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Paul and the law

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NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 31

Series editor: D. A. Carson

Paul and the law

KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS
OF GOD

Brian S. Rosner



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To Andrew Cameron, Richard Gibson
and Philip Kern

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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

Anyone who follows long-standing debates over Paul and the law, over the use of the Old Testament in the New (especially in Paul), over the cogency or otherwise of various theological systems (e.g. Lutheranism, various forms of covenant theology, dispensationalism), over the origins of the common tripartite classification of biblical law (moral, civil and ceremonial), knows that Paul's understanding of the law lurks behind many other theological debates. Add to the topics already mentioned the relationships between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles, the unity of the new humanity in Christ, Paul's apparent flexibility when he evangelizes Jews in Jerusalem and Corinthians in Achaia, and, in historical theology, the validity or otherwise of the 'third use' of the law, not to mention the sheer avalanche of books and articles on these and related topics, and one

PAUL AND THE LAW

readily perceives why a book on Paul and the law is likely to be of perennial interest.

So what is the distinctive contribution of the volume you are holding in your hand? Brian Rosner's strength lies in showing with patience and clarity how the apostle Paul articulates an array of complementary but quite different stances towards the law. That these diverse stances can be integrated he does not deny, but his focus is on letting the crucial passages in Paul speak for themselves. Whether one is persuaded by each exegesis is not as important as listening attentively to the diversity of emphases within Paul's own writings, before attempting the grand synthesis. This is a book to read slowly and appreciatively, a book to ponder.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Author's preface

Most scholars come at Paul and the law as interpreters of Romans and Galatians. My background and perspective are somewhat different. Although I have taught the exegesis of both letters, most of my research has been in three different areas: 1 Corinthians, Paul's ethics, and the Jewish background to Paul's letters. With these interests to the fore, I am as much concerned about what Paul does with the law, especially for questions of conduct, as I am with what Paul says about the law.

I have been pondering the subject since the beginning of my doctoral studies in the late 1980s and in one sense this book is an attempt to complete that project. As one reviewer of my published dissertation complained, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics* 'does not account for Paul's approach to the Mosaic law'.

My goal is to bring some neglected evidence to the discussion and to defend some proposals that sharpen and build on the work of others. I have sought to write something fresh and readable, which examines enough trees to sketch a reliable guide to the wood, along with a map of the broader lie of the land (for subjects related to the law, like justification and ethics).

The book's ideas have been test run in a variety of settings and my indebtedness to others is too big to spell out in full. Special thanks are due to Roy Ciampa and Michael Bird, who kindly read and commented on parts of the manuscript. Don Carson, the editor of the *NSBT* series, provided invaluable guidance from the outset. Phil Duce of IVP was supportive along the way. Eldo Barkhuizen's copy-editing was done with painstaking care and diligence. My wife, Natalie, gave encouragement at every stage.

I am especially grateful to Moore Theological College for the privilege of giving the 2011 Annual Moore College Lectures on Paul and the law. The book's final test run was in that context. The book was largely completed in my last semester at Moore before moving to Ridley Melbourne, where I am now happily ensconced. It is dedicated to three of my closest Moore colleagues and friends, Andrew Cameron, Richard Gibson and Philip Kern.

PAUL AND THE LAW

The subject of Paul and the law is notoriously complex. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the hermeneutical solution to the puzzle of Paul and the law that this book expounds is exegetically compelling, takes Paul's historical context into account and retains at full strength Paul's twin emphases on the free grace of God in salvation and the demand of God for holy living.

A revised and expanded version of my 2010 article 'Paul and the Law: What He Did Not Say', *JSNT* 32: 405–419, appears in chapter 3 and is used with permission.

Brian S. Rosner

Abbreviations

1QS	<i>Community Rule / Manual of Discipline</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
4Q266	<i>Damascus Document</i> ^a (Dead Sea Scrolls)
4Q525	<i>Beatitudes / The Demons of Death</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
'Abot R. Nat	' <i>Abot de Rabbi Nathan</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AD	Anno Domini (after Christ)
AGAJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Against Apion</i> (Josephus)
<i>Alleg. Interp.</i>	<i>Allegorical Interpretation</i> (Philo)
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i> (Josephus)
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
Bar.	Baruch
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BC	before Christ
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and W. F. Gingrich, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CD	<i>Damascus Document</i> (Dead Sea Scrolls)
<i>Dec.</i>	<i>On the Decalogue</i> (Philo)
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i> (Justin Martyr)
DPHL	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i> , ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin, Downers Grove: IVP; Leicester: IVP, 1993

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<i>Dreams</i>	<i>On Dreams</i> (Philo)
<i>Embassy</i>	<i>On the Embassy to Gaius</i> (Philo)
Esdr.	Esdras
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
Gk.	Greek
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
Hebr.	Hebrew
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i> (Eusebius)
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint
Macc.	Maccabees
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>On the Migration of Abraham</i> (Philo)
<i>Moses</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i> (Philo)
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>Names</i>	<i>On the Change of Names</i> (Philo)
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
<i>NDBT</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture</i> , ed. B. S. Rosner, T. D. Alexander, G. Goldsworthy and D. A. Carson, Downers Grove: IVP; Leicester: IVP, 2000
NET	New English Translation
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. W. A. VanGemeren, 5 vols., Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible

ABBREVIATIONS

NLT	New Living Translation
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OT	Old Testament
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>Prov.</i>	<i>On Providence</i> (Philo)
<i>Pss Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>Sacrifices</i>	<i>On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel</i> (Philo)
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
<i>Sifre Deut.</i>	<i>Sifre Deuteronomy</i>
<i>Sifre Num.</i>	<i>Sifre Numbers</i>
Sir.	Sirach
SP	Sacra pagina
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i> (Philo)
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, tr. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76
<i>T. Jos.</i>	<i>Testament of Joseph</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
tr.	translated, translation
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UBS4	United Bible Societies Greek New Testament Editorial Committee, <i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament</i> , 4th rev. ed., Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
Wis.	Wisdom
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Chapter One

‘Circumcision is nothing’ The puzzle of Paul and the law

Paul’s views on the law are *complex*.

(Ben Witherington III)¹

Paul and the law – The subject is *complex*.

(Donald A. Hagner)²

Current discussion of Paul’s view of the law . . . has become extraordinarily *complex*.

(D. A. Carson)³

There is nothing quite so *complex* in Paul’s theology as the role and function which he attributes to the law.

(James D. G. Dunn)⁴

There is a general agreement that Paul’s view of the law is a very *complex* and intricate matter which confronts the interpreter with a great many puzzles.

(Heiki Räisänen)⁵

Understanding Paul’s relationship to the Law of Moses is fraught with difficulty.⁶ Not only is the subject notoriously complex and much studied (some would say studied too much), but major positions are also entrenched. Difficulties begin with questions of definition, of

¹ Witherington 1998: 66, italics added.

² Hagner 2007: 104, italics added.

³ Carson 2004a: 393, italics added. Hafemann (1993: 671) has written similarly, ‘Paul’s understanding of the Law is currently the most debated topic among Pauline scholars.’

⁴ Dunn 2008: 441, italics added.

⁵ Räisänen 1987: xii, italics added. Cf. N. T. Wright 1991: 211, commenting on the law in Rom. 8:4, ‘This is complex.’

⁶ Cf. Kruse 1996: 287: ‘Anyone who seeks to understand Paul’s approach to the law . . . encounters many problems.’

both the extent of Paul's corpus and the meanings of 'the law', and are exacerbated with numerous problems of interpretation of the key texts, decisions about which lead to vastly differing syntheses of Paul's teaching. Like a big jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing, and the box lid thrown out, there seem to be numerous possible configurations, none of which fits every piece. Some doubt whether Paul himself knew what he was talking about.

Those who write about Paul and the law are typically greeted with a barrage of accusations, ranging from unthinking conservatism to complete eccentricity, from advocating licence to imposing legalism, from cheapening grace to ignoring the demands of God.⁷ If few scholars know exactly what they think about the subject, most can tell you what they do not think.

Indeed, it is tempting to agree with 1 Timothy 1:7, which judges that those who want to be 'teachers of the law' do 'not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm' (TNIV). Many would counsel with Titus 3:9 that it is best to avoid 'arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless' (TNIV)!⁸ Those who write on Paul and the law may feel an affinity with Hebrews 5:11: 'We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn' (NIV 1984). However, given the failure to arrive at a consensus at many points on the subject this would hardly be a fair retort!

Too much, however, is at stake to ignore the topic. It is not only the study of Paul and his letters that depends on a clear understanding of the apostle to the Gentiles' stance towards the Jewish law; his teaching concerning salvation, salvation history, Israel, the church, anthropology, ethics and eschatology are all inextricably linked to his view of the law. Needless to say, no serious examination of Paul's relationship to the Law of Moses can afford to underestimate the complexity of the subject, which is after all a subset of one of the biggest questions in the study of early Christianity, namely the parting of the ways between the nascent movement and the mother faith.

The reason understanding Paul and the law is so critical to the study of the New Testament is that it touches on the perennial question of the relationship between the grace of God in the gift of salvation and

⁷ Cf. Bassler 2007: 'No aspect of Paul's thought is as hotly disputed as his view of the law.'

⁸ These warnings are of course not about valid questions of interpretation but concern false teaching. But the sentiment is frequently expressed in response to the subject of Paul and the law.

the demand of God in the call for holy living. Misunderstanding Paul and the law leads to distortions of one or both. From the beginning, even in Paul's day, his teaching on the law has raised hackles on one of two fronts. People think either that the free gift of salvation has been compromised, or a solid basis for the demand of God for obedience and a holy life has been removed. If justification is not by works of the law, does that not lead to licence? If one removes the law, is the result not lawlessness? Do those without the law not end up as outlaws? And if we are still under the law in some sense, does that not compromise the free gift of salvation?

With reference to the history of research, Richard Hays warns, 'Like the stone steps of an ancient university building, the topic of "Paul and the Law" has been worn smooth by the passing of generations of scholars.'⁹ John W. Martens uses a different metaphor to make the same point: 'Scholarship on Paul and the law is a vast array of acres and acres of cultivated fields.'¹⁰

Three theological positions in particular have a strong interest in Paul's view of the law. Each tends to focus on an emphasis in Paul's letters that is clearly present, but plays down other aspects of the subject. Broadly speaking, *Lutheranism* holds that Paul believed that Christ abolished the law and that the law is the counterpoint to the gospel. The primary role of the law is to lead us to despair of any hope of obedience leading to God's acceptance and to drive us to seek God's mercy in Christ. For the most part the law is not seen as playing a big role in the Christian life (although Luther himself made effective use of the law in his catechisms). Secondly, the *Reformed* view agrees that salvation is by grace and not by obeying the law, but once saved we are under the moral law and must obey it in order to please God. Thirdly, the so-called New Perspective on Paul, which is really a new perspective on Paul in relation to Judaism, thinks that the problem of the law for Paul is not that salvation is by grace and not works, but that Paul's opposition to the law was simply that it was used by Jews to exclude Gentiles from the people of God; Jewish ethnocentrism is the reason Paul opposed the law. There is something to learn from each of these perspectives. In my view the challenge is to hold on to their valid insights in a manner that does justice to the full range of evidence and, with important qualifications, does not deny the validity of other perspectives.

⁹ Hays 1996b: 151.

¹⁰ Martens 2003: xiii. To me, rather than a well-cultivated field it feels more like a minefield!

However, the present study does not focus on the history of interpretation. Nor do I document the pedigree of every position I defend; this is not merely to avoid the toil and tedium, but to prevent prior treatments obscuring a fresh appraisal of the primary sources themselves. Neither does this book offer a comprehensive investigation and typology of the usage of ‘law’ in Paul’s letters; much can be missed by focusing too tightly and too early on the explicit evidence to the neglect of other lines of enquiry that set such things in context.¹¹

Instead, my goal is to bring some neglected evidence to the discussion and to defend some proposals that sharpen and build on the work of others. Every researcher approaches the subject with a particular profile that impacts the shape of his or her investigation. Most scholars come at Paul and the law above all as interpreters of Romans and/or Galatians. This is understandable, given the fact that the vast majority of Paul’s references to *nomos* occur in these two letters. To use a metaphor, if the ‘law is the main subplot of Romans’,¹² in Galatians the law is personified and appears as a main character in the drama.

The exegetical problems in connection with the law in Romans and Galatians alone are well known:

- Is Christ the end of the law or its goal, or both?
- Are we no longer under the law’s jurisdiction or just its condemnation?
- Do believers fulfil the law or does Christ do it for us?
- Is ‘the law of Christ’ the law reconfigured, or a new set of commandments, or something else?
- Are we under the moral law? Must we keep the Ten Commandments?
- Are ‘works of the law’ identity markers separating Israel from the nations, or works demanded by the law?
- Is Paul’s opposition to doing the law just his concern that it marks off Jews from Gentiles?

To make matters worse, the standard positions on these questions are entrenched. Paul and the law is the New Testament studies version of the Battle of the Somme, the 1916 World War One allied attack on

¹¹ Cf. Barclay 2011: 37: ‘In the history of scholarship on “Paul and the law” by far the greatest attention has been paid to Paul’s theoretical statements on our topic, with numerous attempts to plot the location of the law in relation to faith, Christ, grace and works on the complex map of Pauline theology.’

¹² Dunn 1997: 131.

the Western Front in France: lots of close fighting in trenches, with no clear winners, hardly any progress, many casualties and no sign of an armistice or even a *détente*. My strategy, to extend the metaphor, is not to enter the fray head on, but to come in from a different direction. More precisely, it is not Paul and the law that is the Battle of the Somme, but Paul and the law fought on predictable lines in Romans and Galatians that fits this unflattering description. There is much vital evidence that has been neglected. Many books on the subject concentrate exclusively on what I cover just in chapter 2!

My background and perspective are somewhat different. Although I have taught the exegesis of both Romans and Galatians, most of my research has been in three different areas: 1 Corinthians, Paul's ethics, and the Jewish background to Paul's letters.¹³ With these interests to the fore, I am as much concerned about what Paul does with the law, especially for questions of conduct, as I am about what Paul says concerning the law (the exclusive focus of many studies). Driving the investigation is the question, according to Paul, *how does the law relate to the issue of how to walk and please God* (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1)? Even if Paul's answer may at first sight seem very un-Jewish, the question itself sits comfortably in a first-century Jewish setting.

Many book-length investigations of Paul and the law seek to be exhaustive in their treatment of the relevant Pauline texts and/or the history of interpretation. An unintended consequence of this is that they are also exhausting to read, and ironically readers are put off developing a comprehensive grasp of the subject. On the other hand, chapters on Paul and the law in various textbooks, while concise, tend to skip over the problems and are therefore unsatisfying. Even the most casual readers of Paul's letters recognize real difficulties in understanding the subject and object to simplistic generalizations and a selective review of the evidence. Most students and ministers, and even scholars, cannot remember what they think about the key texts, let alone have an idea of how they all fit together. The result is often an inconsistent approach to interpreting Paul when he discusses the law and a confusion that hinders a confident Christian reading of the Law of Moses. My aim is to write something fresh and readable,

¹³ In responding to my book on Paul's use of Scripture for ethics, published in 1994, Witherington (2010: 608) offers a four-point critique, culminating with the objection that my approach 'does not account for Paul's approach to the Mosaic law'. He is right that a high view of the importance of Torah for Pauline ethics does require some explanation as to how this fits with Paul's view of the law, especially Paul's negative critique of the law. The present study takes up the challenge.

which examines enough trees to sketch a reliable guide to the wood, along with a map of the broader lie of the land (for subjects related to the law, like justification and ethics).

Paul's apparent inconsistency

The crux of the problem of Paul and the law is the fact that his letters present both negative critique and positive approval of the law. James Dunn makes this observation with reference to Romans and Galatians: 'Paul does not hesitate to describe it [the law] as "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7.12), a very positive gift of God (Rom. 9.4). . . . On the other hand, he clearly speaks of the law as an enslaving power, increasing trespass and used by sin to bring about death (Gal. 4.1–10; Rom. 5.20; 7.5).'¹⁴ Some specific examples in Ephesians and Romans underline the problem. (An apparent contradiction in a single verse appears in 1 Corinthians 7:19 and will be dealt with in detail in a following section of this chapter.)

Ephesians 2:15 is a clear example of negative critique of the law: Christ has 'abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances'.¹⁵ The sheer redundancy of the expression 'the law with its commandments and ordinances', typical of the style of Ephesians, indicates that Paul intends to refer to the entire Law of Moses. The precise syntax is not the point so much as the impression left by the repetition: Christ has abolished every last bit of the law.

The words in question echo the introduction to the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:1: 'This is the command – the statutes and ordinances – the LORD your God has instructed me' (HCSB). 'Command' (Hebr. *mišvā*) in the singular is often interpreted as the law-covenant in its entirety, and the plural, 'statutes and ordinances', sums up the contents of the law-covenant.¹⁶

The verb 'to abolish', *katargeō*, is equally unambiguous. BDAG's (526a) glosses include 'abolish, wipe out, set aside'. A survey of Pauline usage confirms the strength of the term, along with frequent apocalyptic overtones. The following translations appear in the NRSV: 'nullify' (Rom. 3:3; 4:14; Gal. 3:17); 'discharge' (Rom. 7:2, 6); 'reduce to nothing' (1 Cor. 1:28); 'doom to perish' (1 Cor. 2:6); 'destroy' (1 Cor. 6:13; 15:24, 26); 'come to an end' (1 Cor. 13:8 [2×], 10–11); 'set aside' (2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13–14); 'cut off' (Gal. 5:4); 'remove' (Gal.

¹⁴ Dunn 1997: 328–329.

¹⁵ See the section in chapter 2, 'Clarification and confirmation', for a full discussion.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Dr Andrew Shead for this observation.

5:11); 'annihilate' (2 Thess. 2:8); and 'abolish' (Eph. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:10). To paraphrase Ephesians, using Louw and Nida's definition of *katargeō* (13.100), 'Christ has put an end to the law in its entirety.'

Ephesians 2:15 stands in obvious tension with two other verses in Paul's letters, the first of which is in the same letter. If Ephesians 2:15 typifies negative critique, just a few chapters on, in Ephesians 6:1–2, we find positive approval of the law. Paul quotes one of the 'commandments' that Christ had presumably done away with and uses it as an instruction for Christian living: 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother" – this is the first *commandment* with a promise.' The word 'commandment' in Ephesians 6:2, *entolē*, is the same word used in Ephesians 2:15 to describe what it is that Christ has abolished. Christ has abolished the law and yet the law is still of value for Christian conduct. It is genuinely puzzling how an author could write both things in the same letter.

If Ephesians 6:1–2 stands in tension with Ephesians 2:15, Romans 3:31 is its formal contradiction. There Paul asks whether his teaching about the critical nature of faith abolishes the law: 'Do we then *overthrow* the law by this faith?' Paul answers, 'By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.' The verb translated 'overthrow' is *katargeō*, the same word that appears in Ephesians 2:15. If in Romans Paul insists his teaching about Christ and faith by no means abolishes the law, in Ephesians he affirms that Christ has indeed abolished it.

Andrew Errington suggested the following apt and wry analogy:

Discussing Paul and the Law is a bit like being watched while you carve a chicken: it's fairly easy to start well, but you quickly have to make some tricky decisions (about which everyone has an opinion), and it's very easy to end up in a sticky mess with lots of bits left over that no one knows what to do with.¹⁷

Studies of Paul and the law distinguish themselves by whether they face these unmistakable tensions in his letters and how they explain them.

Definition of terms: 'Paul', 'law' and 'believer'

Three terms call for definition before proceeding with our study of Paul and the law.

¹⁷ Personal communication.

The apostle Paul

By *Paul* I mean both the Jew who was seized by Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:12) and became his apostle to the Gentiles and the letters he wrote that are collected in the New Testament. The extent of his corpus is of course a matter of dispute. While I am convinced of the authenticity of all thirteen letters traditionally attributed to Paul, little hangs on this decision for a study of the subject at hand. As already noted, Paul's most sustained discussions of Israel's law and the church's faith are in the undisputed letters. Nonetheless, significant evidence in Ephesians (see e.g. 2:15 and 6:1–2 above) and the Pastoral Epistles, for example, should not be ignored and sometimes offers support to one interpretation over another of texts in Romans and Galatians. Even those scholars who work with a truncated Pauline corpus should recognize that if the law is a central concern for Paul, the pseudo-Pauline epistles provide early reflections of, or on, his views. It is a mistake to disregard such evidence, even if it is not accorded primary status.

The meaning of 'the law'

What Paul meant by *law* is no less contentious and his use of the term *nomos* may not be univocal. When we study Paul *and the law*, what are we talking about? With respect to the sense of *nomos* in the New Testament, BDAG (677–678) is typical of most lexica in noting three general meanings of the word in the New Testament: 'rule, principle, norm', 'legal system' and 'collection of holy writings'. Most treatments of the subject of Paul and the law take 'law' in the second sense of 'legal system' as their primary, if not exclusive, focus. Westerholm is a clear example: '[T]he "law" in Paul's writings frequently (indeed, most frequently) refers to the sum of specific divine commandments given to Israel through Moses'.¹⁸ This concentration often leads to a tight focus on the law's commandments: 'The law that can be kept, done, fulfilled, or transgressed is clearly "the legal parts" of the Pentateuch.'¹⁹ Schreiner concurs: 'In the NT . . . the term *law* most often refers to what is commanded in the Mosaic law.'²⁰

¹⁸ Westerholm 2004a: 299.

¹⁹ Ibid. Cf. Winger 1992: 104: *nomos* refers to '[t]hose words given to and possessed by the Jewish people, which guide and control those who accept them and according to which those who accept them are judged.'

²⁰ Schreiner 2010: 21, italics original.

In favour of this approach we note that on a few occasions Paul may use 'law' to refer to commandments or collections of commandments. Romans 7:7 is a candidate for such a reading, where Paul introduces one of the Ten Commandments as coming from the 'law': 'Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."' The phrase 'the giving of the law [to Israel]' (Rom. 9:4) also points to the law as a body of commandments, most commentators taking it as referring to the divine legislation delivered to Moses at Sinai. Galatians 3:17 is a comparable usage, in that it refers to 'the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later [after the promises to Abraham]'. Parts of the Pentateuch readily fit the description of 'laws', such as the Decalogue, the Covenant Code (Exod. 21 – 23) and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17 – 26). Similarly, the word 'law' is used frequently in Deuteronomy (e.g. 1:5; 4:8, 44; 17:18; 27:3; etc.; cf. 28:61, 'the book of this law') to refer to itself, as 'the sovereign will of Yahweh, now coded into teaching that is palpably available in scrolls'.²¹

But to take 'law' exclusively to mean *legal material in the Pentateuch* poses problems. It is certainly true that the five books of Moses contain a lot more than just laws. Narrative dominates Genesis, the first half of Exodus and most of Numbers. And Sloane notes that when Deuteronomy intimates that Moses will 'expound this law [MT: *tôrâ* / LXX: *nomos*]' in a series of speeches to Israel, his first speech 'contains no rules or regulations; it consists entirely of a recitation of Israel's history, or, more properly, of Yahweh's great and gracious acts on their behalf and their past response'.²²

It is more accurate to say that Torah or 'law' most commonly came to denote not just Deuteronomy, some collection of laws, or even the contents of the Sinai covenant, but rather the first five books of the Bible together.²³ According to John P. Meier, the notion of the law being treated as a 'literary whole' can be found throughout the so-called Deuteronomistic history (Joshua – 2 Kings), and it is continued in 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. In support he cites 2 Kings 23:2 ('the book of the covenant'), Joshua 24:26 ('the Law of God'), 2 Kings 10:31 ('the Law of the LORD') and Joshua 23:6 ('all that is written in the book of the law of Moses').²⁴ Even if the

²¹ Brueggemann 2002: 218.

²² Sloane 2008: 38.

²³ Cf. BDAG's (678d) third definition of *nomos*, noted above: 'collection of holy writings'.

²⁴ Meier 2009: 29.

references to the ‘law’ in Deuteronomy are limited to one book (which is predominantly laws, but not exclusively – see Sloane above), the other references point to a broader referent taking in all of the five books of Moses.

Correspondingly, Paul generally deals with the law as a unity, customarily referring to Mosaic ‘law’, not ‘laws’. This means that, in the main, his responses to the law are not to its various parts, however we may wish to divide it, but to the law as a whole. And he can not only introduce ‘laws’ from the Pentateuch (see e.g. ‘you shall not covet’ in Rom. 7:7, noted above) as ‘law’, but also narrative as ‘law’, as in Galatians 4:21 (Hagar and Sarah, discussed below).

In terms of referent, both Hebrew *tôrâ* and Greek *nomos* in Jewish and Christian writings frequently denote the first five books of the sacred Scriptures attributed to Moses, often labelled the ‘Pentateuch’ or ‘Torah’. Paul can write of ‘the law [the Pentateuch] and the prophets’, as in Romans 3:2. He can also introduce quotations from the Pentateuch as being found in the law, as in 1 Corinthians 9:8–9 where ‘law’ and ‘law of Moses’ are equivalent: ‘Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn’t *the Law* say the same thing? For it is written in *the Law of Moses*: [quotation of Deut. 25:4].’²⁵ Watson is correct: ‘When Paul speaks of “the law”, he has in mind the text known as “the Law of Moses.”’²⁶

A test case for the meaning of *nomos* for Paul occurs in Galatians, where in a single verse Paul writes of the law in apparently different ways: ‘Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?’ (Gal. 4:21 TNIV).

If the first part of the verse sums up the dilemma facing the Galatian Christians, the second introduces Paul’s allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story of Hagar and Sarah. F. F. Bruce’s comments are instructive:

[N]ote the transition in this sentence from *nomos* in the strict sense of ‘law’ – ‘you who wish to be under the law’ – to *nomos* in the general sense of the Pentateuch. The patriarchal narrative [of Hagar and Sarah] does not belong to any of the law-codes of the Torah, but it is part of the Torah, and it is doubtful if Paul and his contemporaries made the explicit distinction in their minds between

²⁵ NIV. For further examples where ‘law’ means the Pentateuch, see Matt. 12:5; Luke 2:23; 24:44; John 8:5, 17; Heb. 9:19.

²⁶ Watson 2004: 275.

the narrower and wider senses of the term that modern students readily make.²⁷

Galatians 4:21 contains two references to 'the law', one negative and one positive. Many scholars seem to take Paul as saying, 'Tell me, you who want to be under [the legal parts of] the law, are you not aware of what [another bit of] the law says?' (TNIV). But the most straightforward interpretation is to understand Paul as simply referring to the Pentateuch in both cases. As Hays puts it, for Paul *nomos* 'is always the same collection of texts, but the import of those texts shifts dramatically in accordance with the hermeneutical perspective at each stage of the unfolding drama'.²⁸ It is better to read the two occurrences of *nomos* in the verse in question as referring to different functions or, better, construals of the Law of Moses. The following interpretative additions to the verse pre-empt some of my main findings in this book: 'Tell me, you who want to be under the law [as law-covenant], are you not aware of what the law [as prophecy] says?' (Gal. 4:21 TNIV).

The question is not *which bits* of the law Paul is referring to in a given instance of *nomos*, but the law *as what*. More attention should be paid to the point of view from which Paul is reading the law.

A few other scholars have pointed in this direction for understanding Paul and the law. I will mention these at appropriate points in the book. To cite a couple of examples here, D. A. Carson writes that Paul does not uphold the law for Christians 'as *lex*, as ongoing legal demand', but rather its continuity is sustained in that it points to and anticipates the 'new "righteousness from God" that has come in Christ Jesus'.²⁹ And Donald Hagner, confronted with the problem of negative and positive comments in Paul's letters about the law, recommends that we 'take the negative statements as referring to *nomos* understood as *commandments*, and the positive statements as referring to the broader meaning of *nomos*, namely as *Scripture*'.³⁰ I said much

²⁷ Bruce 1982: 215.

²⁸ Hays 1996b: 164.

²⁹ Carson 2004a: 139. In terms of this book's construal, Carson points to law as legal code and prophecy respectively.

³⁰ Hagner 2007: 108, italics added. As it turns out, Westerholm (2004a: 37) is close to this view when he comments, 'The law, *as law*, is meant to be observed' (italics original). Cf. Schreiner 2010: 22: 'the law is conceived as a body of commands summarized in the Mosaic covenant'. My point is that while this conception is the most common in Paul's letters, Paul also 'conceives' of the law as a testimony to the gospel (prophecy) and as instruction for living (wisdom).

the same thing in my 1994 study *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*: ‘There is a sense in which the Law as *Mosaic covenant* is abolished, but the Law as *Scripture* has ongoing value for Christians.’³¹

My aim in this book is to sharpen this point and to develop it more comprehensively, constructing what might be called, to recall Hays’s words quoted above, a *hermeneutical solution* to the puzzle of Paul and the law. Rather than studying ‘the law’s commandments’, we are more in tune with Paul when we consider ‘the law as commandments’, as well as ‘the law as prophecy’ and ‘the law as wisdom’. This is my approach in chapters 2–3, 5 and 6 respectively.³²

As it turns out, John P. Meier detects the same three categories (legal, prophetic and wisdom) when he describes the dominant Old Testament conception of the Law of Moses:

[T]he word *torah* has clearly come to mean a written document that comes from God to Israel by the hands of Moses, a scroll in which the foundational stories and ordinances of Israel are woven into a literary whole that retains traits of prophetic and sapiential [wisdom] as well as legal *torah*.³³

Meier pinpoints the three attributes of law, prophecy and wisdom in the Pentateuch in Moses’ depiction in Deuteronomy: ‘In Deuteronomy, Moses is not only lawgiver but also prophet [and] wisdom teacher.’³⁴

A final note on the meaning of *nomos* for Paul concerns a couple of exceptions to the rule that *nomos* for Paul refers to the five books of Moses. Perhaps surprisingly, on two occasions Paul uses *nomos* to refer to Jewish Scripture outside the Pentateuch. In Romans 3:19 he cites a catena of texts from Psalms and Isaiah (Rom. 3:10–18) as evidence of what ‘the law says’. And in 1 Corinthians 14:21 he introduces a quotation of Isaiah 28:11–12 with the words ‘in the law it is written’.

BDAG suggests (*nomos*, 3b) this ‘wider sense’ was employed ‘on the principle that the most authoritative part gives its name to the whole’. Synecdoche, substituting a part for the whole, is common in many languages and cultures, including those of the Bible. The figure

³¹ Rosner 1994: 182, italics added.

³² The word ‘as’ here is meant in the sense of ‘in the capacity of’ or ‘with the force of’.

³³ Meier 2009: 29.

³⁴ Ibid.

of speech is present for example in Romans 3:15, where 'feet' (swift to shed blood) stand for whole persons. The usage of 'law' for the whole Hebrew Bible suggests the latter part was considered to have the same authority as the first five books; but clearly the Pentateuch was foundational.

Paul's description of the Scriptures as 'law' is in fact explicable in both of the abovementioned apparent exceptions. The texts quoted in Romans 3 function as the verdict on all of humankind, climaxing Paul's indictment of the whole human race in 1:18 – 3:9, in which the Law of Moses played a prime role in the condemnation of the Jews. To say 'the law says' that no one is righteous and so on is to appeal both to the judgment of the psalter and Isaiah and also to the basis of the judgment in the Law of Moses.

In the citation of Isaiah 28:11–12 in 1 Corinthians 14:21 Paul may not only be identifying the text as a quotation from Scripture, but possibly also be hinting that he locates its primary significance within the dispensation of the Mosaic covenant. His argument depends on a contrast between the situation of the Israelites and Jews under the law (in need of the redemption that has come in Christ) and the situation that already holds for those who have now experienced the redemption that was especially associated with part of the prophetic message.

The meaning of 'believers in Christ'

A third term calls for comment when discussing Paul's teaching about the relationship between *believers in Christ* and the Law of Moses. Which believers are we talking about? Paul was a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles and both Acts and his own letters testify to his evangelism among both Jews and Gentiles.

Does Paul distinguish between Jewish believers and Gentile believers when it comes to how they relate to the Law of Moses? The answer is yes and no. The best way to answer the question is in reference to the phrase 'under the law', which I will take up in detail in chapter 2. For now it is worth noting that there is a sense in which all believers, both Jewish and Gentile, are not under the law, and a more limited sense in which Jewish believers may choose to live under the law.

This more limited sense is clearly demonstrated in Romans 14:1 – 15:6, a passage in which Paul addresses the observance or non-observance of certain laws from the Law of Moses in the Roman churches. Two topics are mentioned directly, namely the restriction

of diet (see 14:2, 21) and observing certain days in preference to others (14:5). Barclay summarizes the consensus of commentators: ‘In common with many others, I take these verses to refer to Jewish scruples concerning the consumption of meat considered unclean and the observance of the sabbath and other Jewish feasts or fasts.’³⁵ Whereas ‘the weak’ keep Jewish kosher laws and observe the sabbath, ‘the strong’ do not.³⁶

Paul counts himself among the strong (see 15:1) and is convinced that the Christian believer may ‘eat anything’ (14:2); Christians are not under the law (6:14–15; 7:1–6). But while holding his own convictions, ‘Paul accepts an element of subjectivity in the definition of proper conduct relating to diet and calendar.’³⁷ On such matters, individuals are to act in accordance with their own convictions (14:5–6). As Paul states in 14:22, ‘The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.’ In effect, he allows for the expression of Jewish cultural tradition, living under the law’s direction, but not its dominion. Chapter 2 of this book, in exploring Paul’s use of ‘under the law’, explains this distinction in greater detail.

As it turns out, the great bulk of Paul’s teaching about the law concerns all believers regardless of their ethnic or religious background. Jews in the ancient world conceived of just two categories of people, setting the people of God off against the rest, namely the Gentiles. And at many points Paul’s letters reflect a similar classification. However, Paul identifies believers in Christ, from whatever background, as the people of God, effectively dividing the human race into three groups rather than two. This is seen in 1 Corinthians 10:32, where Paul refers to ‘the church of God’, ‘Jews’ and ‘Greeks’. It is this new grouping, ‘the church of God’, that is Paul’s main and undifferentiated focus when it comes to his various interactions with the law.

Having dealt with some preliminaries and offered some preview, an investigation of 1 Corinthians 7:19, a text that gives the subtitle to

³⁵ Barclay 2011: 39. See his full treatment, 37–59, for an illuminating study that arrives at similar conclusions to my own.

³⁶ The two groups probably did not divide neatly into Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians: ‘the weak’ may have included some Gentile Christians and ‘the strong’ may have included some of Paul’s Jewish-Christian friends in Rome, such as Prisca and Aquila.

³⁷ Barclay 2011: 51. Barclay (2011: 54) notes that Paul’s response to the issue is echoed by Justin, in *Dial.* 46–47, who accepts that Jewish Christians may practise circumcision, keep the sabbath and observe other Jewish laws, but strongly opposes attempts to persuade Gentile Christians to follow suit.

this book, will serve to open our discussion of the subject. As Dunn has observed, 'the ways in which 1 Corinthians 7:19 is interpreted by different commentators is very instructive'.³⁸ Beginning inductively with one text will help us to identify the points of tension and to frame more sharply the questions that the study of Paul and the law must address.

An initial sounding: 1 Corinthians 7:19

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God.³⁹

This verse is properly described by E. P. Sanders as one of the most amazing sentences Paul ever wrote.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more un-Jewish statement than the opening words 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing'.⁴¹ Far from an ill-considered slip, Paul says the same thing in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15. His attitude to circumcision was also borne out in practice: in Galatians 5:2 he tells Gentile believers not to be circumcised.

Circumcision was a sign of membership of the covenant community and virtually all Jews considered it a principal command. When Antiochus Epiphanes wanted to eradicate Judaism, one of the things he did was have all those who circumcised their children killed (1 Macc. 1.60–61). Philo firmly criticizes some who argued that the Mosaic laws (including that regarding circumcision) had merely symbolic significance and thus did not need to be literally obeyed (*Migr.* 89–93). *Jubilees* 15.33–34 warns against 'children of Israel . . . [who] will not circumcise their children according to the law'. 1 Maccabees 1.15 denounces Jewish men who remove the marks of circumcision. For a Jew to be selective about the law was tantamount to disobeying it. To abandon circumcision was as good as annulling the law.

The story of Izates from Josephus provides the exception that proves the rule. When the Gentile King Izates pondered whether to get circumcised, the Jewish merchant Ananias advised him 'that he might worship God without being circumcised, even though he did

³⁸ Dunn 2009: 204.

³⁹ My tr.

⁴⁰ Sanders 1983: 161–162.

⁴¹ Gk. *ouden estin*: 'means nothing, is unimportant' (BDAG 735c). Cf. Matt. 23:16, 18; John 8:54; Acts 21:24.

resolve to follow the Jewish law entirely' (*Ant.* 20.41b–42). However, the advice of another Jew, Eleazar, underscores Jewish scruples concerning circumcision:

But afterward, as he had not quite abandoned his desire of doing this thing [getting circumcised], a certain other Jew that came out of Galilee, whose name was Eleazar, and who was esteemed very skilful in the learning of his country, persuaded him to do the thing; for as he entered into his palace to greet him, and found him reading the law of Moses, he said to him, 'You do not consider, O king! that you unjustly break the principal of those laws, and are injurious to God himself [by failing to get circumcised]; for you ought not only to read them, but chiefly to practice what they enjoin you. How long will you continue uncircumcised? but if you have not yet read the law about circumcision, and do not know how great impiety you are guilty of by neglecting it, read it now.' (*Ant.* 20.43–45)

How are we to understand Paul's extraordinary words in 1 Corinthians 7:19, 'Circumcision is nothing'? The context in 1 Corinthians 7 is worth reviewing. The paragraph of which it is a part, 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, is the central element in a ring composition or ABA pattern, with 7:1–16 and 7:25–40 being the A elements. The function of 7:17–24 is to reinforce Paul's advice to be content in one's life situation. Paul states repeatedly in the chapter not to seek a change in marital status (7:2, 8, 10–16, 26–27, 37, 40). Then in verses 17–24 he says three times to remain in the situation in which one is called, with reference to the two great social dividers of his day concerning the questions of race and social class (7:17, 20, 24). Whether a Christian is married or single, *circumcised or uncircumcised*, slave or free, makes no difference to God, or more accurately 'before God' (as v. 24 literally says), so there is no need to change.

That Paul chose circumcision and slavery to make his point takes on greater significance in the light of Galatians 3:26–28, where Paul lists the same three pairs relevant to 1 Corinthians 7 when he proclaims that 'in Christ Jesus . . . there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male or female' (my tr.). The great divisions of the ancient world are redundant in the light of the new creation. What matters in Galatians 3 is being 'children of God through faith' (Gal. 3:26). The more we recognize the imminence of the final transition to the fullness of the new creation, the greater our indifference to the

distinctions and distinctive concerns of life in this present age (cf. 1 Cor. 7:29–31). The tension and relationship between the 'already' and 'not-yet' aspects of Christian eschatology must inform the moral and ethical thinking and behaviour of the believer. Only in this light can Paul say that circumcision is nothing.

In one sense, Paul's sentiments in verses 18–19 concerning the relative irrelevance of circumcision, despite the obvious contradiction of Genesis 17:10–14, and other texts, finds some sympathy in passages like Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, where membership in the covenant community is a matter of the heart, not an outward sign. Other figurative uses of circumcision (see Exod. 6:30, Jer. 6:10, 9:26, which speak of uncircumcised lips, ears and heart respectively) also point in Paul's direction. Nonetheless, 1 Corinthians 7:19a is radical by comparison with these Old Testament attitudes. It is one thing to say circumcision has a deeper significance, but quite another to say it has no significance. Paul's opinion here with respect to the Law of Moses could not be more negative. In Acts 21:21 refusing circumcision is equated with 'apostasy [*apostasia*] from the teaching of Moses' (my tr.).

However, Paul's next words (1 Cor. 7:19b) come as even more of a surprise and apparently create a confusing paradox: literally, 'but [or instead] keeping God's commands', an idiom well translated as, 'Keeping God's commands is what counts' (TNIV). Translations differ on whether the relationship between the clauses suggests simply that while (un)circumcision does not matter, keeping God's commandments does, or if opposites are implied, such that while (un)circumcision means nothing, keeping God's commandments means everything. Other translations say keeping God's commandments 'matters' (NAB, NASB) or is 'what counts' (NET, NIV), is 'what is important' (NJB, NLT) or 'is everything' (NRSV). Either way, if the first half of 1 Corinthians 7:19 assaults the law, the second half seems to contradict this, saying something strongly in its favour.

Both the main terms 'keeping' and 'commands' seem to point to Paul's saying that what is paramount is observing the Law of Moses. Apart from here in verse 19, the noun 'commandments' or 'commandment'⁴² is used thirteen times in Paul's letters. In the majority, ten times, it refers unambiguously to the Jewish Law (Rom. 13:9; Eph. 2:15; 6:2; Titus 1:14; and six times in Rom. 7). In the other three occurrences of the word (1 Cor. 14:37; Col. 4:10; 1 Tim. 6:14) it refers

⁴² Gk. *entolē*.

to Paul's own instructions. The verb 'to keep'⁴³ can mean 'obey' in the New Testament and is used regularly with reference to keeping the Law of Moses, namely 'God's commandments' (Rev. 12:17; 14:12), the 'commandments' (of Moses; Matt. 19:17), 'the Law of Moses' (Acts 15:5), the sabbath commandment (John 9:16) and 'the whole [Jewish] law' (Jas 2:10).⁴⁴ In 1 Corinthians 7:19 the related noun is used,⁴⁵ which refers to 'persisting in obedience' (BDAG 1002d). Thielman is right to observe that 'keeping the commandments/laws' in Jewish and Christian literature regularly referred to obeying the Mosaic law (Sir. 29.1; 32.23; Wis. 6.18; Matt. 19:17; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.120, 395; 17.159).⁴⁶ Since circumcision was an essential part of the law (Gen. 17:10–14, 23–27), what could Paul possibly have meant when he said that 'circumcision is nothing' but the important thing was 'keeping God's commands'? How is this paradox to be resolved?⁴⁷

A common way forward is to draw on the venerable distinction between different parts of the law (civil, ceremonial and moral), dating back, in part at least, to the time of Origen.⁴⁸ According to Thielman, for example, Paul distinguishes between parts of the law that count and parts that do not count. Circumcision falls squarely into the latter category.⁴⁹ But most of the rest of the law is still valid as 'the commandments of God'.

The problem with this explanation is threefold. First, while the distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil law may be a useful heuristic in a limited sense, and it does acknowledge the salvation-historical distinctions between Israel as a theocracy in the land and the church, scholars rightly judge it to be anachronistic. Paul K. Jewett explains with reference to the Old Testament:

It should always be remembered, however, that the distinctions Christians make between 'moral' and 'ceremonial' laws in the Old Testament, was hardly perspicuous to the Hebrew mind. In the Old Testament, cultic and ethical, moral and ceremonial, religious and civil enactments are all worked together, with no sense of

⁴³ Gk. *tereō*.

⁴⁴ The other 'commandments' to be 'kept' are those of Jesus in John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:22, 24; 5:3.

⁴⁵ Gk. *terēsis*; cf. Wis. 6.18 and Sir. 32.23.

⁴⁶ Thielman 1992: 237–240.

⁴⁷ N. T. Wright 1996: 137: 'Paul is expressing a sharp paradox.'

⁴⁸ See C. J. H. Wright 1992a: 102; 1992b: 205.

⁴⁹ Thielman 1992: 237–240.

impropriety, since they all express the will of Yahweh for his covenant people Israel.⁵⁰

Hermann N. Ridderbos makes the related point in relation to Paul's letters: 'In the epistles that have been preserved to us, nowhere is a distinction made explicitly between the moral and ceremonial, particularistic parts of the law.'⁵¹ Paul, Jews contemporary with him, and early Christians make no such distinctions.

Secondly, the distinction is also impractical, with many laws defying classification. Schreiner writes, 'Many of the so-called ceremonial laws have a moral dimension that cannot be jettisoned.'⁵² The same goes for the civil laws, such as in Deuteronomy 25:4, which speaks of not muzzling an ox while treading out the grain, a law from which Paul (in 1 Cor. 9:9 and 1 Tim. 5:18) and many Jews contemporary with Paul derive a moral lesson.⁵³

The third problem for the resort to moral, ceremonial and civil categories of law is that such a strategy ultimately proves unsuccessful in explaining the tensions in Paul's thought on the law. It fails to do justice to the absolute nature of Paul's negative statements about the law (see chapter 2) and misses the rhetorical function of the other statements.

Two parallel texts in Galatians undermine further treating 1 Corinthians 7:19 as a paradox expressing both negative and positive assessments of the Law of Moses. In both cases the thing contrasted with the irrelevance of circumcision is not part of the law that remains (contra Thielman et al.) but something that replaces the law entirely:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is *faith working through love*. (Gal. 5:6)

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but *a new creation* is everything! (Gal. 6:15)

The complement to the repudiation of circumcision in both Galatians 5:6 and 6:15 is a substitute for the law. Since 'faith through love' and 'a new creation' cannot be understood as the Law of Moses in part

⁵⁰ P. K. Jewett 1971: 118.

⁵¹ Ridderbos 1975: 284.

⁵² Schreiner 2010: 94.

⁵³ See Ciampa and Rosner 2010: 403–408.

or in any sense,⁵⁴ it seems only reasonable that neither should ‘keeping the commandments of God’ in 1 Corinthians 7:19 be taken that way.

A fourth example of Paul’s contrasting law observance with something far more important appears in Romans 14:17. There, in the context of discussing Jewish laws of diet and sabbath, he concludes that such laws are not determinative of Christian community or character: ‘For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ Paul regularly puts something in the place of the law (see further chapter 4).

In this light 1 Corinthians 7:19 thus turns out to be not a paradox, marking off one part of the law from another, but polemic. Instead of obeying the law, Paul says the important thing is to obey ‘the commandments of God’, which, I believe, the Corinthians would have understood as Paul’s own instructions in the letter. The only other place where ‘command’ appears in 1 Corinthians is in 14:37: ‘what I am writing to you is a *command* of the Lord’.⁵⁵ Furthermore, if ‘God’s commands’ in 1 Corinthians 7:19 refer to the Law of Moses, in whole or in part, this would be the only place in his letters where Christians are instructed to ‘keep’ them. Christians do not ‘keep’ the commands of the Law of Moses, but instead ‘keep’ some other commands (that are nonetheless from God). When Paul speaks of Christians positively vis-à-vis the law, he does not say that they ‘keep’ or ‘obey’ it but rather that they ‘fulfil’ it.⁵⁶ Paul’s words in 7:19 are formulated in a deliberately polemical fashion.

What, then, is the precise referent of the divine *commandments* Paul expects the Corinthians to *keep* in 1 Corinthians 7:19b? Barrett suggests Paul has in mind ‘an obedience to the will of God as disclosed in his Son [which is] far more radical than the observance of any code, whether ceremonial or moral, could be’.⁵⁷ Can we be more specific than saying Paul is referring to God’s will? Furnish looks for a more contextual definition of ‘God’s commands’ in this text, taking the phrase to mean ‘leading one’s life in accordance with God’s call (v 17a), as one who belongs to Christ (v 22)’.⁵⁸ Without developing the thought, Garland suggests that verse 19b might be a reference to avoiding *porneia*: ‘What matters is keeping the commandments of

⁵⁴ On the meaning of these phrases see the section in chapter 4, “‘Circumcision is nothing’ complements’.

⁵⁵ Cf. Col. 4:10 and 1 Tim. 6:14, where ‘command’ likewise refers to apostolic instruction.

⁵⁶ See further chapter 3 in this book.

⁵⁷ Barrett 1968: 169.

⁵⁸ Furnish 1999: 62.

God (7:19), in particular, avoiding fornication (7:2) . . . Paul implies that the important distinction is not between those who are married and those who are celibate but between those who avoid fornication and those who fall prey to it.⁵⁹ The context supports Garland's reading of the text.⁶⁰

As I have argued elsewhere (with Roy Ciampa), the commands to 'flee sexual immorality' (NET) in 6:18 and 'glorify God with your body' (NET) in 6:20 dominate chapters 5–7 and are never far from view.⁶¹ As it turns out, from 6:12 to 7:16 Paul uses ten imperative mood verbs. Interestingly, six of these refer either directly or indirectly to keeping away from sexual immorality: 6:18, 20; 7:2–3, 5, 9.⁶² And it would certainly not be unlike Paul to give this command prominence, as 1 Thessalonians 4:3, penned by Paul in Corinth, demonstrates: 'It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you avoid sexual immorality [*porneia*] (my tr.). In its broader context, then, 1 Corinthians 7:19 resonates with Paul's argument in chapter 7 and its significance would not have been lost on the Corinthians. The better readers would have seen its relevance to the main message in the chapter and 'connected the dots' to conclude that not only is circumcision nothing, but marriage and singleness are also nothing, and keeping God's commandments is what counts, especially avoiding sexual immorality.

Three moves

In my view Paul does three things with the law and each one must be fully heard without prejudicing the others: (1) polemical repudiation; (2) radical replacement; and (3) whole-hearted reappropriation (in two ways). These respectively correspond to treating the law as *legal code*, *theological motif* and *source for expounding the gospel and for doing ethics*. When describing Paul's view of the law, too often scholars notice only one or at best two of these impulses and minimize, ignore or deny the other(s).⁶³ All three moves occupy a vital place in what Paul says about and does with the law.

⁵⁹ Garland 2003: 299, 306.

⁶⁰ In the broader context of the whole letter, perhaps a second basic command of God that Paul would have the Corinthians think of is the avoidance of idolatry (cf. 10:14 and 10:31).

⁶¹ Ciampa and Rosner 2006, 2010.

⁶² The other four consist of commands concerning divorce: 7:11–13, 15.

⁶³ Davies (1982: 4) was right when he noted in 1982 that 'Paul's view of *Torah* [the law] has led interpreters, concentrating on one aspect to the exclusion of others, to oversimplify his response to it' (italics original).

The three moves are evident in 1 Corinthians.

1. The first move, of repudiation, can be seen in the negation of circumcision in 1 Corinthians 7:19a. Another instance is in 1 Corinthians 9:20, where Paul says simply ‘I myself am not under the law’.

2. The second, replacement, is evident in 7:19b with the call to keep God’s commandments, that is, apostolic instructions. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians replacement of the Law of Moses can be seen clearly in 9:21, where Paul says, ‘but am under Christ’s law’.⁶⁴

3a. The first form of the third move, the reappropriation of the law as prophecy, as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, can be seen in 8:5–6, where the language of Deuteronomy 6:4 governs Paul’s wording and argument.⁶⁵ Alluding to Israel’s Shema, Paul reaffirms strict Jewish monotheism along with finding Christ embedded within the very definition of that one God/Lord of Israel.⁶⁶ It is also evident in 15:45, where Paul uses Genesis 2:7, ‘the first man, Adam, became a living being’, to point to the significance of Jesus Christ, who is of equally universal bearing as our first ancestor.⁶⁷

3b. The second form of the reappropriation of the law, using the law for questions of conduct, can be seen at various points. For example, Paul closes 1 Corinthians 5 and his call to exclude the incestuous man with the words ‘Expel the wicked person from among you’ (5:13b NIV), a quotation of a frequent expression of the LXX of Deuteronomy, where it is used on six occasions to signal the execution of a variety of offenders (13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21; 24:7; cf. Judg. 20:13).⁶⁸ In 9:24 Paul asserts that Deuteronomy 25:4, the call not to ‘muzzle the ox’, ‘was written for us’, helping to establish that ministers of the gospel deserve to be supported financially. And in 10:11 Paul asserts that the events of the exodus and wilderness wanderings ‘were written down as warnings for us’, supporting his warning against sexual immorality and idolatry.

Evidently, Paul does not think his utter repudiation and radical replacement of the Law of Moses entail its complete redundancy. The question to ask in these cases is not *which bits* of the law are still useful,

⁶⁴ The interpretation of not being ‘under the law’ and ‘the law of Christ’ receives more detailed attention in chapters 2 and 4 respectively.

⁶⁵ Chapters 5 and 6 take up these and many other examples from Paul’s letters of law as prophecy and wisdom respectively.

⁶⁶ See Ciampa and Rosner 2007: 717–718; and Rosner 2007: 127–128.

⁶⁷ See Ciampa and Rosner 2007: 746–777.

⁶⁸ The Greek word for ‘expel’, *exairō*, occurs only here in the NT, suggesting Paul’s intentional and explicit use of the formula from Deuteronomy. See Ciampa and Rosner 2007: 709–710.

but *in what sense* is the law valuable for Christians. In short, Christians are instructed by the law, but not as Jewish law. Instead, Paul models reading the Law of Moses as prophecy and as wisdom.

The subtle influence of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 itself points indirectly to a rejuvenated role for the law in determining Christian conduct. Paul conceives of conduct as ‘walking’ (in v. 17) ‘before God’ (v. 24), appeals to a saving event as forming the identity of the people of God in verse 23a (reminiscent of the exodus), possibly alludes to Leviticus 25:42 in verse 23b and gives the ‘call of God’ a key place in everyday life throughout the paragraph. All these show that Paul continues to draw on the Hebrew Bible, including the law, when he formulates moral teaching and seeks moral guidance.

To summarize, the table overleaf suggests Paul’s approach to the law in 1 Corinthians consists of three moves. As we will see in the following chapters, the same pattern can be observed in most of Paul’s other letters (see chapter 7 for seven more summary tables).

The way forward

In terms of method, three guidelines steer the solution to the puzzle of Paul and the law that I am defending and expounding in this book.

Look at all of the evidence

As already mentioned, in my view too many studies of the subject limit the investigation to the undisputed Pauline epistles and concentrate on texts using the word *nomos*. Along with widening the net to the traditional Pauline corpus, we need to take into account four classes of evidence: (1) what Paul says about the law; (2) what he does with the law; (3) what he does not say about the law (that one might have expected him to say); and (4) what he says about other things (that one might have expected him to say about the law).

The Jewish context of Paul’s interactions with the law must also be kept in mind. The question of Paul and the law is a subset of the larger question of the relationship between Paul and Judaism. Critical evidence in this connection includes Paul’s use of certain Old Testament texts, such as Leviticus 18:5 (see chapter 2), the character of the Pentateuch itself and the use of the law in the Psalms. And intertestamental Jewish texts that bear on the subject of the Law of Moses supply critical background to Paul’s teaching on the law and often set it in sharp relief.

PAUL AND THE LAW

Table 1.1 Paul and the law in 1 Corinthians

<i>Text</i>	<i>Repudiation</i>	<i>Replacement</i>	<i>Reappropriation as Prophecy</i>	<i>Reappropriation as Wisdom</i>
7:19	'circumcision is nothing'	'Keeping God's commands is what counts' (my tr.)		
9:20–21	'I am not under the law' (my tr.)	'I am under the law of Christ' (my tr.)		
8:5–6			Allusion to Deut. 6:4 – 'there is but one Lord' (my tr.), establishing Christ as Lord	
15:45			Use of Gen. 2:7, 'the first Adam became a living being' (my tr.), to underscore the universal significance of Christ	
5:13b				Words from Deuteronomy quoted to enforce the expulsion of the incestuous man
9:9				Deut. 25:4, 'do not muzzle the ox . . .' (my tr.), quoted to support the argument for paying ministers
10:11				The exodus and wilderness wanderings 'were written down for our moral instruction' (my tr.)

Use the biblical-theological method

The subject of Paul and the law can be investigated from many angles. It is, for example, a topic in New Testament exegesis, Christian ethics, church history and systematic theology. While not disputing the legitimacy of such work, the present study is a biblical-theological investigation. This means that as far as possible I seek to adopt the terms and categories Paul himself uses and take seriously the way in

which he frames the question in terms of salvation history. Many studies impose categories of thought and terminology that are alien to Paul's historical context and consequently skew the results of the investigation. The best biblical theology comes from patient, inductive enquiry. To signal my intention, Paul's own words form the chapter titles of this book and each chapter closes with a section 'In Paul's own words (a summary and paraphrase)'.

In connection with Paul and the law, impatience leads, for example, to not allowing Paul to say just one thing (or at most two things) at a time. According to my understanding, in 1 Corinthians 7:19 Paul says something negative about the law, effectively rejecting and replacing it. Keen to find a synthesis in Paul's thought that allows for a positive view of the law, many scholars seem unwilling to consider this possibility. Paul's full understanding of this complex subject is not in view in any single text or even chapter. The genre of Paul's letters and his forceful style of communication mean that his discussions of the law, which usually appear as a supporting point in a larger discussion, supply only part of the picture.

Treat the law as a unity

As noted in my discussion of the meaning of 'law' earlier in this chapter, Paul generally deals with the law as a unity. If his letters are marked by negative and positive statements about the law, the question to ask is not 'which bits' of the law he refers to in each case, but the hermeneutical question of 'in what sense', or 'as what'? In my view asking the question of 'the capacity in which' or 'the force with which' the law meets the Christian resolves the tension between the negative and positive material.

In developing a hermeneutical solution to the puzzle of Paul and the law I am seeking to apply the widely held view that early Jews and Christians treat the law as a unity. I am also following the lead of a number of scholars who have on occasion responded to the question of Paul and the law in this light, even if in most cases only in passing. These include F. F. Bruce, D. A. Carson, Roy E. Ciampa, Donald Hagner, Richard B. Hays, Markus Bockmuehl, P. T. O'Brien and, at points, Thomas Schreiner and Stephen Westerholm.

A hermeneutical solution

In his letters Paul undertakes a polemical rereading of the Law of Moses, which involves not only a repudiation and rejection of the law

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as ‘law-covenant’ (chapters 2 and 3) and its replacement by other things (chapter 4), but also a reappropriation of the law ‘as prophecy’ (with reference to the gospel; chapter 5) and ‘as wisdom’ (for Christian living; chapter 6). This construal finds support not only in what Paul says about the law, but also in what he does not say and in what he does with the law. And it highlights the value of the law for preaching the gospel and for Christian ethics.