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What About "the Law"?

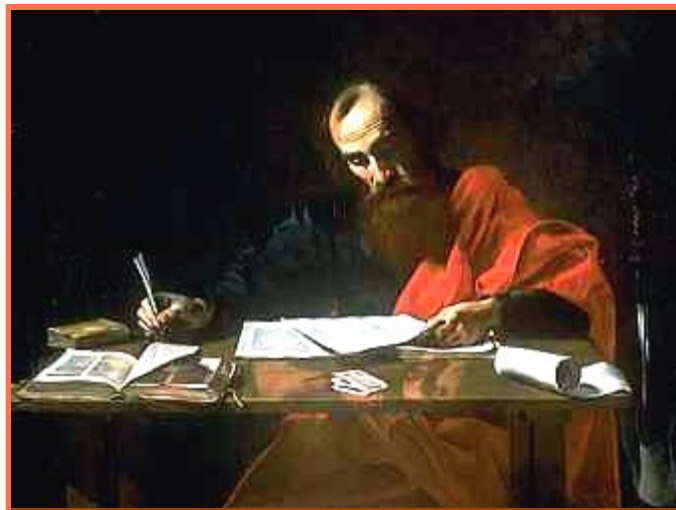
Legalism & Acts 15

by haRold Smith

a citizen of the Commonwealth (Ephesians 2:19)

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him (YHVH) who called you in the grace of Messiah and are turning to a different gospel - not that there is another one, **but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel concerning Messiah.** But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you... a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." Galatians 1:6-9*

*"But some men came down from Judea (to Galatia) and were teaching the brothers, '**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question." Act 15:1-2*



the Letters of Sha'ul (the Hebrew Apostle Paul)

There is just no way around it. The subject matter of this discourse simply requires some time to comprehend it - which means this article will be long. In a previous article in this series, [Torah and the Law \(click on highlighted words to view scripture\)](#), we saw the effect in meaning the error of poor translation has had by changing the word "Torah" from its Hebrew understanding of "instruction" or "teaching" into the Greek wording of "the Law" which carries a distinctly different meaning of "rule" or "regulation" and, culturally, has religated Torah to an elemental means of becoming acquainted with the "laws" associated with [YaHoVeH](#), the "God" of Israel. This subtle change in the meaning of this one word, Torah, has had an enormous associative impact upon other surrounding words and, indeed, subsequent ideologies by giving them a flavor, texture and intent they were never originally meant to convey. We see the same implication take effect with those words whose meanings have become associated with "circumcision". As it is with the word, "Torah" (and *contrary* to what has popularly become synonymous with "the Law"), most adherents to the Christian religion are unaware of the true controversy that raged among Hebrews concerning the circumcision addressed in the writings of the Hebrew apostle *Sha'ul* (having dual citizenship, his Roman name was Paul) - most notably in his letter to the Galatians. What *Sha'ul* (the Hebrew apostle, Paul) was speaking to in that letter was not the abolishment of the Torah itself, but about the *legalistic* application of Torah principles by people who had an agenda separate from that advanced by YHVH through the [redemptive sacrifice](#) offered by Yeshua. Too often, the legalistic [tradition of men](#) cloaked in religion and handed down as "Truth" is easier to accept than the hard work it takes to dig in under the surface of what has become accepted doctrine to find the true meaning of these words in scripture. Since the tradition of men is the *ONLY* thing Yeshua ever pointed to that could render YHVH's Word of "none effect", if we are to be sure we are walking in His Word of Truth, we need to be very careful about what we embrace as Truth ([Mark 7:7-8, 13](#), see [Who's Word Is It?](#)). Words mean things and it is in the context of how those words are used that their meanings are defined. Context means how words work in association with other words in surrounding sentences, paragraphs and volumes; but, context also means the history taking shape in the background when those words were being constructed - the world surrounding the authors influencing why those words were chosen. Most "Christians" are taught to approach *Sha'ul's* letters as though they each are a "theological treatise" written for the benefit of future generations when, in fact, they are nothing more than *letters* - letters written to a specific people in a specific place and time about specific events transpiring around them. Before they were given chapter references and verse numbers, they were simply *letters* addressed to a small group of people the apostle had come to know and to love. Because of Christianity's [declared aversion](#) to anything Hebraic (most notably anything having any association with its interpretation of Torah - "the Law"), all the context of the Hebrew world which prompted *Sha'ul's* writing of the letter to the Galatians surrounding the issue of circumcision (culminating in the subsequent trip to the Council at Jerusalem recorded in [Acts 15](#)) has been stripped from the words on the page. Since most who follow the Christian religion today are ignorant of the Hebrew culture they have been disassociated from, that ignorance

results in viewing "circumcision" as just another part of "the Law" - all of which is something to be avoided at all costs. In fact, nothing could be farther from the Truth.

Circumcision is not, nor has it ever been, a scriptural requirement for coming "to faith" in the One True Holy One of Israel - nor was circumcision given as a means of salvation to the Hebrew people; nor was it given as part of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Hebrew word for Covenant, *beriyth*, comes from a root word that brings with it the idea of a cutting. Thus, circumcision was given as a **sign of the covenant** YHVH made with Himself in front of Abraham 430 years *prior* to the Words given at Sinai (see **One Covenant** for more explanation). That is all it was ever intended to be, a sign of the promise to bring forth a seed of redemption, **a Kinsman Redeemer**, to the family of Israel - in spite of its subsequent mis-handling by men who sought to use it as support for their own agenda (how tradition is borne). Of what is mentioned in several places of the *Tanakh* (OT) for a conversion to faith to occur, circumcision is **NOT** one of the requirements (it is Gentiles that *convert from* believing in other gods *to the Hebrew Elohim*, YHVH, Ethnic Hebrews were simply taught to believe in the One True Holy One of *Israel* (see **Salvation and Eternal Life**). Consequently, the controversy over circumcision concerning Gentiles arose among Hebrews long before the apostle *Sha'ul* first began bringing Gentiles in Galatia to faith in this Hebrew *Elohim*, YHVH, and then only subsequently in Yeshua, the Son (his manner of evangelism is evidenced in the article **the Fathers Will**). To understand what these words are describing, we need to look at some background regarding the Pharisees. To begin with, all Pharisees are not the same. In the second temple period there were many schools of learning among the Pharisees - the two greatest being **Beyt Shammai and Beyt Hillel** (*Beyt* is Hebrew for "house of"). Shammai and Hillel were contemporary, highly influential rabbis who both led the **Sanhedrin** in the latter half of the first century BCE and in the early first century CE. Shammai was very strict in regards to interpretation and application of the Torah while Hillel was more liberal and flexible. Shammai had an intense dislike for gentiles and taught that gentiles had no place in the Kingdom of YHVH unless they became full converts to Judaism and kept all of **the ordinances of Moses**. In his eyes, that included circumcision. Hillel taught that the Kingdom of YHVH was for all people, and that gentiles could become part of the kingdom if they only kept the **7 Noahide Laws** (it should be noted that these particular laws only originate in the man-made religion of Judaism and are not found in scripture).

The Hebrew apostle *Sha'ul* was a student of **Gamaliel**, who was the grandson of Hillel. The Hebrew Rabbi Yeshua also leaned towards the teaching of Hillel on many things (where Hillel was in agreement with Torah) but agreed with Shammai on other points (such as divorce). He did not fit exactly into either school. All those following Yeshua would have been very keenly aware of the hundreds of differences and disagreements between the two Hebrew schools of thought and would also have been very aware of where Yeshua stood in regard to the two groups because their decisions and influence reached into the common, everyday living of a Hebrew community. The pivot of belief surrounding Yeshua *among Hebrews* was His claim to be the Promised Messiah, **the Kinsman Redeemer** to the house of Israel - not about the validity of Torah. His acceptance among those Hebrews who did believe Him to be the Messiah was precisely *because* of His endorsement of Torah (**Matthew 5:17-19**). We are told in **Luke 2:21** that Yeshua, himself, was circumcised on the 8th day in compliance with the Torah (He was not given the name "Jesus", however - see **Who's Name Is It?** for explanation). What is described as taking place in Acts 15 is **NOT** about deciding the validity of Torah, that issue did not once become a topic of discussion; but, rather, is describing a **Torah dispute** between Pharisees of *Beyt Shammai* and those of *Beyt Hillel* who believed in Yeshua as Messiah. *Sha'ul*, being of the House of Hillel, has no problem in going to non-Hebraic believers and teaching them about YHVH, bringing them into fellowship in the Hebraic community of faith in the various cities to which he traveled (Galatia being the first). Pharisees of the school of Shammai objected strongly to this and came to Galatia to try to enforce their view, probably in the hope of driving the Gentiles away (because, in their view, they had no place being in the community of faith in the first place) thus necessitating *Sha'ul's* journey to Jerusalem to bring this dispute to those of influence in the Hebrew sect of followers of **The Way**.



the Obedience of Abraham

"When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the assembly and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that YHVH had done with them. But some believers who belonged to

***the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.' The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.'* Acts 15:4-6**

In this passage, it is plainly stated that what was being considered was the matter of circumcision upon the newly converted Gentiles - not a referendum on the whole of Torah. The "party of the Pharisees" does not refer to all Pharisees, but only to those who objected to the proselyting of the gentiles. We know, by the nature of the objection, that this group of Pharisees were of the school of Shammai, since the school of Hillel (of which *Sha'ul* adhered) had no problem with the Gentiles coming to faith without requiring circumcision. Peter, on the other hand, seems to have been leaning towards the teachings of Shammai, which is why he says in verse 7 that YHVH needed to give him the vision concerning YHVH's view of Gentiles being clean in order to change his Shammai view. What better way for YHVH to convey His view than to use the most influential person in opposition to that view as His Spokesman (by the way, his vision was not about what food to eat but about YHVH's view of Gentiles coming to faith when seen in the context of the whole chapter of **Acts 10**). We also see Peter's Shammai leanings in his conflict with *Sha'ul* at Antioch (recorded in **Galatians 2:11-21**). It should be clarified that Galatia was a region of what is today known as Turkey with a number of congregations in the cities of Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, as well as Galatia. Now *Kiefer* (Peter) stands up to defend the gentiles.

***"And after there had been much debate, Kiefer stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days YHVH made a choice among you, that by my mouth the gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And YHVH, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Spirit just as he did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting YHVH to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Messiah, Yeshua, just as they will.' And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Sha'ul as they related what signs and wonders YHVH had done through them among the Gentiles."* Acts 15:7-12**



the Hebrew apostle Kiefer (Peter)

We need to understand the importance of *Kiefer's* words if we are to connect to just how much impact his statement in verse 10 really carries. Unlike our contemporary translations, *Kiefer* doesn't pull his punches in the original Greek which says, "Why do you tempt God?" (*ti peirazete ton Theon*). This phrase comes directly out of **Deuteronomy 6:16** and specifically implies soliciting a sinful response from YHVH. It is the same reference *Yeshua* uses in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:7**). In this context, it is not merely a matter of testing or proving. *Kiefer's* statement to these devout men (many of whom as Pharisees are meticulous about keeping all the Torah rituals) had all the forceful impact of being hit in the mouth with a closed fist - to tempt YHVH was one of the worst offenses imaginable! Suggesting that these men are tempting YHVH places them in mortal danger - which is why they grew silent and became very attentive after *Kiefer* said this. Notice that *Kiefer* does not frame this controversy as a religious or ecclesiastical issue. In *Kiefer's* view, this is about fidelity to the one true Hebrew God of Israel portrayed in the Torah - not about forming a new religion or bending what they know to be Truth to accommodate Gentile pagan concepts (that came later, at the **council of Nicaea** in 325 CE). If YHVH accepts Gentiles into the community of faith in Him on the basis of grace alone, no man has the right to question His decision - YHVH decides the issue of salvation, not any man. *Kiefer* recognizes that this controversy is not about what obedience comes after salvation; but, rather, is about the basis of salvation. These men were suggesting that a Gentile needed to be circumcised according to the rituals of Judaism in order to be saved. *Kiefer* emphatically says "NO!". He points out that even the children of Israel were not saved by being obedient to **legalistic ritual** (the "oral laws" of the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*). In fact, that kind of

thinking placed such a heavy burden on the Israelites that, because of the legalism that had been collectively heaped upon them through the centuries - they collapsed under the weight. No man is saved through ritualistic obedience, it is simply impossible and YHVH never intended it to be (**1Samuel 15:22, Jeremiah 7:22-23**). The Israelites could not bear this yoke and neither can Gentiles. Legalism is a redemptive failure no matter how it arrives or what it entails or how it is cloaked. Wherever men require more than YHVH, they are tempting Him.

There is a difference, however, between the basis of salvation and what behavior allows men to remain in the Presence of the Holy One after redemption - how to live in the brilliance of His Presence without being consumed

(see what it means to be a **Gatekeeper** to His Kingdom). Salvation comes about because YHVH chooses to be gracious toward men. There are no other conditions. How we respond to that grace makes a world of difference in determining our worship and in experiencing fulfilled lives, but we are not saved because we did something to gain credit with YHVH - that has never been the case. All that is required to obtain salvation is in a repentance from our former life, which means a 180 degree reversal away from former behavior toward a life of holiness, upheld by Yeshua in **Matthew 19:16-19**. Understanding this concept is crucial, especially today. The **deceptiveness** of legalism cloaked in the religious tradition of men always lurks in the dark hallways of religion, waiting to add just one more requirement to salvation. Whether it be baptism, moral living, tithing, creeds, dress, covering or any number of tiny additions - they are all a diversion from the great Love of the Father. Every addition is a challenge to YHVH's Nature and Character. It can not be emphasized enough, the issue being addressed by this Hebrew council was a point of legalism pertaining to involvement in the community of faith in YHVH - it was NOT a referendum on the whole of Torah as Christian tradition would have us to believe. **The dynamic of this council never once mentions the abolishment of Torah.** In fact, it is on the principles established in Torah their decision over the issue of circumcision involving Gentiles is concluded. Now it is James' turn. James (Ya'akov, the Hebrew brother of Yeshua) speaks first of the "tabernacle of David". Some have debated exactly what this passage refers to, but in this context what Ya'akov is referring to is the event spoken of by the prophets of what Messiah would do, the role He would play - namely the re-gathering of the exiles of Israel from out of the nations including some Gentiles believing in YHVH from within those nations, that would constitute the reunification of Israel and Judah - the family of YHVH.

"After they finished speaking, Ya'akov replied, 'Brothers, listen to me. Kiefer has related how YHVH first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for His (YHVH's) Name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek Me, and all the Gentiles who are called by My Name says YHVH, who makes these things known from of old.'" Acts 15:13-18

Notice that Ya'akov does not issue a call to a "new" religion or a "new" covenant, but a restoration of what has come before (see **Agreement**). It is in this context that Ya'akov makes what amounts to a **halakhic** ruling specifying what will be the minimum requirements for non-ethnic Hebrew believers coming to faith in YHVH and coming into fellowship in the Hebrew community. While some (especially Judaistic) sources suggest that Ya'akov is speaking here of the "Noahide Laws", the fact is - they are not specifically mentioned. What IS mentioned is a quote out of the Book of **Amos** found in the *Tanakh* (OT). Plus, as mentioned, scripture does not lend any justification for suggesting that YHVH has a separate set of "laws" for the nations apart from **the Ten Words** given to Israel - especially when you consider they were not "laws" at all but instructions about how to enter into YHVH's Nature once His Grace has been embraced. Let us look at how Ya'akov said the new believers should be instructed:

**"Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to YHVH, but should write to them to abstain from the things contaminated by idols, and from sexual fornication, from what has been strangled, and from blood.
For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim Him (YHVH), for He is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." Acts 15:19-21**

Ya'akov does not say "those Gentiles who turn to Yeshua" in verse 19. He, as were the others in attendance, were completely aware of the meaning of the sacrifice of the **Kinsman Redeemer**, the promised Messiah to Israel, Yeshua, the Son, who made atonement for Israel. His quote from Amos showed His awareness the same sacrifice opened the door of opportunity for the rest of the nations to be able to participate on an equal footing in this relationship these Hebrews had in the worship of this One Hebrew God, YHVH. These four instructions are taken directly from the portions known as the "Heart of the Torah". They are found in the book of Leviticus from chapters 11 through 20 which give YHVH's definition of what is holy - and what is not. Ya'akov's last comment is just as telling; "...For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim Him (YHVH), for He is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." The question has to be asked, what is being referred to as being read and on what day is it being read? It is the Hebrew God, YHVH, that is being read from the Hebrew Torah on the Hebrew Sabbath. These words are describing a decision these Hebrew believers were making over an issue arising some decades after the Resurrection. What these words say they are contemplating is not a change in Torah or the Sabbath - but a decision that is reinforced by the Torah which is read on every Sabbath in the believing community. In other words, the Gentiles who are coming to faith in YHVH as a result of the Hebrew Messiah's sacrifice need to observe these minimum requirements in repentance, a reversal of behavior, in order to be accepted into the community of Hebrew faith and into the Hebrew synagogues - the only place where that Hebrew faith was practiced in this era. Once they had become part of the community, they would then be instructed in the rest of the Torah, the role of the Messiah and the application of that knowledge to their lives which is a lifelong

process of learning and practice for everyone. This position is re-enforced in the context of [Acts 21:17-26](#) with particular emphasis given to verses 24 and 26. *Sha'ul* was asked to show those "thousands of the Hebrews who believe (*Yeshua is the Messiah*) that are zealous for Torah" by his **actions** that what they had heard about him telling the gentiles "not to circumcise their children or walk according to Torah" was unfounded - *not true*. *Sha'ul* subsequently reinforces what he believes with his statement in [Acts 24:14](#). If we are to find Truth in scripture, we have to take the whole of scripture in consideration with what we are reading in one section to understand what these Hebrews are trying to convey from their Hebrew perspective. In the light of this deep commitment to the observance of the Torah, it is hardly conceivable that the Jerusalem Council would have abrogated one of its chief precepts, Sabbath keeping - and pioneered Sunday worship instead (see [Keeping the Sabbath](#)).

Why just these four requirements? Again, we have to consider the context of the world in which these words are written. All of the four minimum requirements had to do with pagan worship rituals which new converts were expected to leave behind (repent of). Most of the cultures that surrounded Israel during this time practiced some form of fertility cultism among several gods. These cults perceived the sex act in one way or another as a spiritual replication of divine procreation. In other words, they thought of their gods as male and female and believed that sexual activity among these gods produced the fundamental constituents of the world. Therefore, since human sexuality mimicked divine intercourse, these fertility cults engaged in temple prostitution at the entryway to the temple and orgies as worship to these deities. Sex was a very big deal. It was part of the magic of the gods. And there were many, many gods. This Hebrew God of Israel was exclusive and to worship Him meant to treat Him *exclusively* - according to His Ways. These pagan religions also practiced blood sacrifices which included drinking the blood of the sacrifice to the idol - sometimes of their own children. These adherents to the Way of *Yeshua* knew the importance of blood from the teaching of the Torah that the Life was in the Blood ([Leviticus 17:11](#), [John 6:53-56](#)). It is also important to note that no evangelizing or proselytizing took place in the synagogues. A person did not become a part of the worship in the synagogue unless they had *already* exhibited a reversal of former behavior to put away their pagan lifestyle. To bring these practices into the community is to contaminate the holy with the unholy. *Kiefer* points to this holiness in his first epistle, written to the "exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia; As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall **BE** holy, for I am holy'." ([1Peter 1:1, 14-16](#)). The phrase "You shall be holy, for I am holy" is a direct quote from [Leviticus 11:44-45](#) and [Leviticus 20:26](#). These scriptures are those referred to in the subsequent letter sent out from the council to the believers in Galatia - the portion of scripture that sets out what YHVH calls holy and what He calls unholy.



the Beauty of Holiness

Ya'akov is specifically targeting pagan religious practices in the Roman world in Acts 15. He says something like this: "Yes, we agree that Gentiles who have come to YHVH on the basis of the Messiah should not be excluded simply because they are not Hebrew, but we do require them to give up pagan practices." In the Roman world, it was quite common to simply adopt *another* god into your personal arsenal in hopes that one more god would give you more protection. But YHVH is not one more god. Worshiping Him means *exclusivity*. Those Gentile pagans who come into this fellowship must give up those things that characterize worshiping false gods. Naming them settles the case. After all, "*Moses is taught every week in synagogue*." The rest of Acts 15 describes this letter and its method of delivery to the community of believers in YHVH in Galatia. Nothing in Acts 15 in any way says that the gentiles coming to faith in YHVH and Messiah *Yeshua* need to not keep the instructions for living found in the Torah. All the instructions contained within this letter come directly from the book of Leviticus. The expectation appears to be that the new believers would come into the community of faith and continue to learn about the instructions for living given by Moses as they engage in fellowship with other believers in YHVH. This council was convened to settle a particular controversial issue concerning whether the legalistic application of circumcision was the basis of salvation - or another gospel apart from that of the redemptive work of the Messiah, *Yeshua*. It was not convened as a referendum on the whole of Torah, the basis for living after salvation - as is evidenced by the fact that the Torah itself is repeatedly used as the foundation from which they arrive at their decision. Now, when *Sha'ul's* letter to the Galatians is re-read from this Hebrew perspective and not through a filtered lens of conventional Christian religious tradition; with the benefit of this background context, we find that *Sha'ul* is NOT advocating the abolishment of Torah from a person's life. In fact, just as the council at Jerusalem upheld, he

continually uses the Torah as the authoritative foundation from which his arguments are presented and it is also why, after the council meeting in Jerusalem, he makes the truthful statement of [Acts 24:14](#).

*"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, **believing everything laid down by the Torah** and written in the Prophets..." the apostle Sha'ul - Acts 24:14*

What About "the Law"? Series
Part One - Torah or "the Law"?
Part Two - the Curse of the Law?
Part Three - Under the Law?
Part Four - Legalism

a discussion of Legalism & Acts 15?



???Questions???

Please feel free to email me at harold@hethathasaneer.com. While not claiming to have all the answers, it would be an honor to partake with you of what Spirit is uncovering.

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