

PARASHAH: Vayelekh (He went)
ADDRESS: D'varim (Deuteronomy) 31:1-30
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

The portion known as **Vayelekh** gets its name from the opening pasuk (verse),

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל

“Vayelekh Moshe vayedaber et-hadevarim ha'eleh el-kol-Yisra'el”

(Moshe went and spoke the following words to all Isra'el).

The story picks up as a continuation of the previous portion. To be sure, in regular years, **Vayelekh** is read with the previous parashah called **Nitzavim**. Moshe, the designated leader of 'Am Yisra'el (the people of Isra'el), is nearing his final days on this earth. At 120 years old, he is ready to pass the responsibility on to Y'hoshua (Joshua), his faithful servant. He reminds the people that because of HaShem's punishment, he himself will not accompany them, but that Y'hoshua will lead them into the land promised to them. His encouragement to be strong and reliant on the protection of the Almighty, despite the seeming opposition ahead, is typical of this most famous leader of Isra'el.

From Moshe to Y'hoshua

Of the 120 years that Moshe lived, a better part of his last third was spent in encouraging this young nation to press on to the greatness that HaShem had called them into. I personally think that at this point in his life, and in the lives of the people, this compassionate servant of the LORD knew that they **needed** to

hear this type of message, and that the only one suitable for delivering it to them was he himself. The fact that in verses 7 and 8 he publicly admonishes Y'hoshua to leadership was also a very wise administrative action, not to mention, necessary. When the people witnessed this passing of the "mantle of responsibility" between these two great leaders (one already proven in faithful service, while the other possessing great potential), it only reaffirmed to Isra'el, the confidence that Moshe had in Y'hoshua. It served as a visible statement to let the people know that "Since you trusted me, and I can trust Y'hoshua, then you can trust him also."

HaShem himself then summons the two men into the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting) for the official transfer of leadership. Being in the military, I have had the opportunity to witness first-hand, the type of change of command procedure that I believe is taking place here. The outgoing commander gives the "troops" his final challenge. He encourages them to show his successor, the incoming commander, the same loyalty and trust that they have shown him. In a way, HaShem picks up on this theme of challenge and runs with it. In fact, as we read further into the passage, we see that he runs quite far with it.

**"...this song can be a witness for me against the people of Isra'el."
(31:19b)**

Having warned the people about their coming days of lawlessness (verses 16-18), HaShem then commands Moshe to teach them a song of remembrance (verse 19-22), which will serve as a witness for their God, against the people of Isra'el. The actual song itself is recorded for us in Chapter 32, but we shall have to wait until next week's parashah to examine it. But why does HaShem keep reminding them of their upcoming failure to obey him? From a cursory glance, it appears rather pessimistic and disheartening. In fact, it may strike the average reader as being too harsh and challenging. But we need to understand the heart of the Father here. His (loving) chastening does appear, at first, to be too much for us to bear, but as we begin to see the "big picture" we will understand it more.

In order to understand why HaShem uses Moshe to point out the downfalls of the people, we must read what it says in verses 24-29 again carefully. I won't quote it all here; I want you to read it for yourself. Allow me to use material from a previous commentary that I've written to explain it to you: Prior to coming to faith, the Torah served as a reminder of sin (Romans 7:7-12). This is not the **only** function of Torah, but it is a primary one. After coming into a relationship with HaShem, through His Son Yeshua (Jesus), the [person] underwent a change in relationship to the Torah. The **Avrahamic (Abrahamic) Covenant** became for him or her, a "promise of inheritance." An "inheritance" of what? Of "eternal life," through trusting faithfulness. It became their "**proof of ownership**" so-to-say. It still reminded him or her of their sin. However, because we now constitute the Righteousness of HaShem (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Ephesians 2:1-10), we are now free to pursue following HaShem without the threat of death for

disobedience! To be sure, the Torah spelled certain death for some disobedient acts committed by the supposed covenant follower (see: Exodus 31:12-18 “Sabbath violation”). Even the New Covenant Scriptures teach “the wages (payment) of sin is death.” But now Yeshua’s atoning death has “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13, **KJV**). “Death” and “condemnation” are no longer our wages (Romans 6:23; 8:1).

Conclusions

Do you understand how this all applies? The Torah is HaShem’s measuring rod for disobedience. To be sure, this is what he said in verse 26 of our present parashah. Even the New Covenant Scriptures echo this same teaching consistently throughout the above-mentioned book of Romans. This happens, the Torah teaches us in both the *TaNakh* and the *B’rit Chadashah*, “in order that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world be shown to deserve God’s adverse judgment. **For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous...** (Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:19).” Now this specifically applied to those within the framework of the Torah, of which the Jewish Nation surely was! The budding young nation that we read about in our current parashah had already begun to live within that framework, which was initiated at the “Mount Sinai experience.” HaShem was training them to become dependent upon his grace **alone** to get them out of “hot water.” This is why he established the elaborate system of sacrifice; they must be taught to operate according to trust. Things were to be done according to the plan of the Holy One of Yisra’el! It would take his loving provision to restore the fellowship that was lost as a result of sin. A Jewish person living in the time period of the *TaNakh* could only approach the Holy God according to the instructions of the Torah! For only God could repair the breach!

In HaShem’s economy there are only two kinds of people: dead men and living men. Which kind you are depends on whether or not you have personally accepted Yeshua as your LORD and Savior. How does a dead man enter into the land of the living? Rav Sha’ul (Apostle Paul) alluded to this change for us in his letter to the Galatians when he stated:

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.”

What does he mean that he “died to the Law?” Is he dead to any responsibility to uphold and follow the injunctions of the Torah? Is he free to chart his own course apart from God’s objective instructions as outlined in the pages of the Five Books of Moshe? Allow me to pull a few comments from my Exegeting Galatians commentary:

Comments: At first blush this verse seems to spell the end of any Torah relevance for the apostle. But a careful reading will reveal its true meaning. The verse starts out with the word “for” (Greek=γάρο, gar) a

conjunction indicating that it is linked to a previous argument. In this case, Paul's "for" represents an answer to the "if" clause introduced in [Galatians 2] verse 17 (*"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners..."*). The key to understanding verse 19 is in answering exactly how we as individuals in verse 17 come to be made aware that *"we ourselves are sinners"*). Prior to his salvation experience Sha'ul was blinded to his true condition: dead in trespasses and sin. However, now that the Spirit has taken up residence within him, via the sacrificial death of Yeshua, he can look back to how the Torah played a part in bringing him to this newfound revelation about himself. The Torah, working in concert with the Spirit of God, revealed sin for what it was: violation of God's righteous standard. Thus, through the Torah—that is, through its proper function of revealing and condemning sin, the individual is brought to the goal of the Torah, namely the revelation of the Messiah himself. Once faced with the choice to remain in sin or be set free by the power of the Blood, Paul confesses that he "died" to his old self and was consequently made alive in the newness that is accredited to those who choose life!

But Paul says that he died to Torah. What does he mean by such a statement? Are we to assume that in Yeshua Paul is now somehow dead to obedience to the Torah? May it never be! Simply put, he now realizes that his new life in the Spirit is a life to be lived without the fear of being condemned as a sinner by the very Torah he previously thought he was upholding! The Torah has a properly installed built-in function of sentencing sinners to become the object of HaShem's punishment and ultimate rejection, a rejection that will result in death if the person never choose the Messiah of life. Paul is teaching the Galatians that his choice of Yeshua is to be understood as a death of self and the former life that Torah condemned in favor of a new life of serving God through the Spirit, a choice brought on by the revelation of Messiah found within the very pages of the Torah itself! Such freedom in Messiah does not liberate one from Torah, rather, such freedom liberates one to be able to walk into Torah as properly assisted and seen from God's perspective!

Verse 21 - I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Comments: Bringing his arguments of the previous verses, and indeed the chapter as we have it, to a close, Paul again reinforces the truth that the "righteousness of God" is attained for an individual at Christ's expense and not through the rubrics of a man-made conversion ceremony (read here as *"through the law"*). The "law" in question is the Oral Tradition that only Isra'el can inherit blessings in the World to Come, a belief formerly held to by the apostle himself. To be sure, if being declared righteous (understood to be primarily forensic, but including behavioral as well)

could be achieved via the flesh (that is, being born Jewish or converting to Judaism) then truly what need would there be for a Messiah to come and provide it later for anyone? Paul would have the reader to understand that such righteousness is altogether outside of human achievement and therefore must be procured by surrendering to the power of the Anointed One of God.¹

What is more, the Torah will always have a conscious “sin-raising” role as long as we walk in imperfection. Again I quote from my Galatians commentary:

Galatians 3:19

Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. (King James Version, KJV)

What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made; and it was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator. (Authorized Standard Version, ASV)

Why, then, the law? on account of the transgressions it was added, till the seed might come to which the promise hath been made, having been set in order through messengers in the hand of a mediator. (Young’s Literal Translation, YLT)

Why then was the Law given? It was imposed later on for the sake of defining sin, until the seed should come to whom God had made the promise; and its details were laid down by a mediator with the help of angels. (Weymouth New Testament, WEY)

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. (English Standard Version, ESV)

So then, why the legal part of the Torah? It was added in order to create transgressions, until the coming of the seed about whom the promise had been made. Moreover, it was handed down through angels and a mediator. (Complete Jewish Bible, CJB)

Prevailing Christian and Messianic Jewish Perspective

¹ Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, *Exegeting Galatians* (HaNaviy Internet Ministries [HIM], 2006), p. 24, 25.

1. According to Paul, the law has a negative purpose: It was added because of transgressions (v. 19). Paul has already demonstrated what the law does not do: it does not make anyone righteous before God (v. 11); it is not based on faith (v. 12); it is not the basis of inheritance (v. 18). So if the law is divorced from righteousness, faith and inheritance of the blessing, to what is law related? Paul says that the law is related to transgressions. A transgression is the violation of a standard. The law provides the objective standard by which the violations are measured. In order for sinners to know how sinful they really are, how far they deviate from God's standards, God gave the law. Before the law was given, there was sin (see Rom 5:13). But after the law was given, sin could be clearly specified and measured (see Rom 3:20; 4:15; 7:7). Each act or attitude could then be labeled as a transgression of this or that commandment of the law.

Imagine a state in which there are many traffic accidents but no traffic laws. Although people are driving in dangerous, harmful ways, it is difficult to designate which acts are harmful until the legislature issues a book of traffic laws. Then it is possible for the police to cite drivers for transgressions of the traffic laws. The laws define harmful ways of driving as violations of standards set by the legislature. The function of traffic laws is to allow bad drivers to be identified and prosecuted.

2. The temporal framework for the law is clearly established by the words added . . . until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (v. 19). Paul has already emphasized that the Mosaic law was given 430 years after the Abrahamic promise (v. 17). The word added implies that the law was not a central theme in God's redemptive plan; it was supplementary and secondary to the enduring covenant made with Abraham. As the word added marks the beginning point for the Mosaic law, the word until marks its end point. The Mosaic law came into effect at a certain point in history and was in effect only until the promised Seed, Christ, appeared. There is a contrast here between the permanent validity of the promise and the temporary nature of the law. On the one hand, the promise was made long before the law and will be in effect long after the period of the law; on the other hand, the law was in effect for a relatively short period of time limited in both directions by the words added and until.

As we shall see in our study of the next few sections of the letter (see 3:23-25; 4:1-4), Paul's presentation of the temporal framework for the law is a major theme of his argument for the superiority of the promise fulfilled in Christ over the law. This theme differs radically from the common Jewish perspective of his day, which emphasized the eternal, immutable

nature of the law. But Paul's Christocentric perspective led him to see that Christ (the promised Seed), not the law, was the eternal one.²

Concerning this verse (3:19) Stern seems, in some ways, to take the popular Christian view as noted above just a step further. While not casting the Torah in a negative light, he nonetheless seems to not fully capture the intended meaning of Paul's point there in verse 19. Because of his widespread acceptance among many messianic believers, his view is worth critiquing. Moreover, his popularity in the Messianic Community has far-reaching influence in the way the Movement forms their view of the Torah. Writing in his Jewish New Testament Commentary we read (all emphasis, his):

So then, why the legal part of the Torah (see v. 17N)? Why was it needed at all, if the promise (v. 18) is independent of it? **It was added** to the promise—and to the environment of Jewish history in particularly and human history in general—in **order to create transgressions**, literally, “because of transgressions.” The latter could mean, “in order to contain and limit transgressions,” in order to keep the Jewish people from becoming so intolerably sinful that they would become irredeemable. But instead of this, I think it means, as Sha'ul explains in Romans 7, that a key purpose of the commandments was to make Jewish people ever aware of their sin—not that Jews were more sinful than Gentiles, but that, like Gentiles, Jews too “fall short of earning God's praise” (Ro 3:23). The *Torah* “creates” transgressions by containing commandments which people break, indeed, which rebellious human nature perversely wants to break (Ro 7:7-12&NN). But at least in some cases the guilt they feel causes them to despair of ever earning God's praise by their own works, so that they come to God in all humility to repent, seek his forgiveness, and trust in him (see Ro 3:19-20&NN, 4:13-15&NN, 5:12-21&N, 7:5-25&NN).

Until the coming of the “seed,” Yeshua (verse 16), **about whom the promise had been made.** From the time of Moshe until the coming of Yeshua, the Torah had a “conscious-raising” role towards sin. The Torah still exists, is still in this force (see Gal. 6:2), and for those who have not yet come to trust in Yeshua it still has this function. But for those who do trust in Yeshua and are faithful to him, the Torah need no longer serve in this capacity. Sha'ul explains why in verses 21-25.

It, the Torah, was handed down to Moshe on Mount Sinai **through angels**, a point made three times in the New Testament (see Acts 7:53) **and through a human mediator**, Moshe. An often-heard Jewish objection to the New Testament's teaching is that Jews don't need Yeshua because they don't need a mediator between themselves and God. This verse refutes the claim with its reminder that Moshe himself

²<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/index.php?action=getCommentaryText&cid=7&source=1&seq=i.55.3.6>

served as such a mediator—as, for that matter, did the cohanim and the prophets. See Hebrews 8:6, 10:19-21; 1 Tim. 2:5; Exodus 20:19; Deut. 5:2, 5; and this citation form a Pseudepigraphic work dating from the first or second century B.C.E:

“Draw near to God and to the angel that intercedes for you, for he is a mediator between God and man...” (Testament of Dan 6:2)³

I believe that as important a contribution as Stern has made to the Messianic Movement (I currently endorse his Bible translation), with regards to his commentary on this particular verse, this “neutral” view—as opposed to the blatant “negative” one that Christianity holds—that the Torah was given to Isra'el to make her ever aware of her transgressions misses the point of Paul’s argument at this point in his letter.

In a sort of combination of both BibleGateway and Stern, David Guzik, Christian commentator, adds his contribution to the Galatian dilemma:

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions: Part of the reason the law was given was to restrain the transgression of men through clearly revealing God’s holy standard. God had to give us His standard so we would not destroy ourselves before the Messiah came. But the law is also added because of transgressions in another way; the law also excites man’s innate rebellion through revealing a standard, showing us more clearly our need for salvation in Jesus (Romans 7:5-8).⁴

True, the Torah does possess a sort of “conscious-raising” role with regard to sin, as correctly stated by Guzik and as correctly noted by Stern in Romans chapter 7, but, given the immediate context of the following complimentary verses⁵, it seems more likely that this is not the Apostle’s intended meaning here. Instead, Tim Hegg seems to uncover Sha’ul’s true, “positive” intentions with his well-written comment to his Galatians study, quoted at length here:

The language of our present verse would indicate that we should read it positively, not negatively. “Why the Torah? It was given (added to

³ David H. Stern, *The Jewish New Testament Commentary-Galatians* (Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), p. 550.

⁴ David Guzik, *Galatians 3-The Christian, Law, and Living by Faith* (David Guzik, 2001) <http://enduringword.com/commentaries/4803.htm>

⁵ The presence of angels and a mediator are not pejorative marks against the Torah, as many Christian teachers presume. Rather, in the 1st century Jewish worldview, these elements are signs that God regarded his Torah as high and lofty enough to warrant accompaniment by angels, and to be safeguarded by the great Moshe, the one who delivered our people from Egypt.

the revelation already given in the Abrahamic covenant) to reveal the divine method of dealing with transgressions,” i.e., “for the sake of transgressions.” Already prejudiced against the Torah, the typical Christian exegesis misses the fact that a great deal of the Torah centers upon the Tabernacle/Temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. How were the covenant members to deal with the inevitable presence of sin in their personal and corporate lives? The Torah gives the answer: by repentance and acceptance of God’s gracious gift of forgiveness through the payment of a just penalty exemplified in the sacrifice. It was the Torah that revealed in clear detail the method which God had provided for transgression, and it was this method—the sacrificial system and priesthood that pointed to Messiah, the ultimate sacrifice and means of eternal forgiveness.

Thus Paul adds: "until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made." In the Greek, this clause follows second, immediately after "it was added because of transgressions." The ESV has the order correct: "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary." The Torah was given in order to reveal God’s gracious manner of dealing with transgressions, i.e., through the death of an innocent substitute. Paul therefore immediately makes this point by adding, "until the seed would come..." Here, as often, the word “until” (ἄχρι, *achri*; Hebrew אֲדָ, *’ad*) has the primary meaning of "marker of continuous extent of time up to a point, until."⁶ The point is that the revelation of the Torah regarding how God provides redemption in the face of transgressions has its focal point in Yeshua. Once Yeshua had come and offered Himself as God's eternal sacrifice, the ultimate revelation to which the sacrifices pointed had been given. This is Paul's consistent perspective: the Torah leads to Yeshua (cf. Ro 10:4 and the continuing context of Gal 3).⁷

The Torah will always serve to remind us that we all fall short of the goal when we try to accomplish things our own way. By reminding us of our shortcomings, the purpose of HaShem is accomplished—we fall desperately into his means of provision for our sin! When we **then** accept HaShem on his terms and his terms **only**, we have no choice but to accept his Messiah! This is not legalism, too harsh thinking, or even “narrow-mindedness.” This is pure LOVE! Had it not been for Yeshua providing the only way back to the Father, we would all be without hope! Think about it: a man only accepts the hand of his rescuer, once he realizes he is drowning, and cannot save himself! **Yeshua is the one who is reaching out his hand to rescue the drowning man!** Unless the man realizes he is in need of Yeshua, he won’t reach out to accept him. The Torah helps man to see his need for a Savior!

⁶ Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB), ἄχρι.

⁷ Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (torahresource.com, 2002), p. 121.

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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