

Ma'ase ha-Torah “Works of the Law”

The phrase “works of the law” (which is sometimes rendered “deeds of the law” in the KJV) appears only nine times in the New Testament and only in Paul’s writings: Rom. 3:20; 3:28; 9:32 & Gal. 2:16 (3x); 3:5; 3:10 (In Gal. 3:10 the Aramaic has “Works because of the Law”) This phrase, “works of the law”, is best understood through its usage in Gal. 2:16. Here Paul writes:

*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law,
but by the faith of Jesus Christ,
even we have believed in Jesus Christ,
that we might be justified by the faith of Christ,
and not by the works of the law:
for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.
(Gal. 2:16 KJV)*

If we consider this passage carefully we can see that Paul uses this phrase to describe a false method of justification, which is diametrically opposed to “faith in the Messiah”. To Paul “works of the law” is not an obsolete Old Testament system, but a heresy that has never been true.

The term “works of the Torah” has shown up as a technical theological term used in a document in the Dead Sea Scrolls called MMT which says:

4QMMT (Miqsat Ma'ase ha-Torah) (Some of the Works of the Law)	Galatians
<i>Now we have written to you some of the works of the law, those which we determined would be beneficial for you... And it will be reckoned to you as righteousness, in that you have done what is right and good before Him... (4QMMT (4Q394-399) Section C lines 26b-31)</i>	<i>Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Yeshua the Messiah, even we have believed in Yeshua the Messiah, that we might be justified by the faith of Messiah, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified....Even as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. (Gal. 2:16; 3:6)</i>

This heretical doctrine laid out in MMT is based on twenty-four purity regulations about which the Essenes held a stricter halacha than their Pharisaic counterparts, and which they believed would be reckoned to them as righteousness. Apparently Paul’s opponent takes “righteousness/justification” in this passage of MMT to mean “salvation”. Paul however argues that it is faith in Messiah and not these “works of the law” by which we are saved.

When Paul speaks out against “works of the law” it is like a Baptist preacher speaking out against “Latter Day Saints”, he does not mean the words according to their literal meaning, he has nothing against “Saints” who live in the “Latter Days” he is using the Mormon’s theological technical term to refer to their theology.

There can be no doubt that Paul sees “works of the law” as categorically bad, yet Paul calls the Torah itself “holy, just and good” (Rom. 7:12), certainly Paul does not use these phrases to refer to the Torah itself as obsolete, but to a heresy, a false theology that was never true.