of the belief in one Creator. As for the Jewish failure, highlighted in Romans 2 in respect to one Decalogue precept, it receives its comprehensive explanation later on, in Romans 7.³⁰ Finding unconvincing the attempts to interpret the reasoning in Romans 7 as targeting exclusively the “Gentile predicament,”³¹ I therefore side with those who discern here Paul's grim diagnosis of the human condition, *Jews included*.³² In the final account, what is central to my argument is that whoever are the explicit intended addressees of the reasoning in Romans 7, we should take into account – the move already probed above with regard to Galatians – the implicit Jewish audience too. The apostle's pessimistic appraisal is characteristically complemented with the quantum leap, leading from the earlier impotence vis-à-vis the demands of the law imposed from outside to the new mode of existence (Romans 7:4–6):

Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the Torah/law through the body of Christ/ the Messiah, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵ While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

The appearance of the favorite Pauline expression “bear fruit” collated with the centrality of the Spirit, duly noted in the earlier discussion of Galatians 5, indicates that the “freedom from the law” here does not at all mean lawless frivolity. It rather designates a new stance “in the Spirit,” finally enabling one to fulfill the core Torah commandments, which was impossible when one's relation to the law was

²⁹ Romans thus presents itself as a continuation of the discussion in Galatians, with Paul striving to clarify his position and “to ward off potential and actual misreadings of his (earlier) arguments” (Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 103).

³⁰ Rom. 7:1 (“Do you know, brethren – for I am speaking to those who know the law/Torah . . .”) is one more indication of the epistle's engagement with the concerns of the Jewish component of the community in Rome; see note 26 above.

³¹ As, for instance, in the Stowers' claim that “the persona of Romans 7,” for whose sake Paul performs here the speech-in-character act, “can only be a gentile” (Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews & Gentiles* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 277). Stowers bases his assessment, inter alia, on his observation that the “sin as power” pattern of thought, is “not typical of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament . . . but rather . . . of Homer and Greek poets” (*ibid.*, p. 272), ignoring later, and more relevant, Jewish evidence. See also note 34 below and discussion there. Stowers views Romans as a whole in terms of exclusively Gentile intended audience (*ibid.*, pp. 32–33, *pace*, e.g., Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 17th rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 307–10).

³² Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp. 473–77, where Romans 7 is understood as presenting the case of the human Ego.

that of vis-à-vis externally ordered obligation. In fact, Paul himself continues to clarify the matter (Romans 7:7-12):

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! *Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin.* I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”⁸ But *sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness.* Apart from the law sin lies dead . . .¹⁰ the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ *For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me.*¹² *So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.* Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! *It was sin, working death in me through what is good . . .* [emphasis added]

So, the law “is good” and it opens one’s eyes, teaching what sin is, but, unfortunately the law does not provide one with the capability to resist sin (cf. Romans 3:20). Moreover, in our encounter with the just demands of God’s law, sin manages to exploit our pervert nature (evil inclination?),³³ turning the commandment into temptation to disobey it. The problematic side of the “written code” is idiosyncratically emphasized here, though Paul takes care to piously ascribe the blame not to the Torah itself, which is holy, but to the defective human condition – and Jews are clearly not exempted.

In the following programmatic passage, Paul further elaborates on the issue, this time pointing to our “being flesh” as the real culprit (Romans 7:14–25):³⁴

We know that **the Torah/law is spiritual**; but I am carnal, sold under sin.¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.¹⁸ *For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.*¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.²¹ So I find it to be *a law* that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.²² *For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self,*²³ *but I see in my members another law* at war with *the law of my mind* and making me captive to the *law of sin which dwells in my members.*²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve *the law of God* with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the *law of sin.*³⁵

³³ See discussion in Serge Ruzer, “The Seat of Sin in Early Jewish and Christian Sources,” in *Transformations of Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, eds. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 151–65.

³⁴ See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 472, who argues that such a localization of the sinful inclination in the body – in other words, the dualism of body and soul – while current “in the Hellenistic world, and also in Jewish Hellenism,” was not characteristic of the rabbinic Sages.

³⁵ Whether the “I” of the passage provides a glimpse of Paul’s own autobiographical exposure or represents the “speech in character” rhetorical device only, is an intriguing and much debated question. It is, however, irrelevant for the present discussion (emphasis added).

Telling is the variety of meanings in which the word “law” (*νόμος*) is used. First, the law is God’s Torah addressed to our inner man, to our mind (*nous*) – thus it is “spiritual” (cf. Philo’s position discussed above). However, when devoid of the Spirit, our response to God’s law is “carnal,” which means transgressing the commandment we are supposed to fulfill, thus succumbing to the “law of our bodily members,” a sinful negative of God’s holy Torah.³⁶

According to Paul, this pitiful stance vis-à-vis God’s law will continue until the body, which, as it were, pulls us down, is metaphorically “put to death” overwhelmed by the Spirit. The belief in Jesus’ atoning death, combined with the notion of our bodies’ metaphorical “death to sin,” seems to reflect – and drastically modify – here a broader idea that until the very moment of physical death we all, even the righteous ones, are destined to incessantly struggle with sin. This is, for example, how this idea is expressed in the rabbinical midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (9.5):³⁷

“And lo, very good” (Genesis 1:31). [What is very good?] It is death. Why was the death ordained [even] for pious ones? [Because] all the time when they are [still] alive they spend fighting their evil impulse. [Only] when they die, they [may at last] rest.

This death-centered perception of final transformation is characteristically collated in Paul with the belief in the liberating function of the Spirit (Romans 7:24–8:4):

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ/the Messiah our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ/the Messiah Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ/the Messiah Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. [emphasis added]

One notes that the crux of Paul’s reasoning is the aspiration to finally be able to fulfill “the just requirements of the Torah.”³⁸ The Torah is helpless: even if it still has a very

³⁶ As I suggested in an earlier study, Paul may be here a witness to a pristine phase in a trajectory leading in later rabbinic sources to the idea that each bodily member is tasked with fulfilling the specific commandment assigned to it by the Torah. See Serge Ruzer, “The Seat of Sin.”

³⁷ The English quotation is from the *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. and tr. by H. Freedman (London: Soncino Press, 1939). See discussion in Serge Ruzer, “The Death Motif in Late Antique Jewish *Teshuva* Narrative Patterns and in Paul’s Thought,” in *Transformations of Inner Self*, eds. Assmann and Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 199), 151–65, esp. 158–62.

³⁸ In contradistinction to what was until only a few decades ago the traditional view of Paul, which ascribed to the apostle the conviction that the dawn of the messianic era in its very essence heralded a divorce from the Jewish religious outlook centered on the Torah and its commandments. Statements on the Torah’s (partial) validity and absolute holiness were correspondingly explained away as secondary and/or dictated by the needs of the mission. This appraisal had a long history in theological thought – both among Christians, who embraced this position as their own and among

important function to accomplish – namely, to highlight and strengthen the awareness of one’s sins (Romans 3:20) – it also exposes one to the cunning of the evil impulse and, most important, does not provide the means to overcome humanity’s built-in sinful inclinations and follow God’s commandments (Romans 9:31).

At the end of the chapter, I will return to the characteristic collation of Jesus’ atoning death and the gift of the Spirit as two complementing “enablers.” Right now, however, I am going to ask to what extent this pessimistic appraisal of our inherent ability to cope with God’s Torah as law was Paul’s idiosyncratic contribution to the religious discourse or, alternatively, a reflection of an intuition of a much broader currency in the Jewish world.

It goes without saying that the call for the earnest effort to try to fulfill Torah commandments as the sure path to righteousness was characteristic of Jewish covenantal outlook as a whole, to which there are multiple attestations. The telling passage from Mishnah *Abot* 2.1, addressed above, is a fine example of such an outlook. An influential trend in rabbinic tradition also viewed the Torah as antidote to the evil impulse, even if its effectiveness is not always thorough.³⁹ However, by the time Paul was addressing the topic, a substantially different intuition, derived from an essentially pessimistic appraisal of a person’s ability to gradually build the edifice of righteousness by his/her own efforts, had also been voiced in Jewish tradition. It was even enticingly suggested that this pessimistic appraisal was intrinsic to the Pharisaic religious outlook, which propagated the expansion of the scope of the commandments by means of reinterpretation (Oral Torah) to the realm of intentions (“the inner man”) – a demand that further aggravated the impossibility of the task.⁴⁰ Later rabbinic sources also bear witness to such a tendency, with the sometimes inevitable conclusion, mentioned above, that nothing short of death can cure one’s sinful inclination. I have dealt at length elsewhere with rabbinic responses to this conundrum;⁴¹ it will suffice to say here that in such a context a variety of remedies were suggested, such as: trust in last-minute repentance, trust in God’s merciful benevolence, and belief in the expiating function of one’s death.

In eschatological thinking, however, this basically pessimistic assessment engendered aspirations for the last-days transformation of the nature of man’s stance vis-à-vis God’s law. This tendency, in fact, goes back to classical biblical

Jews (those who paid attention), who disapproved of it, including Judeo-Christians of the early centuries. Its various modifications have also been adopted, *mutatis mutandis*, by many influential scholars. For a review, see Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 3–42. Characteristically, even Alan F. Segal (“Torah and *Nomos* in Recent Scholarly Discussion,” *SR* 13:1 (1984): pp. 9–27) subscribed to this view at an earlier stage, claiming that “Paul deliberately revalued Torah” following “his radical conversion experience” (*ibid.*, 27). The scholar seems to have later modified this assessment; see Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

³⁹ See Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 472–73, 483–85.

⁴⁰ Ellis Rivkin, “Pharisaic Revolution,” in Ellis Rivkin *The Shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation* (New York: Scribner, 1971).

⁴¹ Ruzer, “The Death Motif”; “The Seat of Sin,” in *Transformations of Inner Self*, 151–65, 367–91.

prophecy, with a famous example provided by Jeremiah, who speaks of a “change of heart” imposed by God “from outside” – and not the steadfast efforts invested in pious ritual actions, temple sacrifices included – as the only way to righteousness, remission of sins and redemption (Jeremiah 31:31–34):

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the LORD: “I will put my Torah/law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, – ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

It is only this inner transformation enforced by God that makes the observance of the core stipulations of God’s covenant possible.⁴² Characteristically, in another famous oracle, that of Ezekiel, this eschatological transformation is further described in terms of receiving the gift of Spirit (Ezekiel 36: 24–29):

²⁴ For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ *And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.* ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses; and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. [emphasis added]

Compared to *m. Sotah* 9.15 quoted above, the passage from Ezekiel outlines an inverted sequence – instead of the righteousness, forgiveness of sins, gift of the Spirit and redemption as the crowning outcomes of earnest efforts to fulfill God’s precepts, including the ritual ones focused on the cleanness-uncleanness dichotomy, the very ability to act righteously is presented here as conditioned by the prior intervention by God that changes one essentially with the “stroke of the spirit.” This perception

⁴² It has been suggested that, in fact, Jeremiah already did not view certain elements of the ritual – namely, those pertaining to Temple sacrifices – as part of the obligatory core stipulations. See Moshe Weinfeld, “Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel,” *ZAW* 80 (1976): 17–56, esp. p. 32, who proposes that the prophet might have perceived the new covenant as associated not with formal statutes but exclusively with the “circumcision of the heart.” Jeremiah might have also expressed a broader prophetic tendency to harbor reservations toward the priestly aspect of the Jewish religion.

would be later picked up in the *Rule of the Community*, drastically modified in accordance with the Qumranic double predestination belief. A powerful expression of that pattern of religious thinking is found in the closing section of the *Rule* (1QS 11.7–17):⁴³

To those whom God has selected he has given them as everlasting possession; until they inherit them in the lot of the holy ones. ⁸ He unites their assembly to the sons of the heavens ... to be an everlasting plantation throughout all future ages. ⁹ However, *I belong to evil humankind to the assembly of wicked flesh; ... the assembly of worms ... of those who walk in darkness ...* ¹⁰ For to man (does not belong) his path, nor to a human being the steadying of his step; since judgment belongs to God, ¹¹ and from his hand is the perfection of the path. By his knowledge everything shall come into being, and all that does exist he establishes with his calculations and nothing is done outside of him. ... ¹³ he will free my soul from the pit and make my steps steady on the path; ¹⁴

... in his justice he will cleanse me from the uncleanness of the human being and from the sin of the sons of man, ... so that I can extol God for his justice ... Blessed be you, my God, who opens the heart of your servant to knowledge! ¹⁶ Establish all his deeds in justice, ... to be everlastingly in your presence, as you have cared for the selected ones of humankind. ¹⁷ *For beyond you there is no perfect path and without your will, nothing comes to be.* [emphasis added]

According to the *Rule*, the God-imposed transformation is (a) the only possible avenue to achieving the righteousness and (b) conditioned on the predestined election. The flesh-spirit dualism characteristic of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as of Paul in Romans 7,⁴⁴ is only hinted at here (the “flesh” being incapable of following God’s will, line 9, cf. Matthew 26:41); the Spirit, however, is clearly perceived elsewhere in the same scroll as both cleansing the person’s “inner man” when the last days come, and revealing God’s ultimate mysteries (1QS 4.20–23):

Meanwhile, God will refine, with his truth, all man’s deeds, and will purify for himself the configuration of man, ripping out all spirit of deceit from the innermost part ²¹ of his flesh, and *cleansing him with the spirit of holiness from every irreverent deed.* He will sprinkle over him the spirit of truth like lustral water (in order to cleanse him) from all the abhorrences of deceit and from the defilement ²² of the unclean spirit. *In this way the upright will understand knowledge of the Most High, and the wisdom of the sons of heaven will teach those of perfect behavior.* For these are those selected by God for an everlasting covenant ²³ and to them shall belong all the glory of Adam. [emphasis added]

The heavenly mysteries revealed to those “refined by God” are identified as a new interpretation of the Torah precepts, pertaining to the pre-eschatological “age of

⁴³ The English translation of Qumranic material in this chapter follows Wilfred G. E. Watson in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, ed. F. García Martínez (Leiden: Brill, 1994) (electronic version).

⁴⁴ See discussion in David Flusser, “The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity,” in David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magness, 1988), 23–74.

wickedness” in the *Damascus Document* 6, whereas both the necessity of the initially enforced action of the holy Spirit for obtaining righteousness and its cardinal effect as preventing one from sinning against God in the future are again highlighted in the Qumranic *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QH 4.17–26):

*[I give you thanks, Lord,] for the spirits you have placed in me . . . to confess my former sins, to bow low and beg favour*¹⁹ *for [. . .] of my deeds and the depravity of my heart. Because I wallowed in impurity, [I separated myself] from the foundation [of truth] and I was not allied with [. . .]*²⁰ To you does justice belong, blessing belongs to your Name for ever! [Act according to] your justice,²¹ free [the soul of your servant,] the wicked should die! However, *I have understood that [you establish] the path of the one whom you choose*²² *and in the insight [of your wisdom] you prevent him from sinning against you, you restore his humility through your punishments, and by your ord[eals streng]then his heart.*²³

[You, Lord, prevent] your servant from sinning against you . . .²⁵ [. . .] *for your servant is a spirit of flesh. Blank*²⁶ [I give you thanks, Lord, because] *you have spread your holy spirit upon your servant [. . .] his heart . . . [emphasis added]*

The emphasis on election/gift of the Spirit as the precondition for fulfilling the Torah precepts is expressed with particular force and clarity in Qumranic texts – not least, thanks to its being linked there to the double predestination concept.⁴⁵ However, it stands to reason that outside of this idiosyncratic linkage, the late Second Temple revival of the intuition found already in Ezekiel 36 was not restricted to their sectarian eschatologically oriented milieu.⁴⁶ Paul then may be viewed as an important witness to this tendency.

IV CONCLUSION

My reading suggests that in both Galatians and Romans, Paul repeatedly addresses the challenge of the *νόμος* (law) component of Jewish religion. The apostle’s rhetorically amplified statements there attest to a variety of nonharmonized

⁴⁵ Moreover, the gift of the Spirit features in some Qumranic texts as a self-definition of the covenanters. Thus, for example, in fragments of the *Damascus Document* found at Qumran, “the anointed/messiahs by his/the holy Spirit” or “the messiahs of (his) holy Spirit” (משיחי רוח הקודש/משיחי רוח) serve as the community’s collective self-definition (See 4Q266 ii, 2:12 (= CD-A 6) and 4Q270 ii, 2:14). In other passages, a shorter title, “the anointed of the holiness” (משיחי הקודש), denotes the whole community of the covenanters – as distinguished from the Qumranic priestly elite, those belonging to the “Aaronic anointing see, e.g., 4Q266 iii, 2:9; 4Q267 2, 6; 4Q269 iv, 1:2; see Serge Ruzer, “The New Covenant, the Reinterpretation of Scripture and Collective Messiahship,” in idem, *Mapping the New Testament*, 215–39).

⁴⁶ The following passage by Philo seems to indicate that a similar emphasis, albeit without a characteristic link to the Spirit, was probed also in a non-eschatological Hellenistic Jewish context: “God has . . . promoted goodly natures apart from any manifest reason, pronouncing no action of theirs acceptable before bestowing his praises upon them. . . . the prophet says that Noah found grace in the sight of the Lord God (Gen 6:8) when as yet he had . . . done no fair deed, etc.” (Philo, *Leg.* 3:77–79).

appraisals – from the Torah precepts being “good and holy” to constituting an obstacle on the way to true righteousness. In accordance with the latter emphasis, the centuries-long Christian tradition ascribed to Paul the conviction that in the messianic era, following Jesus’s salvific death, the Jewish religious outlook centered on the Torah and its commandments becomes obsolete. Trying to cope with the apostle’s statements on the Torah’s (partial) validity and absolute holiness this tradition explained them away as, for example, dictated by the tactical constraints of the mission. Various modifications of this appraisal have also been adopted, *mutatis mutandis*, by some influential modern scholars.⁴⁷

There have been also a number of inroads in recent research, alleviating this picture of Paul’s substantial reversal of the attitude to the Torah law, including the law’s ritual aspects. Most prominently, the scholars propagating the so-called New View of Paul forcefully argued for a context-related interpretation of Paul’s criticism of Torah ritual precepts as directed exclusively toward Gentiles. If so, there is no reason at all to view it as radical – and no reason to think that he called for annulling the Torah obligations of the Jews. The issue of Torah observance or deeds-grace controversy can moreover be viewed as not part of the initial core of the apostle’s teaching of messianic salvation, but rather one of the secondary themes evoked in response to varying circumstances – most notably, the appeal to non-Jewish addressees. This study approached the issue from a different angle. Not denying Paul’s very particular circumstances, it aimed at discerning in the apostle’s reasoning a reflection of broader Jewish awareness – within the covenantal nomism outlook – of the problematic side of the law as religion’s foundational aspect.

I started with a discussion of Paul’s “works of the Torah/law” usage featuring prominently in Galatians, which gives support to the suggestion that this phrase should be understood, similarly to its Hebrew parallel in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in a limiting sense of ritual markers. The context of the epistle indicates that those are the distinguishing positive ritual markers of Judaism, circumcision et al. that Paul tries to discourage his Gentile addressees within the Jesus movement from adopting. The apostle’s argument is that the ritual elements of the law are, in fact, not helpful in our attempts to achieve true righteousness. The position, that those are only the core demands of the Torah – embracement of monotheistic faith and worship and of proper morals – and not the details of ritual law that are expected from Gentile God-fearers, was, in fact, current among Hellenistic Jews. Paul therefore may be viewed as riding upon an existing tendency. Though the apostles’ polemical stress on the dilemma of either Jewish ritual or Jesus’ atoning death, is definitely his singular trademark.

I suggested, however, that Paul’s insistence that “secondary” ritual observances do not contribute to achieving true righteousness epitomized in the Torah’s foundational demands, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), was also aimed at

⁴⁷ See note 38 above.

his “hidden audience” – those Jewish members of the movement, whose influence on the Gentile fellow-travelers he is trying to repel. To clarify that intra-Jewish logic of the argument, I reviewed a number of early Jewish sources attesting to the variegated divisions of the Torah law into “primary” and “secondary” sections. Though in the final account, all these sources uphold the “righteousness value” of the “secondary” (external, ritual) observances – for example, as assisting in fulfillment of the foundational moral demands – they clearly betray the backdrop disagreements and polemic. This strengthens the probability that Paul’s negation of the ritual’s auxiliary value, first triggered by the concrete polemical situation *vis-à-vis* his Gentile addressees, was in the final account meant to have a broader appeal. Since in the intra-Jewish discourse it was likewise a matter of contention, Paul might have consciously related to some aspects of this contention.

However, it turns out that Paul’s doubts with regard to the usefulness of the ritual precepts for our aspiration to achieve righteousness are part of his more substantial skepticism. The apostle in fact argues that one is incapable of fulfilling the Torah’s foundational moral demands, those “just requirement of the law,” through one’s own efforts at all. In the Epistle to the Romans, he further elaborates on that, blaming our “being in flesh” for the basic impotence in coping with God’s law. The chapter shows that side by side with more optimistic appraisals of the man-versus-Torah-as-law conundrum, this pessimistic one was not unknown in broader Jewish tradition, representing, moreover, a long-standing tendency within it.

Having briefly related to rabbinic responses to this pessimistic appraisal of human nature that focused on mechanisms of repentance and God’s forgiveness, I noted that traditions of eschatological flavor alternatively attest to the aspiration for the last-days transformation. They are often expressed in terms of receiving the Spirit, which would finally make feasible the fulfillment of God’s commandments. According to my reading, Paul inherited from broader patterns of Jewish thought not only the pessimistic diagnosis of human condition *vis-à-vis* God’s demands in the “externally imposed” law, but also the eschatological solution of the problem through the gift of the Spirit. One of the characteristic features of Paul’s argument is the coupling of this inherited motif of broader circulation with the “sectarian” argument, ascribing the same enabling function to Jesus’s salvific death.

In the final account, my investigation brings me to the conclusion that the crux of the apostle’s reasoning was not the annulment of the Jewish religious outlook centered on the Torah and its commandments. It was rather the perception of the deeply problematic nature of the human predicament in face of God’s will as epitomized in the code of law. This seasoned pessimism was coupled with the eschatological hope for the inner transformation induced by the Spirit that would finally enable us to live up to the just demands of God’s Torah. With regard to both these motifs, as well as to the perception of the hierarchical division between peripheral and core precepts, Paul’s writings may be viewed as an illuminating

witness to broader intuitions of Jewish tradition. The apostle, however, retains his idiosyncratic singularity thanks to the addition of the atoning death of the Messiah as a complementing enabler of that eschatological metamorphose, and, of course, to the conviction that this metamorphose is already somehow present among his addressees.