

All Things to All Men

Paul and the Torah in 1Corinthians 9:19–23

by Tim Hegg

Introduction

In our “post-Torah”¹ era, the New Testament (so-called) is read through the lenses of modern Christianity in which the issues of the Torah have long since been determined. The foundational question of the place of Torah within the life of the Christian has been so thoroughly answered by long-standing theologies that it no longer has the status of a question. Most everyone is well settled in their conscience that one’s obligations to the commands of God shifted in the very distant past, and thus the well worn paths of Christian tradition are the only ones found on the daily map of “spiritual formation” in our times. The ancient trails have long since disappeared.

This post-Torah perspective is, as one could imagine, the paradigm by which the New Testament is read, interpreted, and applied. Even modern English translations of the Scripture evidence a presupposition that the Torah has been abolished (or at least significantly diminished) by the “coming of Christ.” With the colored lenses of post-Torah theology well fitted to the eyes of modern-day believers, the words of Yeshua and His Apostles conform nicely to the preconceived theology of the day. The God of Israel has (in practical terms) become the God of the Church, Who, in “switching” from one people to another, has likewise written a “new constitution” by which the current “people of God” are governed. “The old has passed away, the new has come” (2Corinthians 5:17).

It is therefore understandable why the current “Torah movement” has become like a burr under the saddle of the modern Christian Church. We’re asking the old questions once again. And in so doing, we are subtly (and not so subtly) suggesting that the current “answers” are patently insufficient. We’re questioning well-worn paths of theology and this is unsettling. In the canoe of today’s theology, gliding smoothly through the waters of Christian tradition, we’re leaning over to see what’s in the water, which makes the rest of the passengers very nervous.

The study of Paul is, of course, at the heart of this whole matter. Since ancient times, Paul has been interpreted as settling the Torah issue once and for all. Thoroughly versed in Torah and the Judaisms of his day, Paul is championed as the Apostle who led the followers of Yeshua beyond the confines of the repressive Torah, to “freedom in Christ.” It is interesting to me that when the question of Torah is once again brought to the table, those who maintain that it has no current relevance to the life of the believer inevitably go to Paul, not to Yeshua. While some would openly admit that Paul was the first to stand boldly against the Torah, most simply presume that he only further explained what Yeshua had taught. Yet an open-minded study of the life and teaching of Yeshua from the Gospels gives the clear impression that He not only maintained a Torah life Himself, but instructed His disciples to do the same.

Paul: the Inconsistent Apostle?

But could Paul have consistently claimed the position as “the Apostle of Yeshua the Messiah”² and taught contrary to his Master? Is it possible that Paul, knowing the teachings of Yeshua,³ would directly and purposefully teach contrary to the message with which Yeshua had entrusted him? Did not Yeshua instruct His disciples to carry the message He had given them (Matthew 28:19–20), a message that

1. I use the term “post-Torah” much like the term “post-modern” in our times. That is, I refer to the era of the believing communities (“churches”) in which the primary matrix of “faith and practice” is entirely without connection to the Torah.

2. Romans 1:1; 1Corinthians 1:1; 2Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1Timothy 1:1; 2Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1

3. See David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Eerdmans, 1995).

included His strong teaching on the eternal value and applicability of the Torah (Matthew 5:17–20)? We are therefore left with only two options: either Paul intended his message and teaching to be based firmly on the teachings of Yeshua, meaning that what he taught in no way contradicted the words of his Master, or he fashioned his own theology in opposition to what Yeshua taught. If we opt for the latter, we should rip the Pauline epistles from our Bibles—they are the words of a renegade.

But to think that Paul formulated a contrary position to that of Yeshua is not only bad scholarship, it is also illogical. Paul’s epistles circulated among the communities of The Way at the same time that the Gospels were being composed and received, or even earlier. It is illogical to think that communities who identified themselves first and foremost with the risen Messiah, would receive the teaching of someone like Paul if he brought a contrary message. The fact that he regularly appeals both to the Tanach, as well as to his position as Yeshua’s commissioned Apostle, means that he intended his words to be received as entirely in line with those of his Master. We do well, then, to read his words with this in mind. When we hear Paul disagreeing with the teachings of Yeshua, we had better look again at Paul, and seek to know how we have misinterpreted him.

Or is it possible that Paul was simply inconsistent with himself? Did he start out believing one thing, and then later changed his views? Did he begin his life of service to Yeshua as a Jew with a Jewish message, and then later disavow his Jewishness and head off to the Gentiles? At the beginning of his newfound faith in Yeshua did he maintain his Torah life of obedience, only later to abandon it as the unnecessary trappings of immature faith? Many modern scholars have considered this as the only reasonable explanation for what appears to be disparate statements of the Apostle. Yet with such an explanation we fare no better than if we hold that Paul taught contrary to Yeshua. If Paul flip-flopped his message along the way, we certainly cannot accept his words as authoritative. Moreover, if we believe that the epistles of Paul form part of the inspired word of God, we surely cannot accept the theory that he said one thing here, and contradicted it there. The superintending work of the Spirit would not allow such a thing.

Paul the Chameleon?

The worst-case scenario is that Paul was purposefully duplicitous, that he simply said what his audience wanted to hear. The text which forms the primary focus of our study here (1 Corinthians 9:19–23) is often read and interpreted as though Paul were a theological chameleon, changing color to fit the occasion. Indeed, Paul speaks of “being all things to all men in order to save some” (v. 22), which at first blush sounds like full-fledge pragmatism—that the “end justifies the means” when it comes to evangelism. It is not uncommon, then, to find this text interpreted to mean that Paul could present himself as Torah observant when that was to his advantage, and disregard the commandments when keeping them would have caused waves. When he was with his Jewish brothers and sisters, he played the part of a mensch, but when visiting or living among Gentiles, he just as easily set the Torah aside as unnecessary and veiled his Jewish identity. Reading the text in this way makes Paul out to be a salesman who does whatever necessary to huckster the gospel.

But this is exactly opposite of Paul’s own description of how he proclaimed the Good News! In 1 Thessalonians 2:1–5, he explicitly states that his proclamation of the Gospel was not “from error or impurity or by way of deceit,” and he taught with boldness, even in the face of persecution, so that his message was clearly not “to please men.” He came, not with “flattering speech” seeking the glory of men, but with the power of the Gospel of Yeshua infused with the demonstration of the Spirit.

Moreover, Paul rebuked Peter openly for changing his halachah to fit the situation. While in Antioch, and before the coming of certain disciples of James, Peter freely ate with the Gentile believers. But when his Jewish brothers arrived, he withdrew from table-fellowship with the Gentiles in conformity to the prevailing rabbinic halachah. If Paul’s modus operandi was to switch halachah to accommodate the current situation, it seems very hypocritical to condemn Peter for doing just that.

Thus, to read this passage as suggesting chameleon accommodation for the sake of evangelism brings more problems than it solves. Can we honestly find Yeshua or Paul adopting an evangelistic pattern that condones disobeying God’s commandments in order to get people to accept their message?

Hardly! Both were persecuted, even unto death, because they refused to compromise the message, either in word or deed, to satisfy the crowd. Furthermore, to use accommodating methods for the proclamation of the Gospel not only cheapens the message, it also undermines it. The Gospel comes to the sinner, not as a “one size fits all” elastic kind of message, but as demanding the sinner’s own conformity to the word of the King. The message of the Gospel as far as Paul was concerned was that God is “commanding people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

1 Corinthians 9:19–23

But how then are we to understand Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23? If we’re suggesting that Paul held the Torah as the eternal and unchangeable standard for faith and *halachah*, how are we to explain his words in this text, which on the surface seem to say that he could take it or leave it, depending on the situation? If Paul’s Gospel came not only in word, but also in deed (2 Corinthians 10:11), did he actually preach two different Gospels, depending upon whether he was with Jews or Gentiles?

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Torah, as under the Torah though not being myself under the Torah, so that I might win those who are under the Torah; 21 to those who are without Torah, as without Torah, though not being without the Torah of God but under the Torah of Messiah, so that I might win those who are without Torah. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

The Larger Context

The situation that prompted the writing of 1 Corinthians was divisions within the Corinthian community (1:10ff).

In a word, Paul is engaged in ‘politics.’ He is engaged, as the ‘father’ of the community (cf. 4:14–21), in the strenuous task of nurturing its fragile existence in the face of external pressures and internal differences which threaten to blow it apart.⁴

The factions that had engulfed the Corinthian congregation evidenced themselves in various parties following prominent teachers (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, cf. 1:12; 3:22) and interpreting their teachings as the basis of conflicting *halachah*. Yet Paul’s purpose is not to pit one teacher against the other, nor to claim some teachers to be right while others wrong, but to emphasize the identity of all in Messiah (1:20ff; 3:22–23).

The schisms that had occurred among the Corinthians were most obviously seen in the day-to-day life of the community. Some apparently were willing to tolerate sexual sins (5:1ff). Paul makes it clear that apart from evident repentance by those who had engage in immorality, they could not remain within the congregation. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (5:6). Then there was the issue of settling legal disputes among those within the community (6:1ff), and the practice of some to resort to the pagan courts to win their claims. Paul requires that such disputes be settled within the community of faith, not outside of it.

The issue of using pagan courts springboards into the whole matter of pagan temples, since often

⁴ Stephen C. Barton, “All Things to All People” in James D. G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 273.

the courts were held in the temple precincts. Thus, in 6:12ff, Paul briefly introduces several issues connected with the pagan temples, i.e., food offered to idols and participation with temple prostitutes. He will deal in greater depth with the issue of meat offered to idols (chapters 8–10), but here he specifically forbids any connection to temple prostitution on the basis that the body will be resurrected in holiness (6:14–15), that the one-flesh principle is reserved for marriage (6:16–18, quoting Genesis 2:24), and that the believer is presently the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19–20). That which is holy cannot be mixed with the unholy.

Chapter seven goes on to deal with *halachic* matters of marriage (including the giving of a daughter in marriage), divorce, and singleness, all of which were apparently causing division within the Corinthian community. Interestingly, these very issues form significant parts of tractates in the later Mishnah, indicating that they were core *halachic* matters within the larger Jewish community as well.

In chapters 8–10, Paul tackles the problem presented by meat offered to idols in the pagan temples of his day. The controversy was over whether such meat was fit for consumption by believers in Yeshua. Some had “knowledge” that idols were actually nothing, and the gods they represented were only the figment of pagan imagination. For these, the profane influence of idolatry did not attach to the meat, so that eating it could not bring idol defilement. Others were not so convinced. They most likely felt that the power of the idol adhered to the offered meat, and that one who ate it would therefore be defiled. Paul’s clear instructions are that participation in pagan temples was contrary to one’s faith in Messiah (10:18–22) and was therefore prohibited. However, meat that was eaten at a common meal, even with unbelieving Jews,⁵ should not be scrutinized. The possibility existed that meat purchased from the market could have originated in the pagan temples. But unless one was specifically made aware of this, he was not to ask, since from Paul’s point of view, the profane status of idolatry did not adhere to the meat. If, however, one was specifically notified that the meat had come from the pagan temple, one should not eat it in order to guard the conscience of the one who served it (10:27ff). In short, believers should always present the life message that they have nothing to do with the idolatry.

The Immediate Context – Chapter 9

Paul’s basic appeal in chapters 8–10 is that one’s freedoms, based upon “knowledge,” should be forfeited, if necessary, for the sake of those who were “weak.” This, in fact, is the same appeal he emphasizes throughout the epistle. In the midst of his instructions on the issue of meat offered to idols, and his appeal to forfeit one’s freedoms for the sake of another, Paul offers the illustration of his own life and ministry to demonstrate what this would look like. In 9:1–13 Paul lays out the authority he has as an Apostle of Yeshua, and his right (freedom) to expect that he would be supported by those to whom he ministers. Yet in 9:14–18 he explains that he forfeited this right to be remunerated for his service, in order to further the effectiveness of his ministry. In so doing, he appeared to some as less than a *bona fide* Apostle, particularly because he chose to work at menial tasks to support himself. In the final paragraph of chapter 9, Paul uses the illustration of an athlete who likewise forfeits personal rights in order to train for and run in the race. Thus, the overarching focus of Paul in chapter 9 is what one voluntarily gives up in order to obtain a desired goal.

Why would Paul have voluntarily refused the support expected for an Apostle, and instead work with his hands to support himself? There may be several reasons, though he never tells us directly. First, in order to establish communities of faith among the Gentiles, Paul needed to stay longer than if he were simply passing through Jewish communities. Staying for an extended period might have placed a burden upon any community if they were expected to support him. Furthermore, we know that the Didache (an early didactic work written to establish doctrine and conduct among believing communities) considered

⁵ I take 1Corinthians 10:27 to be speaking of unbelieving Jews, not unbelieving Gentiles, since the question at hand regards meat offered to idols, and the conscience of the host who informs the visitor of such which is to be guarded (v. 28).

apostles who came and stayed longer than two days to be false prophets.⁶ Additionally, the *Didache* marked as a false prophet any apostle who asked for money.⁷ Granted, the *Didache* was most likely composed after Paul, in the late 1st Century CE,⁸ but it may well portray an earlier perspective, one which obtained during the Apostolic era. These notices in the *Didache* parallel a similar ruling in the Mishnah (Peah 8:7) in which a poor man traveling from place to place is to be given a loaf of bread, shelter for the night, and three meals if his stay includes a Shabbat. Secondly, pagan prophets and teachers also circulated among the communities of ancient Rome. And it was their custom not to provide their service of divination until they were paid. Surely Paul would have wanted to distance himself from any connection to such prophets and teachers.⁹ Finally, some within the Jewish communities may have look askance at a teacher who took support from Gentiles.¹⁰ As such, Paul may have voluntarily given up his right to be supported by the Gentile communities to which he ministered, in order not to be judged as improper by his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Thus, it is clear that the overarching principle set forth by Paul in the immediate context of our passage, as well as throughout the epistle, is that one must be *willing to give up his freedoms in order to establish the priority of the Gospel within the community of faith.*

9:19–23

Having considered the wider context of our passage, we should note the parallel structure of the lines that make up the paragraph of 9:19–23. Since our text begins with the word “For,” it is linked directly with the preceding context and forms the conclusion to 9:1–23, a description of Paul’s own pastoral example of forfeiting freedoms for the sake of the Gospel.¹¹ It is important to realize that he is not describing what he is free to do, but rather the freedoms he has given up in order to further the success of his work as an Apostle of the Gospel of Yeshua.

It is clear that there is a definite pattern of Hebraic style parallelism found in this paragraph. This structure may be represented as follows:

- (A) I made myself a slave to all in order that I might gain more (v. 19)
- (B) I became to the Jews as a Jew, in order that I might gain Jews (v. 20a)
- (B1) To those under the Torah as under the Torah . . . to gain those under the Torah (v. 20b)
- (C) To those outside of Torah as outside of Torah . . . to gain those outside of Torah (v. 21)

^{6.} *Didache* 11.5.

^{7.} *Didache* 11.6.

^{8.} Aaron Milavec (*The Didache: Faith, Hope and Life*, Newman Press, 2003) thinks the *Didache* was written in 50 CE, but he stands nearly alone among scholars in this early dating.

^{9.} Compare the notice in *The Shepherd of Hermes, Mandate* 11.12 that speaks of prophets who demand payment before they will prophecy.

^{10.} John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, 4 vols. (Baker, 1979), 4.220.

^{11.} A great deal of debate has gone on among commentators as to the structure of 1Corinthians 8–10. Those who are not concerned with the integrity of the epistle have often suggested that chapter 9, or parts of chapter 9, fit better in other places of the epistle, or were even later insertions. More recently, however, a number of scholars have shown the integrity of chapter 8–10. I take 9:19–23 to be the conclusion of Paul’s example of forfeiting his freedoms, with 9:24–27 functioning as an introduction to the material in chapter 10. For a more detailed study of the structure of this section of the epistle, see Jerry L. Sumney, “The Place of 1Corinthians 9:24–27 in Paul’s Argument” *JBL* 119/2 (2000), 329–333.

(C1) I became to the weak weak in order that I might gain the weak (v. 22a)

(A1) I have become all things to all in order that I might in all circumstances save some of them (v. 22b)

In noting the structure of our text in this way, several important aspects are seen. First, the opening and concluding phrases (A//A1) are clearly parallel. Paul begins by stating his position as “slave to all” and concludes that he has “become all things to all.” In good Hebraic fashion, he begins and ends by stating the same thing twice, utilizing parallel terms. Secondly, this structure indicates that Paul was not defining four different groups of people with whom he interacted, but two groups, each defined by two parallel lines. Thus, the group designated “Jews” in line B is further defined in B1 as “those under the Torah.” Likewise, the group designated “those outside of Torah” in C is further defined as “the weak” in C1. In each of these cases, the first designation is more fully defined by the second. This was necessary because the more general term (given in the opening line), if left by itself, would have been too ambiguous without further definition. The phrase “to the Jews I became as a Jew” leaves the reader with a very real quandary. Paul was obviously Jewish, and never ceased from identifying himself as Jewish (Acts 19:34; 21:39; 22:3; Philippians 3:4–6). It therefore makes no sense for Paul to write that he “became as a Jew” unless the Jewish group to which he refers is made more specific. This he does by the additional phrase “those under the Torah...,” further defining this Jewish group as those who comprised the synagogue community of unbelieving Jews. Similarly, the designation “those outside of Torah” could, at first blush, be a designation for pagans or transgressors since the Greek word translated “those outside of Torah” is *anomos*, a word often used to describe “transgressors” or those who are “lawless.”¹² But Paul is not indicating that he actually engaged in transgressions or unlawful acts in order to be received by this group. Rather, the second line further defines what he means by “without the Torah.” He is describing Gentile believers who were viewed by the unbelieving synagogue as outside of the covenant defined by Torah, and who were therefore considered weak or incapable of covenant status before God. It was the unbelieving synagogue that labeled the Gentile believers as “without the Torah” and “weak.”

Thus, Paul is noting his membership status in two groups of people, groups which had some very definite boundary markers, but which also overlapped in some ways: the wider Jewish community, particularly marked by their rejection of Yeshua as Messiah, and the community of The Way, comprised in the majority of Gentile believers. These Gentile believers were technically considered “other” by the traditional synagogue, but were nonetheless viewed as within the wider circle of Judaism by Roman society in general. Understanding that our text deals primarily with two groups (unbelieving Jews and believing Gentiles) matches Paul’s description in 10:23–“Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”

With this background in mind, and with the specific structure of our paragraph noted, we are now in a better position to understand Paul’s words in this often-misunderstood paragraph.

9:19 *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.*

In what way was Paul “free from all men?”¹³ The previous context gives us the answer: Paul was free from the need to gain his livelihood as a worker engaged in the general commerce of his day. As an Apostle, he had the right to expect remuneration from those he served, and he therefore had the right not to engage in a daily occupation in order to supply his basic needs. Yet, as he clearly explained, he gave up this right, and instead engaged in the work-a-day world, appearing as a common “blue collar” worker. As such, he served (“became a slave”) to each one, striving to fulfill the requests of his customers, who doubtlessly came from all walks of life. But he did this because he wanted his work as

^{12.} cf. Luke 22:37; Acts 2:23; 2Thessalonians 2:8; 1Timothy 1:9; 2Peter 2:8.

^{13.} The Greek has *ek panton pasin*, literally “out from every person.”

an Apostle of Yeshua to be untarnished by those who might have accused him of huckstering the Gospel.

In this verse we also encounter the use of the word “gain” or “win” (*kerdaino*). This verb is found a total of five times in our passage, and always forms the purpose for Paul’s voluntary forfeiture of his freedoms. He became as a slave to Jews and non-Jews in order that he might win some of them to his message of the Gospel. Most have understood “win” in the sense of evangelism, to “win lost souls for Messiah.”¹⁴ Yet in the 17 times this verb is found in the Apostolic Scriptures,¹⁵ never is it clearly speaking of evangelistic success. While the word most often refers to acquiring possessions or money, in terms of interpersonal relations, the word describes successfully bringing someone to do what is right. Note Matthew 18:15: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won (*kerdaino*) your brother.” In this case, to win one’s brother is to rescue him from error, and bring him to do what is right. Thus, Paul’s purpose, couched in the word “win,” could include bringing someone to agree with the Gospel and its life-transforming message, but it could also include bringing those who had already espoused the Gospel to a fuller acceptance of its implications within the community of faith. To put it simply, Paul’s use of the word “win” could also include bringing fellow believers to agree fully with his Gospel, which proclaimed membership within God’s family on the basis of faith in Yeshua without the need to obtain Jewish status.

9:20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Torah, as under the Torah though not being myself under the Torah, so that I might win those who are under the Torah;

As noted above, Paul’s claim to “become as a Jew” would have sounded very strange to those who knew him, since he was a Jew by birth and maintained a very open and obvious connection to his Jewish community. But the subsequent designation of those “under the Torah” helps define in a particular way the Jewish group with whom he here identifies. Of the many sects of Judaism in the 1st Century, Paul continued to identify with the Pharisees (Acts 23:6) and thus submitted to their rule and authority within the traditional synagogue.

For Paul, the phrase “under the Torah” (*hupo nomon*) describes those who have not confessed Yeshua as Messiah, and who continued to rely upon their Jewish identity, bound up in observance of the Torah, as the grounds for their acceptance by God.¹⁶ This being the case, it is understandable why Paul quickly reinforces the fact that he was not himself “under the Torah.” He no longer trusted in his Jewish status, identified by Torah observance, as the means of justification before God. Now, living according to the Torah was the inevitable response of love to the One Who had redeemed him.

The majority of Paul’s Jewish brethren, according to his own testimony, had rejected Yeshua as the Messiah, something that grieved him greatly (Romans 9:1–3). These remained in need of redemption

^{14.} The common use of “win” in the sense of “bring people to confess Yeshua as Savior” may have had some connection to the use of the verb *sakar* “to hire,” “hire for oneself,” “payment” in rabbinic literature, on which see David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hendrickson, 1998 reprint), pp. 355–361. However, the more modern use of the term “win” in the sense of “evangelizing the lost” is based upon a misunderstanding of Proverbs 11:30, “...and he who is wise wins souls.” The context of this verse would indicate that the righteous, because they live according to wisdom, have stability and thus avoid poverty, and therefore are able to sustain the lives of others as well. Whatever the phrase “...and he who is wise wins souls” means, it is not specifically talking about handing out gospel tracts.

^{15.} Matthew 16:26; 18:15; 25:16-17, 20, 22; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25; Acts 27:21; 1Corinthians 9:19-22; Philippians 3:8; James 4:13; 1Peter 3:1.

^{16.} In the Pauline epistles, “under the Torah” (*hupo nomon*) is found in Romans 6:14-15; Galatians 3:23; 4:4, 21; 5:18. In each of these cases, those who are designated as “under the Torah” are still in their sin. In the case of Yeshua who was born “under the Torah” (Galatians 4:4), this designates Him as the One who came to take the penalty of condemnation for sinners, “to redeem those who are under the Torah.” Thus, for Yeshua to be “under the Torah” means that He took the condemnation of the Torah upon Himself for the sake of those He redeemed.

from the curse of the Torah and constituted the majority of the established synagogues of Paul's day. Yet though they remained "under the Torah" in Paul's perspective, he nonetheless continued to submit to their rule, for five times he bent to receive lashes at the hands of the synagogue authorities (2Corinthians 11:24). And for what did he receive such punishments? Most likely he received lashes because he continued to proclaim Yeshua as Messiah (something that may have been considered blasphemy) and he willingly received Gentiles as bona fide covenant members of Israel (which may have been considered participation with idolaters). Yet, in order to keep an open door to his Jewish brothers and sisters by maintaining his place in the established synagogue, he submitted to their rule and to their whip.

The Mishnah (*Makkot* 3) describes the process of giving lashes. Those who had committed a crime worthy of being cut off, could, in certain cases (such as blasphemy), be spared the extreme punishment of being banished by receiving lashes instead. As the transgressor bent down to receive the whipping, a reader would loudly proclaim the words of Deuteronomy 28:58ff, which comprise the curses of the covenant. Then Psalm 78:38 was read aloud, which speaks of God's compassion and willingness to forgive. But after the lashes were finished, the Mishnah (*Makkot* 3:15) states:

"All those who are liable to extirpation (being cut off) who have been flogged are exempt from their liability to extirpation, "as it is said, And your brother seem vile to you (Deuteronomy 25:3)—"once he has been flogged, lo, he is tantamount to your brother. . . ."

Paul proved himself to be fully vested within the larger Jewish community by submitting to the whip for matters that were, in reality, not transgressions, but were considered so by those who had rejected Yeshua. Paul had every right and freedom in Yeshua to walk away from such man-made legislation, but he gave up his freedom for the sake of the Gospel. It was in this manner that Paul "became as a Jew to Jews," that is, to the unbelieving Jewish community. Instead of accepting the penalty of being cut off from his people, he willingly received lashes that, in the perspective of the Jewish Sages, confirmed his on-going status as one within their group. Because he submitted to their punishments, he was received as a "brother."

9:21-22 to those who are without Torah, as without Torah, though not being without the Torah of God but under the Torah of Messiah, so that I might win those who are without Torah. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

Who are these described as "without Torah?" By this term Paul does not mean that they were devoid of Torah in the sense of disregarding it. This he makes clear by adding the parenthetical phrase "though not being without the Torah of God but under (literally "in") the Torah of Messiah." It was not Paul who had labeled these as "without Torah" (*anomos*) but the traditional synagogue. Thus, those to whom Paul refers as "without Torah" are surely the Gentile believers whom the established synagogue considered outside of the circle of God's favor and promises.¹⁷ Since they had not become proselytes, the larger synagogue community reckoned them as "without Torah." In their eyes, the Gentiles who had not become proselytes had not submitted to the full yoke of the Torah as defined by the Sages, and could

¹⁷. On the sense of being "without Torah," cf. Romans 2:14, although *anomos* is not used in this verse. Note also that the same could be said of lapsed Jews in 1Maccabees 7:5; 9:23, 58, 69; 11:25; 14:14 (in all of which *anomos* is used), showing that "without Torah" was used generally of those deemed to be outside of the covenant promises made to Israel. Since in the eyes of the Sages the Torah was the means by which the covenant was mediated to Israel, to be "without Torah" was likewise to be without the covenant.

therefore not be received.¹⁸ They were still classed as “sinners” as over against “Jews.”¹⁹ One should remember that in the words of the Sages, “without Torah” would include not only the words of Moses, but also the interpretations and *halachic* decisions contained in the Oral Torah.

But Paul wants to make it clear that though the Gentile believers were labeled as “without Torah” by the traditional synagogue, they were not, in fact, without the “Torah of God.”²⁰ While in the eyes of the synagogue leaders they had not qualified as *bona fide* covenant members since they had not submitted to the ritual of proselytism, Paul knew that they had submitted to the “Torah of God” as defined in the life and teachings of Yeshua. And Paul willingly identified with them in this. Whereas before coming to faith, Paul based his covenant membership on his Jewish status as a keeper of Torah (Phil 3:6), his participation in the Gospel had changed that. Like his Gentile brothers and sisters who had attached themselves to the God of Israel solely through faith in Messiah Yeshua, so Paul had come to realize that the Torah was not the means of righteousness before God for anyone. If they were deemed as “without Torah” because they had not sought to “become Jews” as the means of attaining covenant standing with God, then Paul was happy to receive that same label, for his status as righteous before God was founded upon being “in Messiah,” not upon his physical linkage to Jacob. When it came to right standing before God, Paul proclaimed that there was neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28).

The language Paul employs here is insightful. While the traditional synagogue labeled the Gentile believers as *anomos*, “without Torah” or “transgressors,” meaning that they considered them outside of the realm of the Torah as traditionally taught and upheld by the Sages, Paul counters by saying that they were not outside of God’s Torah, but actually were *in the Torah* (*ennomos*) of Messiah (translated “under the law of Christ” in the NASB). The word *ennomos* is only found one other time in the Apostolic Scriptures, at Acts 19:39. There, in the ruckus caused by the silversmiths of Ephesus whose livelihood depended upon the manufacturing of idols for the cult of Artemis, Paul appeals to the protocol of Roman law, requesting that any formal charges against him should come from a “lawful (*ennomos*) assembly,” that is, the established court.²¹ In using the same word here, Paul establishes the fact that the Gentile believers do live in accordance with the Torah as written by Moses and modeled by Yeshua, even if they have not conformed entirely to the Torah as defined and expanded by the traditional synagogue. The truth was that their lives were governed by the very Torah of God as taught and lived out by Yeshua Himself.

Thus, the typical understanding of these verses, that Paul abandoned Torah-living while among the Gentiles, is entirely unfounded. He makes it amply clear that he (and by extension those among whom he ministered) lived by the Torah of God as defined by Yeshua. Furthermore, just a few chapters earlier (cf. 7:19), Paul had already stressed the point that obedience to God’s commandments was what really

^{18.} “A proselyte who took upon himself all the obligations of the Torah except for one item, they do not receive him” (t.*Demai* 2:5).

^{19.} Note Galatians 2:15, “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles,” which are the words of those who were teaching that Gentile believers were not full-fledged covenant members until they became proselytes.

^{20.} I recognize that the participle *on* (translated “being” in the phrase “not being without the Torah of God”) is singular, and thus refers specifically to Paul. Yet when Paul claims that he was “not being without the Torah of God,” it stands to reason that what he describes of himself must also describe the group he is with. Thus, when Paul speaks of “not being without the law of God but being in the law of Messiah,” this describes both his situation and that of the group with which he identifies. Moreover, it is important to note that in the case of those “under the Torah,” Paul specifically adds *autos* in the phrase “though not myself under the Torah.” Here, however, he does not add the emphatic *autos*, “myself,” leaving open the option that the singular participle envisions the whole group.

^{21.} The Greek word *ennomos* was used in Paul’s day to define proper law, and those whose lives conformed to it, cf. Liddell & Scott, *Lexicon*, “*ennomos*.” The word is found once in the Lxx, Sirach 0:10, where it describes those who live in accordance with “the Law and the Prophets and the other books.”

mattered, not whether one was a Jew (circumcised) or a Gentile (uncircumcised).

Paul further identifies this group labeled as “without Torah” by adding, “to the weak I became weak.” But there is a significant difference in this phrase when compared to the preceding ones. In each of the others, Paul says he became “as” (*hos*), but here he does not say he became “as the weak,” but that he actually “became weak.”²² Those who consider the designation “weak” to mean “believers who were weak in their faith”²³ suggest that Paul somehow presented himself as likewise weak in faith. But this certainly cannot be what the phrase means, for it does not say that he became “as” weak, but that he actually was weak. Moreover, Paul does not add a qualifying phrase as before. If he simply were struggling at this point to “adapt himself to weaklings,” we would expect an additional phrase such as “though I myself am not weak.” But he does not say this. He rather affirms that with the weak, he was weak.

If, as I have suggested above, the phrase “to the weak I became weak” further identifies those who were considered “without Torah,” and if such a designation was the opinion of the Jewish community as it judged the Gentile believers to be outside of the covenant people because they remained Gentiles, then the designation “weak” identifies their inability to attain covenant status because they were not Jewish. At one point in his life, Paul had considered his Jewish status to be his strength in terms of covenant membership. But though his pedigree was impressive, the risen Messiah had revealed to him that reliance upon his flesh was hopeless (Phil 3:4–7). When it came to claiming a right to God’s blessings, Paul had come to the conclusion that he, like all of mankind, was weak before God. Thus he writes to the Romans (5:6): “For while we were still helpless (*asthenes*, the same word used in our text translated “weak”), at the right time Messiah died for the ungodly.” The Jewish community considered the Gentiles among whom Paul ministered as “weak” before God because they were outside of the people group to whom God had made covenant promises. Paul, on the other hand, had come to realize that no one could be a legitimate claimant to God’s righteousness in his own strength, or based upon his own worth. In this regard, all were “weak” before God when it came to deserving His favor. As such, he openly admitted that he, like the Gentiles, was weak before God. The righteous status he enjoyed was based entirely upon Messiah’s strength that overcomes the weakness of sinful flesh.

Thus, when he came to the Gentile communities, he did so as one openly admitting his inability to garner God’s favor because he was Jewish. Clearly he did not despise his Jewish heritage, nor did he try to hide his Jewish identity. He confessed the advantages of his Jewish heritage.²⁴ Rather, he openly confessed that his Jewish status offered no advantage in terms of right standing before God. To those who were considered weak (Gentiles), he openly identified himself as equally weak.

It is with this in mind that Paul adds, “that I might win the weak.” It is apparent throughout Paul’s epistles that some Jewish believers continued to encourage their Gentile brothers to become proselytes as the necessary completion of their confession of faith in Yeshua. Paul, of course, was strongly against such a thing, since the linkage to Jewish status as the means of covenant membership was the motivating force in persuading the Gentiles to proselytize. When Paul, himself Jewish, openly confessed that his Jewishness gave no special privilege in terms of being declared righteous before God, he stood before them as a living example of God’s means of justification. Moreover, as Paul evangelized the Gentiles, his message was one of faith in Yeshua as the only means of justification, and his own testimony supported this message of Good News. He proclaimed the Gospel not only in word, but also in deed (2Corinthians 10:11).

Thus, Paul concludes with a restatement of how he began the paragraph. He starts by declaring

22. In some of the later manuscripts, scribes have added the word “as” at this point, most likely for two reasons: 1) they did not want Paul represented as actually weak, and 2) they felt that the parallelism with the former phrases implied that Paul had become “as” the weak. But the earliest manuscripts (P⁴⁶, N*, A, B) are unanimous in not including the word “as” at this point.

23. Cf. Romans 14:1.

24. Cf. Romans 3:1–2.

himself a slave to all, and ends by saying “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.” Obviously, the idea of becoming all things to all must be limited to what he has just explained in the previous verses. It goes without saying that Paul did not become a pagan to pagans, a fornicator to fornicators, or a thief to thieves. What he did do was give up his own freedoms in order to demonstrate the Gospel, centered in the Messiah Yeshua. Moreover, he willingly identified with the Gentile believers because he confessed that his covenant status was based upon the same foundation as theirs, namely, faith in Yeshua and His work, and not in his Jewishness.

9:23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

In this final verse of the section, Paul brings the larger context of the entire chapter to a fitting conclusion. In calling the Corinthians to give up their individual freedoms in order to effectively minister to each other, he has used his own life as an example. And the motivation for such a perspective is nothing less than the Gospel itself, which proclaims the self-sacrifice of Yeshua for His people. If the Gospel message is centered upon the selfless giving of Yeshua for sinners, then those who also sacrifice their own freedoms for the sake of others are privileged to participate in this Gospel. Paul recognized that in comparison to the sufferings of Messiah, his was merely “light affliction” (2Corinthians 4:14; cp. Romans 8:18), but even in this there was a filling up of the afflictions of Messiah (Colossians 1:24). Such self-abasement for the sake of the Gospel was, indeed, a participation in the sufferings of Messiah and as such, a partnership in the Gospel. It was to this that Paul called the Corinthians, and still calls us.

Summary

To summarize, I offer this expanded paraphrase as commentary on our text:

19 Even though I could accept the remuneration that you are required to give me as an Apostle of Yeshua, I have voluntarily forfeited this right and thus continue to work with my hands to make a living. As such, I am a servant to many people every day as they hire my services. By rights I shouldn't have to do this, but I've decided to become a servant to all kinds of people in order to enhance the ministry entrusted to me in the Gospel, and thus to win over some to the full message of Yeshua as Messiah.

20 And I've become a servant in far greater ways than just sewing tents. For instance, to the Jewish community of my brothers and sisters who have rejected Yeshua, I still present myself as a brother within their midst. I could just as easily have left that association and been content to submit only to the synagogues of The Way. But in order to give the Gospel a fair hearing within the unbelieving community of my people (those who remain under the penalty of the Torah and are in need of redemption from sin), I have submitted to their authority, even though it meant being whipped five times, and openly humiliated as a blasphemer and a companion of Gentile idolaters. I did this so that I would be received as a true brother, and so that I might have the ability to live out the Gospel before my countrymen.

21–22 On the other hand, I willingly associate with the community of the The Way, comprised in majority of Gentile believers. I know that my own Jewish community considers them to be outside of the blessings of Torah, and that they have no hope of covenant membership unless they become proselytes. But I tell you that we are not outside of God's Torah, but that we live in accordance with God's teaching as we follow in the commandments of our Master, Yeshua. Moreover, I tell you this—if the teachers of my people designate this mostly-Gentile community as “without Torah” because they have not become proselytes, then they may as well say the same of me. That is because the Torah is not the means of obtaining righteousness before God for anyone, Jew or Gentile. They say of my Gentile brothers and sisters that they are weak, without any ability to obtain membership in God's covenant.

Well, that accusation is correct, because no one, in and of himself, can attain such covenant status. Everyone is weak before God in this regard, myself included. And that is my message to the Gentiles: I stand before them as a Hebrew of Hebrews, and Jewish to the core. But my message is that my Jewishness could never make me righteous before God, nor could the fact that they are Gentiles block their approach to God. All of us, whether Jew or non-Jew, come to God only through faith in His Son, Yeshua.

23 So you can see that I have lived out the very message I am impressing on you. You need to be willing to give up your rights and freedoms if doing so means you'll be able to effectively minister to others. You can see in the examples I've given that I have been affirmed as a brother within the non-believing Jewish community, and I've been willing to be maligned as "without Torah" and "weak" because I freely associate with the Gentile believers as well. You can see how I have given up my own freedoms in order to win a hearing for the Gospel. But while giving up my own freedoms was not always easy (I have the scars of the whip to prove this), it was worth it, for in suffering for the sake of the Gospel, I have been privileged to participate in the same kind of sufferings that our Savior underwent. As such, I have come to understand and appreciate what it means to be a partner in the message of the Gospel.