

What Does the Phrase “Under the Law” Mean?

An Analysis of the “Under the Law [Torah]” Passages in the Testimony of Yeshua (NT)

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Romans 3:19

Now we know that what things soever the law [Torah] says, it says to them who are *under the law*: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before Elohim.

Explanation: The Jews were self confident in their special relationship with YHVH because (a) they were Jews and the seed of Abraham, (b) because YHVH had given them the Torah, and (c) because they were circumcised, yet many had failed to obey the Torah, thus making their outward appearance of righteousness (i.e., their circumcision) a pointless sham. Whether one is uncircumcised or not is immaterial; rather, what matters to YHVH is one's heart orientation toward him (i.e., is one circumcised in heart or not, Rom 2-3:4). After all, circumcision can't be a salvation issue, since it's impossible for one half of humanity to be circumcised, while the entire population (both men and women) can be circumcised in heart!

Paul was being accused of promoting Torahlessness because of his stand that circumcision was not a salvation requirement, and that a Jew who is circumcised, and yet lives a Torahless life is no better than a Gentile sinner. In fact, an uncircumcised Gentile who follows the basics of the Torah that are written in his consciences will be blessed on the day of judgment (Rom 2:14-16).

Paul is attempting to level the spiritual playing field (or to tear down the middle wall of partition) between Jews and Gentiles by showing that a hypocritical, law-touting, circumcised Jew has no standing in righteousness before YHVH, while an uncircumcised Gentile who knows little about the Torah, yet follows the light of truth that he has with his whole heart has righteous standing before YHVH.

The bottom line is that all (both Jews and Gentiles) have sinned (violated the Torah, 1John 3:4), and all are under sin's death penalty (Rom 3:9-18).

Paul then brings in the concept of *under the law* and relates this to man being “guilty before Elohim” (Rom 3:19). That is to say, because each man has sinned (i.e., violated the Torah, 1John 3:4), each one has come under the penalty that the Torah prescribes for sin; that is, he has come *under the law*. Paul expresses this same concept elsewhere when he writes, “For as many as are of the works of the law are *under the curse*: for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them’” (Gal 3:10). In other words, anyone who sins by breaking one of the least of the Torah's commandments comes under the curse of the law, which is death, for we read in Ezekiel that the person who sins will die (Ezek 18:4), and the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

Therefore, since the Torah defines sin, it cannot at the same time bring man to right standing (or righteousness) before YHVH, since all men are guilty before Elohim of violating the Torah (Rom 3:19-20, 23).

Paul goes on to explain through the remainder of the chapter that we are made righteous (or cleansed from sin or Torahlessness) because of our faith in Yeshua, but that this in no way invalidates (or makes void) the Torah, but rather establishes the Torah (Rom 3:22-31), since Torah shows us the path of righteous that will keep us from sinning.

Romans 6:14-15

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not *under the law*, but under grace....What then? shall we sin, because we are not *under the law*, but under grace? Elohim forbid.

Explanation: Paul is saying here that sin (i.e., Torahlessness) shall not have dominion over those who have faith in Yeshua (Rom 6:1–10), because the sting of sin is death (1 Cor 15:56), for sin is the violation of the Torah (1 John 3:4), and the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), and those who are alive to Elohim in Yeshua (Rom 6:11) have had their sins forgiven, and are walking under his merciful grace, so that if they sin (i.e., violate the Torah), they can repent and receive his grace (1 John 1:9) instead of death. This is why Paul can say that the redeemed believer is no longer under the (penalty of) the Torah, but is under grace (Rom 6:14).

Because we are under grace and we have been spared by Elohim’s merciful grace from the penalty for sinning (i.e., violating the Torah), which is death, does this mean that we can sin (i.e., continue violating the Torah, Rom 6:15)? Certainly not, Paul strongly affirms! Elohim’s grace is not a license to sin. If a saint sins, he must repent of his sin and not continue in his sin so that the grace of Elohim will cover his transgression.

Since we are no longer slaves to sin because of our relationship with Elohim through Yeshua, we now have become slaves to righteousness (i.e., Torah obedience, see Ps 119:172). The Torah defines what sin is, and shows us how *not* to sin, but it is the grace of Elohim that not only gives us grace or unmerited pardon for violating the Torah (i.e., sin), but the same grace divinely enables us to live in obedience to the Torah, so that we will not come under the (penalty of) the Torah through sinfulness. This is why Paul can go on to declare that the Torah is holy, and the commandment holy, just and good (Rom 7:12). It reveals to us the path of righteousness and how not to sin by showing us how to love Elohim and our neighbor.

1 Corinthians 9:20

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are *under the law*, as *under the law*, that I might gain them that are *under the law*; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to Elohim, but *under the law* to Messiah,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Explanation: It is evident that when Paul uses the phrase, “under the law” in his writings, he at times infuses different connotations into this phrase. Only by studying the context of the surrounding passages in which this phrase is imbedded can we understand the exact connotation that Paul was attaching to “under the law.”

In this passage, the phrase “under the law” is found four times, and doesn’t connote “under the penalty of the law,” (as is the case with Paul’s usage of the term in Romans). The first three times this phrase is found here it means “in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah” (as David Stern translates it in his *Complete Jewish Bible* and then explains reasons behind this translation in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*). Here Paul identifies several groups of people, each of which had its own view of the Torah. These groups were (a) ethnic Jews, (b) those (ethnic Jews or otherwise) who had come under a legalistic view of the Torah in that they believed, for example, that circumcision was a precondition for salvation (certain Pharisees believed this [see Acts 15:1], and Paul was dealing with this doctrinal perversion in the first several chapters of Romans), (c) those (presumably Gentiles) who had no knowledge of the Torah, and (d) those new believers who were still weak and unstable in their faith.

In Paul’s final usage of this phrase in this passage he adds to the phrase *under the law* [Gr. *ennomos* meaning “in the law”] the two words “in Christ.” This changes the whole meaning of the term *under the law*. As we have noted elsewhere, “under the law,” as Paul uses it can mean “under the [penalty of] the Torah,” or “under a legalistic perversion of the Torah,” but here Paul is referring to Torah obedience in the context of a faith in Yeshua. Is Paul referring here to Christians who keep the Torah? Yes! This is what the first century redeemed believers were, and what Paul confesses here about himself (1 Cor 9:21). Paul’s pro-Torah stance is totally consistent with other apologetic statements he makes concerning the Torah along with his confession to being totally Torah-obedient himself (e.g., Rom 3:31; 7:12, 22, 25; 1 Cor 7:19; Acts 21:24; 24:14; 25:8). Torah obedience was also to be a normative attribute of the life of the redeemed believer then and now (e.g., Acts 21:20; 22:12; Rev 12:17; 14:12; 22:14).

So what specifically does the phrase “not being without the Torah toward Elohim, but *under* or *in the law toward Messiah* mean? There is a keeping of the Torah that is done through men’s legalistic efforts that is devoid of trusting faith toward Elohim, whereby one hopes to earn Elohim’s grace or merciful kindness through human effort. This approach Paul proves in Romans 3 and 4 was never how Elohim intended men

to come into a spiritual relationship with him, since it is impossible for men to keep the righteous requirements of the Torah perfectly without sinning. Thankfully, salvation is by the grace of Elohim through faith in Yeshua (Eph 2:8–10). It is through Elohim working through his Holy Spirit through our relationship with Yeshua that we can do the good works (Eph 2:10) of loving Yeshua by keeping his Torah commandments (John 14:15; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:24; 5:2–3). When Yeshua and his apostles use the term *commandments* in their writings, how do we know that they're referring to the Torah-commandments? In Luke 18:19–20, Yeshua himself connects the word *commandments* (Gr. *entole*) with the laws of Torah (in this case, the Ten Commandments, which is the cornerstone of or the basis for all the other 600 plus commandments in the Torah).

Therefore, when Paul says “not being without the Torah toward Elohim, but under [or, in] the law toward Messiah,” he is referring to Torah obedience within the context of Elohim’s grace toward us (which covers our past sins and delivers us from the penalty for violating the law, which is death), and to Yeshua living in the redeemed believer’s life through his Set-Apart Spirit, which enables one to love Yeshua by obeying his Torah (John 14:15).

Galatians 3:23

But before faith came, we were kept *under the law*, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. (KJV)

Some other Bible translations of this verse read as follows:

But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. (NKJV)

But before the coming of faith, we were guarded under law, having been locked up to the faith being about to be revealed. (J.P. Green)

Now before faith came, we were held in custody under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. (Mounce)

Explanation: Here, Paul attaches yet another nuanced connotation to the term *under the law*. To help us to understand his meaning, let’s go back to verse 19, where he refers to the Torah as *being added because of sin*. What was added, and to what was it added? We know that the Torah pre-existed Mount Sinai. Many laws contained in the Torah were specified from the time of creation onward (e.g., the Sabbath, Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the dietary laws, and prohibitions against adultery, rape, murder, lying, etc.), as was the entirety of Torah with its various subsections (Gen 26:5 and 18:19). So obviously, Paul wasn’t referring to the Torah as known to men prior to its being given to Israel at Mount Sinai. What was then added to the Torah? The children of Israel were given the Torah as a legal system with penalties enforcing its violation. Israel was also given a Levitical priesthood system with an elaborate sacrificial system including numerous purification rites, all of which prefigured the sin-atonement death of Yeshua the Messiah on the cross.

The sacrificial system and Levitical system was added to the Torah until the Seed (of Abraham, i.e., Yeshua) should come to whom the promises were made (Gal 3:19). The Torah in its codified form became the national law or legal and judicial system of Israel when it became a nation at Mount Sinai. The Torah as expanded at Mount Sinai defined sin, prescribed the penalties for its violation, which involved an elaborate sacrificial system and purification rites as administered by the Levitical priesthood. The purpose of this system was to show man what sin is, what he had to do when he sinned to make atonement for his sin, and, as Paul shows us, this system pointed the way to Messiah who would once and for all pay the price for all of man’s sins by his atoning death on the cross. The Torah with its added systems, kept Israel walking (more or less) in righteousness (at least compared to the surrounding heathen nations), and preserved them so that there would be a nation from which the Messiah would eventually emerge in fulfillment of YHWH’s promises to Abraham about a Seed coming.

When the Messiah came, the part of the Torah that was added because of sin ceased to be needed; namely, the system of legal penalties, along with the sacrificial and Levitical systems — something the writer of Hebrews makes abundantly clear in Hebrews chapters seven through ten. Was the original Torah which delineates how one is to walk in righteousness in relationship to Elohim and one’s fellow man abolished? We’ll let Paul answer this question. He asks the question, “Do we make void the Torah through faith? Cer-

tainly not! On the contrary, we establish the Torah" (Rom 3:31). Also, he declares, "Shall we sin [or violate the Torah] because we are not under [the penalty] of the law but under grace? Certainly not!" (Rom 6:15). We'll also give Yeshua the opportunity to address the purpose of his mission. Was it to abolish the Torah? Absolutely not! In his omniscience, Yeshua foresaw those who would erroneously think this when he declared:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Torah or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Torah till all is fulfilled. "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:17-19)

Galatians 4:4-5

But when the fullness of the time was come, Elohim sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the Torah-law, to redeem them that were under the Torah-law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Explanation: In this passage, Paul says that before we came to Messiah, we were like children enslaved to the elements (or principles) of this world (v. 3). We were in bondage to sin and to going contrary to the standards of righteousness as revealed in YHVH's instructions in righteousness, his Word, the Torah. We naturally went with the flow of this world, which is in rebellion to YHVH and his ways. However, the Torah with its laws and penalties for violating those laws not only revealed our spiritual deficiency, but pointed us to Yeshua, who, in the fullness of time, was born of a woman under the penalty of the law, and redeemed us or took upon himself the death penalty for each of us of violating the Torah (vv. 4-5). This act of selfless love on Yeshua's part paved the way not only for our redemption, but for us to become spiritual sons of Elohim and heirs of future glory in Elohim's heavenly kingdom (vv. 6-7).

Galatians 4:21

Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?

Explanation: The Jews in Paul's day who glorified the Old Covenant with its stringent penalties imposed on humans when they violated the Torah were sadly misguided. The New Covenant that Yeshua initiated through his death on the cross frees men from the Torah's death penalty as a result of sin, for those who place their faith in Yeshua. In essence, Paul is asking the question, why would anyone want to go back under the Old Covenant with its severe penalties, when one can be under the provisions of the New Covenant, and have one's sins paid for by Yeshua, and be free of the bondage or weight of the Torah's death penalty, which is like a sword hanging over one's head by a thread (Gal 5:1). Paul goes on to say that those who claimed that circumcision (i.e., Torah-obedience) was a mandatory pre-requisite for salvation (Gal 5:3-5 cp. Acts 15:1), were, in essence, going back under the Old Covenant with its severe penalties, and were trusting in their own good works to save them instead of the grace of Elohim and have therefore fallen from grace (Gal 5:3-5).

Galatians 5:18

But if you be led of the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Explanation: To understand this passage, let's back up to verse 16 where Paul instructs the Galatians to walk in the Spirit of Elohim, and not to fulfill the lust of the flesh. What are the lusts of the flesh? Doing that which comes naturally to the carnal man such as lust, adultery, lying, stealing, worshipping false gods, coveting, and so on. All these things are a violation of YHVH's Torah-commands. In verse 18, Paul says that if one walks in accordance with YHVH's Holy Spirit, then one won't be violating the Torah. One, instead, will be fulfilling the Torah by loving one's neighbor as oneself, which is the fulfillment of the Torah (vv. 14-15). Then in verses 19 through 21, Paul goes on to list the works of the flesh, all of which are violations of the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah's laws. He then lists the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22-25), which are the summation and result of Torah-obedience.

So now what about verse 18? Very simply this. If we walk in accordance with the Spirit of Elohim that convicts us of sin (i.e., Torahlessness, 1 John 3:4) and leads us away from sin (John 16:8) and into the truth of Yeshua who is the Living Torah-word and truth of Elohim (John 14:6; John 1:1, 14), we will be walking in YHVH's Torah-truth (Ps 119:142, 151), and under YHVH's grace if and when we sin. If we either don't place our faith in Yeshua, or try to earn our own salvation by our good works, then we have failed to receive YHVH's grace and come under the penalty of the law, which is death. **This is the summation and the bottom line message of Paul's message in the Epistle to the Galatians.**