

INTRODUCTION

Need for the Study

When Paul stood before a group of theologians and desired to create an instant debate he brought up the topic of the resurrection of the dead. Today one can create the same sort of response by speaking of Paul and the Law. In the 19th century F. C. Bauer saw two Pauls: one who *observed* the Mosaic Law in the book of Acts and one who *denounced* the law in his epistles. Bauer's solution to the apparent conflict was to deny the historicity of Acts, seeing it rather as a Lukan attempt to mute the contrast between Paul and the Jews.¹ Others who hold to the inerrancy of Acts have resolved the conflict in a different way, by understanding Paul's law observance as an exercise of "becoming all things to all men." The common denominator in both approaches is giving priority to the allegedly "clearer sources," namely Paul's epistles, which are understood to be anti-law, and then adjusting the interpretation of Acts to fit.

That Paul speaks against the law in his writings is clear, but the sense in which he speaks has not always been so evident. In the reformation Luther saw the answer to his own struggles with sin and conscience, in Romans and Galatians, nearly drawing an equation between the merit-based indulgences of the medieval period and the works of the law. Since then, for good or for ill, much of New Testament scholarship has followed in his footsteps. More recently, Krister Stendahl in his short but seminal work, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, has called into question the projection of this modern preoccupation (which he calls "the introspective conscience of the West") onto the writings of Paul. He argues that in the book of Galatians in particular Paul is not answering Luther's question of the sixteenth

¹Goodenough comments on the conflict between the Paul of the epistles and the Paul of Acts, "One wonders if it was someone thinking like the author of Acts whom Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Galatians: 'Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed' (Gal. 1:8). For no one in the Galatian or Corinthian churches would have recognized in the pages of Acts the Paul they had heard preach or had read in his letters." Erwin R. Goodenough, "The Perspective of Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds., Leander Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 58.

century, “How can a sinful man become righteous before God?” but rather a question asked in the first century by Paul’s converts, “On what basis can Gentiles be admitted into the people of God?”²

Following after Stendahl has been the work of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.³ One of the results of this study was to demonstrate from early sources that rabbinic Judaism was not, contrary to accepted opinion, a merit-oriented religion of works. As Moo has noted, “Once these assumptions are questioned or rejected, and the background for the interpretation of Paul’s theology of the law is re-shaped, the nature of that teaching itself becomes subject to serious revision.”⁴ Much debate continues today about the harmony between the Epistles and Acts and many scholars question whether Paul even held a systematic theology of law. While some harmonize Paul’s epistles by seeing development from one book to another, others view his writings as simply incoherent.

Contribution of the Study

While this study cannot address all of the problems mentioned so far we hope that it will contribute to a better understanding of the theology of law. A major weakness in much of the current discussion of Paul and the law is the failure to recognize that the New Testament is neither a systematic nor homogeneous theology of law. Simple matters of the historical and occasional nature of individual books are often overlooked which contributes to serious errors of theology. I would like to approach the problem not as though it is an exercise in systematic theology of the New Testament, but rather as an exposition of individual, self-interpreting books. That is, instead of allowing a theology of law derived from the Epistles to inform the book of Acts, a better approach would be to compare the message of Galatians as a whole with the message of Acts as a whole. In this way it is hoped that the important hermeneutical considerations of audience, occasion and history will receive their due emphases. It is hoped that better methodology will result in better understanding of individual books and this in turn will

²Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 86-88.

³E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, (London: SCM, 1977).

⁴Douglas J. Moo, “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 288. Moo’s words, “The last ten years have witnessed an impressive number of such revisions,” written in 1987 are just as appropriate today.

serve as a basis for better theology. Thus, the goal is theological, while the method involves exposition of individual books.

Thesis of the Study

The proposal of this study is that the New Testament teaching on the law can only be understood (1) in light of the progress of revelation and (2) with an appreciation for the differing responsibilities which Jews and Gentiles had to the Law. Between the years of A.D. 30 and 70 great transition and development took place. The book of Hebrews which was written toward the latter end of this time frame clearly addresses the end of the Mosaic Law as a regulatory document for the nation of Israel. In fact, it states that the work of Christ on Calvary was the death knell for the Law. What is often overlooked, however, is that this revelation is not given until relatively late in the apostolic era, and the theology of Hebrews should not be read into earlier books.

The book of Acts in particular reveals a loyalty to the Law by Jewish believers in the first three decades of the New Testament era. I would agree with Sanders and others in this regard, that the Law was not essentially a legalistic instrument and that its observance was a delight to the Jewish believer and his God. Though the major figures in the book understand that the New Covenant has come they do not seem to consider it to be incompatible with Mosaic regulations for worship. Perhaps more importantly, the freedom from the law which is negotiated in the Cornelius incident (Acts 10-11) and in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) only concerns Gentiles. The pattern which is observed in the book of Acts is that of Jewish believers who rejoice in their New Covenant relationship with God and express their worship according to Mosaic norms.

Finally, the book of Galatians which is written just before the Jerusalem Council addresses the historical question of whether Gentiles enjoy the blessings of Abraham in Christ or in Law. Paul concludes that they are sons of God because they are in Christ and have no need to adopt the law. This message is focused, however, towards Gentiles and should not be extrapolated beyond its target. That is, though Paul speaks pointedly about Gentiles and the place of the law in salvation history, he does not address the relationship of the Jewish believer to the Law of Moses in the letter.

Thus, Gentiles were never obligated to the Mosaic law either before Christ or after Christ. Jewish believers, on the other hand, were bound to the Law before Christ and were released at Calvary.

In the progress of revelation, however, this knowledge does not come until relatively late in the New Testament era. Thus, Jewish believers, in the short transitional period between A.D. 30 and 70, rejoiced in their salvation through Messiah and expressed their worship in the best way they knew how, i.e., obedience to the law. This is why the study of the law in the New Testament can only be understood in light of the progress of revelation and with an appreciation for the differing relationships which Jews and Gentiles had toward the law.

Limits of the Study

Although this thesis has implications for the entire Pauline corpus, a study of it all is much too broad. Given the methodology described above of expounding individual books as a unit, we have chosen to support this thesis by describing and defending three key books in the argument: Galatians, Hebrews, and Acts. Hebrews is chosen because it so powerfully communicates that the end of Moses has come, particularly for Jews. Acts demonstrates that Paul was a careful practitioner of the Law in the period under discussion. Galatians is chosen because this is admittedly Paul's most forceful and some would say hostile treatment of the law and is thus the best test case.

We assume the inerrancy and historicity of the Epistles and Acts and hold to an early date for the writing of Galatians, around A.D. 49, before the Jerusalem Council. We also hold that the book of Hebrews was written shortly before the destruction of the second Temple, approximately A.D. 64. All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted are from the New American Standard Version.