

Understanding the Old Testament as *Torah*

Introduction

The material presented in these notes on the *Torah* are the personal lecture notes of Dr. Ian A. Fair, with information enriched by the *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, the *Baker Evangelical Dictionary of Bible Theology*, and notes from previous lectures. Since this material is not intended for publication I have limited footnoting sources.

Beginning in the early days of the Apostles, ca. 50 CE, Christians had difficulty discerning the *theological nuances* between the subtleties inherent in the *Mosaic Law*, *works of Law*, and the *Christian views of Grace*. Hence, both Paul, cf. Galatians, *et al.*, and Peter Acts 2:15, *et al.*, addressed serious questions regarding Law keeping.

The early Jewish disciples would have been aware of Jesus' healthy view of Law. They had witnessed Jesus' battles with the Pharisees over Sabbath Law keeping, and of Jesus' emphasis on faith, compassion, and grace. However, the new burgeoning Gentile churches would not have had that apostolic experience.

Paul, whose ministry was mostly in the Gentile world, devoted considerable time to addressing the *doctrine of salvation by grace through faith* and not by works of any kind. We will briefly examine Paul's doctrine of soteriology.

The Symbiotic Relationships in Christian Theology

The Strange Symbiotic Relationship of Torah, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Catholic Church, and the Lutheran/Erasmus/Calvinistic Protestant Reformation emerging ca 1500 CE

Shortly, we will examine each of the above ingredients in this the *Symbiotic relationship* of the Catholic Church, Westminster, Luther, Law, Works, Calvin Total Depravity, and the modern Evangelical doctrine of salvation solely by faith in Jesus. Since the Catholic Church in Martin Luther's reformation movement "erred" in their sale of indulgences, a strident challenge arose in the developing Protestant Reformation doctrine of *forgiveness or salvation by faith only*, a *faith* that lay partially in the *renaissance possibility* of the *divine activity of the Holy Spirit*.

Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, and John Calvin, ca. 1500 CE, argued that *salvation* is not earned by *human rational work of any kind*, e.g. *the sale of indulgences*, for in Calvin's and Luther's thinking man was considered due to the original sin of Adam and Eve to be *totally, or seriously, impaired* and not able to *determine or rationalize* salvation.

The numerous Protestant reactions to the Catholic legalistic *doctrine of rex, Law*, resulted in the Greek theme *nomos*, implying *instruction or guidance*, and Hebrew understanding of **Torah** as *instruction, developed into a codified system of rules and laws* highlighted in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a Reformed Confession of Faith, ca. 1646 CE.

A misinformed view of *faith* developed from *reading Law as the Latin rex*, where faith is not a human exercise but a product of God's calling and election and the work of the Holy Spirit. *Faith* does not arise from reading the *Law/Torah*, which in the Hebrew culture was understood as *divine instruction on how to live righteously, not necessarily for salvation*. According to the developing Protestant reaction to Catholicism *Faith* became a *gift from God to his elect*, those *chosen* by God for *salvation*, and for a *relationship with the divine*.

Any form of *human effort or works* had no part in the developing Protestant movement.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

Scholars summarize this era of Church history. “By the time of Martin Luther (early 1500s), the Western Roman Catholic Church had long established Latin as its universal liturgical and ecclesiastical language. This was a continuation of centuries of tradition dating back to Late Antiquity when Latin replaced Greek as the dominant language in the Western Roman Empire and thus in church affairs. This form of Latin is known as Ecclesiastical Latin, or Church Latin, a variant of classical Latin adapted for Christian worship, theology, and administration.

Latin functioned as a unifying, universal language for the Western Church, transcending local spoken languages, that is the language spoken by the laity. Ecclesiastical Latin, for over 1500 years, was the language of the Mass, official Church documents, theological works, and canon law. Latin was used by the clergy and educated elites, *ensuring consistency and uniformity in doctrine and practice* across different regions, despite the diversity of other spoken languages.”¹

Luther, grace, faith, lex, and the Catholic “sale of indulgences”

It is possible to trace the “*protestant reformation*” to Martin Luther’s 1520 “Wittenberg 95 theses” reaction of the Catholic Church’s sale of indulgences to raise necessary funds to support the church’s various functions.

“Born in Eisleben, Luther was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. He came to reject several teachings and practices of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church, in particular the view on indulgences and papal authority. Luther initiated an international debate on these in works like his *Ninety-five Theses*, which he authored in 1517. In 1520, Pope Leo X demanded that Luther renounce all of his writings, and when Luther refused to do so, excommunicated him in January 1521. When Luther died in 1546, his excommunication by Leo X was still in effect.

Luther is attributed to be the primary cornerstone of the German Lutheran church.

Luther taught that justification is not earned by any human acts or intents or merit; rather, it is received only as the free gift of God's grace through the believer's faith in Jesus Christ. He held that good works were a necessary fruit of living faith, part of the process of justification Luther's theology challenged the authority and office of the pope and bishops by teaching that the Bible is the only source of divinely revealed knowledge on the Gospel.”²

A more recent church conference produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, ca 1750.

“The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) was composed between 1643 and 1649 by the Westminster Assembly, a council of theologians and ministers convened by the English Parliament. It aimed to provide a unified and detailed summary of biblical doctrine for the Church of England and, by extension, Reformed churches worldwide. The confession outlines essential beliefs on the authority of Scripture, the nature of God, salvation by grace through faith, the sacraments, church order, and Christian living. While primarily associated with Presbyterian denominations, the WCF has influenced a broad segment of Reformed Christianity, including some Reformed Baptist and evangelical groups.”³

John Calvin, doctrine of human total depravity

“John Calvin was born Jehan Cauvin on July 10, 1509, in France. His father originally “encouraged” a career in the priesthood. Calvin, however, chose to study law, attending universities at Paris, Orléans, and

¹ Edited from Wikipedia, www.catholic.com, and other sources.

² This pericope is from a Wikipedia article on Martin Luther which cited Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Martin Luther". Encyclopedia Britannica as its source.

³ Edited information summarized and adapted from sources including The WestminsterStandard.org, Christianity.com, Westminstersswmbly.org, et al.

Bourges. Calvin was deeply influenced by *Renaissance humanism* and the works of Protestant reformers such as **Martin Luther** and **Erasmus**. In 1530, impressed by Luther, Erasmus, and other German Humanist thinkers *he experienced a religious conversion, breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church.*

Calvin's theology stressed the absolute sovereignty of God over creation and the eternal destiny of man, stressing the operation of the Holy Spirit in man's redemption, even in the creation of faith in man.

Calvin's theology of redemption is often summarized with the acronym **TULIP**.

Total Depravity. *Humanity* is thoroughly affected by sin and *unable to seek God on its own.*

Unconditional Election. God's choice, elect, regarding salvation and judgment is not based on any foreseen merit. Election is solely on God's gracious choosing.

Limited Atonement. Christ's death is sufficient for all, but effectively redeeming only the God's elect. Christ's atoning sacrifice is limited to God's choice since all are doomed by their depravity, which depravity they inherit in their human nature.

Irresistible Grace. God's grace to save cannot be resisted when extended to the elect. The Holy Spirit acting on God's election creates faith in Jesus which brings them into the atoning work of Christ.

Perseverance of the Saints: Those truly elected will persevere in faith by the indwelling Holy Spirit until the end.

Evangelic Protestant churches

Evangelic Protestant churches influenced by Luther, Calvin, and the English Westminster Confession of Faith, all follow in some measure the 1500 CE *theological genes* of the **protestant reaction to Roman Catholic and Orthodox** "authorized" understanding of Law as interpreted by the Ecclesiological Latin concept of *lex*, a system of laws intended to define a community, a church, and its religion.

The core of the "Calvinistic Protestant Reformation" lies in its *rejection of human reason seen in its inability to follow God and his scheme.* This failure is due to *human intellectual and spiritual depravity.* Such "Calvinistic" views reject all forms of depraved human works, works of merit, humanistic works, and works of obedience in redemption, salvation. Humanity is depraved with an inherited life in sin. "Calvinistic religions stress that *salvation is totally dependent on faith*, human salvation is *not a faith based on human intellect and reason*, but *only faith created in them by the working of the Holy Spirit.*

When it is claimed by most Evangelicals that salvation is based on *God's grace through faith in Jesus*, they mean **God's and the gift of faith created by the indwelling Holy Spirit** and not faith from reason, for *man's reason is depraved.*

New Testament Witness to Justification by Faith

Jesus' Reaction to the Misguided 2nd Temple Jewish Legalistic Interpretation of Law

Jesus explanation of the Law and the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1–14. ¹ *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.* ² *But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath."* ³ *He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the law how on the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath."*

⁹ *And he went on from there, and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, "What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not*

lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him.”

Paul’s Reaction to Jewish Legalistic Views of Law

Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians

These profoundly significant texts highlight the early development of *righteousness* or *salvation* in the Christian Messianic system ***emphasizing faith as the foundation of a righteous relationship with God as opposed to righteousness based on the Law.***

Paul argued that this view of righteousness by faith was not new! It was the foundation of God’s relationship with and through Abraham, Gen 12, 17.

Righteousness by Jewish tribal covenant, defined by the Law, became a defensive, exclusivist mechanism for Temple Priestly control of alienating the Gentile from Abrahamic covenant.

Paul’s soteriology focused on *Jesus’ atoning sacrifice*, not the Temple cult. Salvation is experienced through a faith in *Jesus’ death and resurrection* and not on the Law as interpreted by 2nd Temple Judaism.

Rom 3:21-28. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.”

Rom 5:1, 2. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

Eph 2:1-10. “And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. ³ Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not because of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Gal 3:19-26. “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

²³ Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But

now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”

The *law/grace/faith righteousness symbiotic dynamic difficulty* emerged early in the life of the church. Christian churches struggled to define for their communities the “laws,” rules, and boundaries of their faith. Early church conference and synodal conferences were called to where a new system of church creeds developed which were introduced to refute “heretical” challenges to the faith.

Possibly the first such conference is recorded by Luke in the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15, ca. CE 49/50. The common language of the Jerusalem and Gentile churches would be Greek with a strong Hebrew Septuagint influence. The word for Law during Jesus’ and Paul’s time would have been *ὁ νόμος*, a Greek word used to interpret the Hebrew word *torah, instruction*.

Comment on the words, *Law, Nomos, Torah, Lex*

The Hebrew word *torah* carried the sense of *instruction, or divine instruction*.

So when Jesus and Paul spoke of *Law* they did not imply the later *Latin* sense of *law, lex, meaning a set of rules, laws that govern a government, an organization, or community*.⁴ Jesus’ and Paul’s view of *Law/Torah* was understood as *divine instruction, not Law, Rex, rules for righteousness*.

As the power of Rome and Emperor Constantine spread through Christianity *Latin* became the official language of the church, more specifically, *Ecclesiastical Latin*. This *Ecclesiastical Latin* language was used by the Church when defining *the religious life of the dominant Roman Catholic Church*.

So, *Law* became *Lex*, a codified system of defining the faith and the life of the Church.

The Greek *nomos*, the word chosen by the *apostolic writers* of the New Testament, based on the Greek Septuagint, translation ca. 230 BCE of the Hebrew Scriptures, lost its sense of *divine instruction* and became the *Rex Law* of the dominant Roman Christian Church in its creedal history, ca. 325, 381 CE. The confession of the Nicene creeds drove the separation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox church, and the later the developing Protestant Evangelical churches.

“Where does the discussion of *Law* fit into this dialogue of *Torah*?”

Law in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and the *General Protestant Culture*, carries within its meaning *the Latin understanding of Rex*, which refers to *rules that control the church or community through its creeds and rules that that define faith*. This is exemplified in the ancient creeds of *Nicea and Constantinople* that defined the Roman Catholic church, the Church of England, Orthodox churches, and some modern Evangelical churches as in the Methodist church, *et al*.

Most Evangelical churches, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Southern Baptists, while seemingly eschewing⁵ the *Westminster Confession legal*⁶ stress on justification and salvation, *adamantly profess that salvation is achieved solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by works of any kind*.

Attempts to be justified by keeping *the Law of Moses*, or the *Laws of the Old Testament*, are understood by evangelicals to be *seeking justification by works of Law* which is diametrically opposed to their doctrine of *salvation by faith only*.

Most Evangelical Soteriological Views

The issue inherent in evangelical arguments lies in their *misunderstanding of the meaning of Law as Torah, instruction not rules and regulations*. Evangelicals understand the *Law as Lex or rules* in the Latin tradition of the Westminster confession which we have discussed above.

⁴ Cf. *Lex* in most Latin English Dictionaries.

⁵ Implying a deliberate avoidance.

⁶ Latin *rex*, legal rules.

In this matrix, it is claimed by evangelicals that *baptism is not for salvation which amounts to attempting to be justified by human action*. Evangelicals hold that *baptism is because of salvation, not for salvation*, as the majority of English translations of Acts 2:38 read!

F. Wilbur Gingrich, prominent Evangelical Greek scholar, in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ignores his own Grammatical definition εἰς, *eis*, arguing that reading *baptism for salvation* as in Acts 2:38 *violates the critical evangelical doctrine of salvation by faith only*. Reading the Greek preposition εἰς, *eis*, as *for salvation implies that salvation is a work that we do*, making *salvation a result of human works!* Hence, salvation becomes a human work through *baptism*, emphasizing human effort rather than justification by *faith only* in which *faith is not a human work but the work of the Holy Spirit in the Calvinistic theology* which most evangelicals such as in Southern Baptist Conference adopt.

We should note here that *not all* Baptist churches hold to the Southern Baptist view. British, Scandinavian Baptists, and other Missionary Baptists accept *baptism for salvation as in Acts 2:38*.