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MINISTRIES

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Be Doers of the Word: Does James Affirm the Torah’s Validity?

Is the Torah—that is, God’s law given through Moses—relevant to Christians today? We believe that it is. Today, we want to highlight some verses in the book of James that proclaim the ongoing validity of the Torah.

In the book of James, the apostle writes that believers are to be “doers of the word.” What does that mean? Let’s look at the passage:

James 1:21-22

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

So, James instructs us to receive with meekness the “implanted word.” He instructs us not just to hear that implanted word, but to be doers of that word. That is to say, receiving the implanted word should lead to doing the word.

The term “implanted” in Greek is *emphutos*. This verse is the only place this word appears in the New Testament. However, in other Greek writings outside of the Bible, this term carries the meaning of “inborn,” that is, something that is a natural characteristic (BDAG, “ἐμφυτος,” 288). In other words, this “word” is ingrained within the very nature of the believer. When we receive this implanted word, it becomes who we are.

Having the word implanted within us echoes the promise of the New Covenant. Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a New Covenant where he would write the Torah on the hearts of his people:

Jeremiah 31:33

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts

This essentially means that God’s people will internalize the Torah—our thinking and decision-making will revolve around the Torah.

James also says that receiving the implanted word “[is able to save your souls](#).” Once again, this statement seems to go back to Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant. After Jeremiah says that God will write the Torah on the hearts of his people, he says this:

Jeremiah 31:34b

[For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.](#)

The New Covenant, inaugurated by the Messiah’s work on the cross (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 9:15; 12:24), is God’s promise to forgive his people and transform them into people who keep the Torah. When we receive the Messiah, God saves us and forgives our sins. We don’t earn God’s forgiveness; we receive it by grace through faith. But being saved and receiving God’s forgiveness also includes receiving God’s Torah being written—implanted if you will—in our hearts. It is a package deal. When we are genuinely saved, we are transformed. Keeping Torah becomes who we are.

So, what is this “word” that we are to be doers of according to James 1:22? It’s the Torah! And this becomes clear a couple of verses later:

James 1:25

[But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.](#)

Here we see that James equates the “word” with the “perfect law, the law of liberty” (cf. Deuteronomy 6:6; Isaiah 2:3; 5:24; Psalm 119:9-11, 18). As the scholar David Nystrom writes:

For James “perfect law” and “word” are related, for each describes a pattern of life conduct. So “the word planted in you” (1:21) and “perfect law” are found in such close association that one implies the other.

—David P. Nystrom, *James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 95

Likewise, Dan McCartney writes:

Why the shift from mentioning God’s word (1:21) to God’s law (1:25)? They actually refer to the same thing.

—Dan G. McCartney, *James* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2009), 122

So, James’s instruction to be “doers of the word” can be understood as an instruction to be doers of the Torah. The Greek word translated “law,” *nomos*, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term Torah, God’s commandments given through Moses. The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—translates the Hebrew word Torah using the Greek word *nomos* almost 200 times. The New Testament also uses the word *nomos* in direct reference to the Law of Moses (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23; 1 Corinthians 9:9; Hebrews 10:28). In light of the lexical data, when James uses the Greek word *nomos*, “law,” he surely has in mind the Torah. Therefore, according to James, Christians are to be doers of the Torah.

Some object to this interpretation of James 1:22 and 25. For instance, it is often argued that the word/law that James tells us to “do” cannot refer to the Torah. Instead, it must refer only to God’s “moral” law.

To explain, it is popular in some circles of Christianity to divide the Torah into categories called moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law. Moral law refers to commands having to do with ethical actions toward others, such as don't steal and don't murder. Civil law refers to commands having to do with Israelite society, such as penal codes. And ceremonial law refers to commands having to do with religious rituals, such as the Sabbath and other holy days. Within this framework, it is often said that the ceremonial and civil parts of the Torah are done away with and only the moral law remains applicable to believers.

In support of the idea that James refers only to the “moral law,” it is often pointed out that, throughout his epistle, James emphasizes having love toward one's neighbor and treating people right. He doesn't mention ritual laws like the Sabbath. Thus, according to some Christians, when James says to be doers of the word, he means only the moral law. James's instruction to be doers of the word does *not* imply things like keeping the Sabbath or dietary laws.

It is worth noting that the Scriptures themselves do not divide the Torah into categories like “moral” and “ceremonial” law. This way of categorizing the Torah developed much later in Christian history and is, frankly, contrived. Nevertheless, are there any reasons to think that James's concept of “law” here would include commands like the Sabbath and dietary laws? Yes, there are! We will give five.

First, according to what we know about James from the book of Acts, he clearly recognizes the ongoing validity of the entire Torah. In Acts 21, James informs Paul that there are “**many thousands**” of Jews who have come to believe in the gospel and that they are all “**zealous for the law**,” *nomos* (Acts 21:20). In the very next verse, James associates this “law” with Moses. James was concerned about some rumors that were circulating about Paul—rumors that Paul was teaching others to “**forsake Moses**” and not circumcise their children. James knew these rumors were false, so he admonished Paul to participate in a public purification ritual at the temple to reassure the Jerusalem Christians that these rumors were baseless and that Paul himself lived “**in observance of the law**.” And that is what Paul did (Acts 21:22-26). This passage is significant because it shows us that James's concept of “law,” *nomos*, included not only the moral laws, but also the so-called “ceremonial” ones.

Second, James's readers met in the synagogue:

James 2:2

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in...

In Greek, the word translated as “assembly” here is *synagoges*. Everywhere else this Greek word appears in the New Testament, it is translated as “synagogue,” the regular Jewish assembly for prayer and worship. The book of Acts references both Jews and Gentiles meeting in the synagogue (e.g., Acts 15:21; 18:4), but the synagogue was a Jewish institution governed by Jewish leadership that upheld the Torah. In Acts 15, James identifies the synagogue as the place where the Torah is read every Sabbath:

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

The fact that James's epistle was addressed to believers who met in the synagogue—a place he associates with the Torah being read every Sabbath—strongly suggests that when James says *nomos*, or law, in his letter, he means the entire Torah, including commands like the Sabbath and dietary laws. It is

also doubtful that James's readers who were meeting in the synagogue would have imagined anything other than the entire Torah when they read James's instruction to be doers of the law.

Third, James directly affirms the validity of the entire law in chapter 2:

James 2:10

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Here, James implies that the "whole law" is valid and authoritative. You can't be held "guilty" of violating something that doesn't apply to you! The God who said, "Do not commit adultery," is the same God who also said, "Do not murder." If you have rejected God's authority in one law, then no matter how many other laws you keep, you have still rejected God's authority. James says that we can't just pick and choose which commandments we are going to keep. We have no authority to declare some commandments valid and others invalid.

Ancient Judaism also taught this concept, that rejecting one law from the Torah was tantamount to rejecting the entire Torah. For instance, in 4 Maccabees, written in the first century AD, we read:

So don't think it's a minor sin for us to eat forbidden foods. Whether we disobey the Law in a small matter or a big one, it is equally important, because we are showing equal contempt for the Law itself.

—4 Maccabees 5:19-21 (CEB)

Similarly, in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of rabbinic writings on theology and law, Rabbi Meir says:

One who is suspect with regard to one matter is suspect with regard to the entire Torah.

—*b.bekhorot* 30a

Most significantly, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he was called in the first century—taught this same principle. Yeshua said that nothing from the Torah—not an iota or dot—would pass away until heaven and earth pass away and until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:18). That is to say, not a single law from the Torah will pass away until the end of the age and the arrival of the new heavens and new earth, when the present created universe passes away (2 Peter 3:7, 13; Revelation 21:1). Moreover, Yeshua admonished his followers to do and teach *even the least* of the Torah's commandments:

Matthew 5:19

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

We can see some similarities between this verse and James 2:10. One who "relaxes one of the least commandments" (Matthew 5:19) is like one who "fails in one point" of the Law (James 2:10). James's point is that if one breaks even one commandment, they are not obedient but rather a "transgressor" who

has essentially broken the entire Torah. Why? Because in the minds of first-century Jewish teachers, the Torah is a unified whole. You are either obedient or a transgressor.

Now, to be clear, James does not expect perfection. In chapter 3, he admits that “[we all stumble in many ways](#)” (James 3:2). Praise God that when we do sin, Yeshua advocates for us (1 John 2:1). When we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Nevertheless, the Bible does admonish us as believers to strive to be obedient to God’s Torah. If we claim to be faithful Christians who keep God’s commandments out of love for him, but then we say that some of God’s commandments don’t matter, then how can we really say that we keep God’s commandments?

Fourth, the language used to describe the law in James 1:25 is similar to the language used to describe the Torah in the Old Testament. For instance, James calls the law a perfect law:

James 1:25

[But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.](#)

Compare this to Psalm 19:

Psalm 19:7

[The law of the LORD \[YHWH\] is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD \[YHWH\] is sure, making wise the simple.](#)

Additionally, the Psalms praise the Torah as a gift that brings blessing and liberty to those who observe it (Psalm 1:2; 19:7-11; 119). When the authors of these psalms wrote these things about the Torah, they didn’t have in mind just the “moral” parts of the Torah. They were speaking of *all* the commandments given through Moses.

Given the strikingly similar language and concepts used to describe the Torah in other Scriptures, it seems unlikely that James’s concept of “law” would be anything other than the entire Torah. These other biblical writers did not imagine that the Torah they described in such a similar way was some reinterpreted “moral law.” Why would we assume that James did?

Fifth, James’s allusion to Jeremiah’s New Covenant prophecy indicates that James has in mind the entire Torah when he speaks of “law.”

As we’ve mentioned earlier, and as many scholars have recognized (e.g., Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 45), Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant seems to be in the back of James’s mind when he speaks of the “implanted word” in this passage. In Jeremiah 31:33, when God promises to write the “law” on the hearts of his people, the word “law” in Hebrew is Torah, and in Greek it is *nomos*. Again, *nomos* is the word James uses in James 1:25 when he speaks of the law.

Given this background, if it is absurd to think that James is referring to the entire Torah in this passage, then it is just as absurd to think that Jeremiah was referring to the entire Torah in his prophecy of the New Covenant. But we have no reason to believe that when Jeremiah spoke of the law written on the heart that he meant only the so-called “moral law.” Jeremiah 9:13, 26:4, and 44:10 each define the law

as one “that I [= YHWH] have set before you,” a clear allusion to what Moses writes in Deuteronomy 4:8.

Deuteronomy 4:8

And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

It seems evident that the term “law” (Torah/*nomos*) in Jeremiah refers to the entire law given through Moses. Additionally, in Jeremiah 17:19-27, Jeremiah admonishes Israel concerning proper Sabbath observance. Thus, Jeremiah’s concept of “law” clearly includes the command to keep the Sabbath, which some would call a “ceremonial law.”

Suppose Jeremiah’s use of the term “law” informs how we should understand the term “law” in James 1:25. In that case, it seems likely that James’s instruction to “do” the law is not restricted to what some call the moral law but would include even commandments like the Sabbath and dietary laws.

In conclusion, James instructs believers to be “doers of the word.” Since James equates the “word” with the “law,” we can see this as a direct instruction to Christians to obey the Torah, the law of Moses. That James has in mind the entire Torah, including commands like the Sabbath, is evidenced by the following facts:

- 1) The book of Acts portrays James as someone who affirms the validity of the entire Torah.
- 2) James’s readers met in the synagogue, which implies a congregational context centered around the entire Torah.
- 3) James 2:10 implies that James considered the “whole law” valid and authoritative.
- 4) The language used to describe the law in James 1:25 is similar to the language used to describe the Torah in the Old Testament.
- 5) James’s allusion to Jeremiah’s New Covenant prophecy indicates that James has in mind the entire Torah when he speaks of “law.”

We hope this short teaching has opened your mind to seeing how the book of James affirms the Torah’s validity. May we take his instruction seriously. May we look into the perfect law of liberty and be doers of that word.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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