

## Lexical Observations Regarding Paul's use of νόμος

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Thesis: That the most prominent semantic domain influencing Paul's use of νόμος is "the Sinai covenant." The term ordinarily is employed to refer to the distinctive attributes of that covenantal administration, and from this general usage, the term is also employed to describe the inscripturated document of that covenantal administration, or the members (when employed as part of a substantive prepositional phrase such as οἱ ἐκ νόμου) of that covenantal administration. Technically, νόμος is a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant; that is, since that covenant is so characterized by Torah-giving at Sinai, the term "law" can be used to denominate that covenant characterized essentially by law-giving. Analogously, Paul sometimes employs "promise" as a synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant, since that covenant is so characterized by promise-giving. In one single passage, he employs both synecdoches: "This is what I mean: the law (νόμος), which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise (ἐπαγγελίαν) void." (Gal. 3:17). A subsidiary concern, then, is to avoid those un-pauline usages that are more influenced by the semantic domain of the English "law" (or the German *das Gesetz*) or the Protestant term, "legalism."

My three-part form of proving the thesis is: First, to demonstrate that there are many passages where νόμος (with or without articles or prepositions) cannot mean either "God's moral will" or "legalism;" Second, to demonstrate that there are many texts where it surely *is* a reference to the covenant made at Sinai (or some aspect thereof); Third, to demonstrate that this second usage makes best sense of those passages that cannot be understood by the other definitions.

The challenges this makes to exegesis and theology are several:

1) Since the term νόμος in many contexts is evidently a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant, this definition is an indisputably pauline *option* for any text. Since νόμος rather evidently does not and cannot mean "will of God" or "legalism" in some passages, it cannot even be *considered* as

an option until such passages are found. If such passages are found, then and only then can this option be considered for other passages. Further, if a particular text is found that could make plausible sense if νόμος were rendered by “will of God” or “legalism,” such a text should not be so interpreted if it is also plausibly interpreted by the already-established meaning of “Sinai covenant.”

That is, sound lexicography requires not only that a term be contextually plausible, since often several options are contextually plausible. Sound lexicography would require that the interpreter choose that plausible option that is also established elsewhere, unless there is substantially greater plausibility to another option. That is, no lexical option (or any other exegetical option) can be responsibly *preferred* to alternatives simply because it is plausible. Some additional reason must demonstrate that the option is *more* plausible than the alternatives. If the alternatives are established by other usage, then they are *prima facie* more plausible, and the burden of proof is rightly on the individual who argues to the contrary of that which is *both* plausible *and* elsewhere established.

The burden of proof does not rest upon the one whose view is new; it rests upon the one whose view is less plausible. If an unwarranted, implausible, or unattested option is asserted without justification once; and if that unwarranted assertion is repeated a thousand times; it does not become less unwarranted for its repetition. We concede that many have intruded the semantic domain of the English “law” (or German “das Gesetz”) upon Paul’s νόμος for many generations; what we dispute is whether a cogent lexical argument has ever been introduced as justification for this intrusion. Further, what we dispute is whether we, who can produce incontestably pauline usages of νόμος meaning “Sinai covenant” and passages where νόμος could not possibly mean “God’s will” or “legalism,” must assume any further burden of proof.

On the basis of what we have demonstrated, we believe that the first definition of νόμος to be considered in any pauline text is “Sinai covenant.” We believe that the burden of proof lies with others to demonstrate that other renderings are *more* plausible than this in any given text. We believe that, contextual considerations being equal, “Sinai covenant” is the most responsible choice.

What has happened in the history of Pauline interpretation is that the English/German semantic intrusion into Paul's vocabulary has been so oft-repeated that it has now assumed intellectual "squatter's rights." Had anyone ever introduced sound evidence for this option (other than the plausible rendering of a passage thereby), then this option would have as much validity, *prima facie*, as other options. Until such evidence is produced, it remains an option only for readers of the English or German texts; not for readers of the Greek text.

2) Passages where the death of Christ is described as having reference to the law are to be interpreted as Paul's understanding of the redemptive benefits of Christ for those who were *under* the law; such passages are not to be universalized.

I. Passages where it is not possible that νόμος means "legalism":

Rom. 7:14 οἶδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι ὁ νόμος πνευματικός ἐστίν, ἐγὼ δὲ σάρκινός εἰμι πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν.

"Legalism" is *not* spiritual, in any sense of the word. It is at least plausible to render this: "We know that Sinai covenant is spiritual, but I am fleshly, sold under sin."

Rom. 8:4 ἵνα τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου πληρωθῇ ἐν ἡμῖν τοῖς μὴ κατὰ σάρκα περιπατοῦσιν ἀλλὰ κατὰ πνεῦμα.

The just requirement of legalism is certainly not fulfilled among those who walk according to the Spirit; indeed there is no just requirement of legalism. It is at least plausible to render this: "in order that the just requirements of the Sinai covenant might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

1Cor. 9:20 καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὢν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω·

Paul did not become legalistic to win legalistic people; he did not rely on his own efforts for salvation in order to win those who relied on theirs. It is at least plausible to render this: "and I became as a Jew to the Jews in order that I might win Jews; I became as under the Sinai covenant

to those under the Sinai covenant, although myself not under the Sinai covenant, in order that I might win those under the Sinai covenant.”

Gal. 3:24 ὥστε ὁ νόμος παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν εἰς Χριστόν, ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν·

Legalism did not guard or instruct us until (or “unto”) Christ; rather, wherever it exists, it drives people *away* from Christ and his gracious justification. It is at least plausible to render this: “Therefore the Sinai covenant was our guardian until Christ; in order that we might be justified by faith.”

Gal. 4:4 ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον,

Christ was not legalistic. It is at least plausible to render this: “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the Sinai covenant...”

Gal. 5:14 ὁ γὰρ πᾶς νόμος ἐν ἐνὶ λόγῳ πεπλήρωται, ἐν τῷ Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν.

Legalism is neither summarized nor fulfilled by loving the neighbor. It is at least plausible to render this: “For the entire Sinai covenant is fulfilled in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Gal. 6:13 οὐδὲ γὰρ οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι αὐτοὶ νόμον φυλάσσουσιν ἀλλὰ θέλουσιν ὑμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι, ἵνα ἐν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ σαρκὶ καυχῶνται

If νόμος means “legalism” here, then Paul argues that those who desire to circumcise the Galatians do *not* observe legalism. It is at least plausible to render this: “For those who are circumcised do not even themselves keep the Sinai covenant, but they require you to be circumcised, in order that they may boast in your flesh.”

II. Passages where it is not possible that νόμος means “God’s moral will”:

Rom. 6:14 ἁμαρτία γὰρ ὑμῶν οὐ κυριεύσει· οὐ γὰρ ἐστε ὑπὸ νόμον ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ χάριν.

Paul could hardly say that the redeemed community is not under God’s moral will. It is at least plausible to render this: “For sin will not have dominion over you, since you are not under the Sinai covenant but under grace.”

Rom. 6:15 Τί οὖν; ἀμαρτήσωμεν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐσμὲν ὑπὸ νόμον ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ χάριν; μὴ γένοιτο.

Same as above; it may be true that new covenant believers are not under the Sinai covenant, but it is not possible that they are not under God's moral will.

Rom. 7:4 ὥστε, ἀδελφοί μου, καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐθανατώθητε τῷ νόμῳ διὰ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, εἰς τὸ γενέσθαι ὑμᾶς ἐτέρῳ, τῷ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθέντι, ἵνα καρποφορήσωμεν τῷ θεῷ.

As with the texts in the chapter six, Paul could hardly say here that believers have died to the moral will of God in order that they may bear fruit to God. It is at least plausible to render this: "Therefore my brothers, you also died to the Sinai covenant through the body of Christ, in order that you might belong to Another, to Him Who was raised from the dead, in order that you might bear fruit to God."

Rom. 7:6 νυνὶ δὲ κατηργήθημεν ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἀποθανόντες ἐν ᾧ κατειχόμεθα, ὥστε δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος καὶ οὐ παλαιότητι γράμματος.

Same as at 7:4.

1Cor. 9:20 καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὢν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω·

If to be "under the law" means to be under God's moral will, then why do such people need redemption? Further, is the moral will of God something that Paul only observes when it is expedient to do so for evangelistic purposes? It is at least plausible to render this: "and I became as a Jew to the Jews in order that I might win Jews; I became as under the Sinai covenant to those under the Sinai covenant, although myself not under the Sinai covenant, in order that I might win those under the Sinai covenant."

Gal. 3:10 ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσὶν, ὑπὸ κατάραν εἰσὶν· γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι Ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὃς οὐκ ἐμμένει πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά.

Those who are within the moral will of God are hardly under a curse; rather, such individuals would be enjoying fellowship with God. It is at least plausible to render this: "For as many as are characterized by observance of the Sinai covenant are under a curse..."

Gal. 3:12 ὁ δὲ νόμος οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ πίστεως, ἀλλ' ὁ ποιήσας αὐτὰ ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς.

The moral will of God is indeed characterized by faith; those who submit to God's will are characterized by "the obedience of faith." It is at least plausible to render this: "The Sinai covenant is not characterized by faith, but: "The one who does them shall live by them."

Gal. 3:13 Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασεν ἐκ τῆς κατάρας τοῦ νόμου γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα, ὅτι γέγραπται, Ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὁ κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου, Christ has surely not redeemed us from the "curse" of God's moral will. It is at least plausible to render this: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Sinai covenant by becoming a curse for us..."

Gal. 5:18 εἰ δὲ πνεύματι ἄγεσθε, οὐκ ἐστὲ ὑπὸ νόμον.

Same as at Ro. 6 and Ro. 7.

Eph. 2:14 Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἔστιν ἡ εἰρήνη ἡμῶν, ὁ ποιήσας τὰ ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἐν καὶ τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ λύσας, τὴν ἐχθρὰν ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ, 2:15 τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας, ἵνα τοὺς δύο κτίσῃ ἐν αὐτῷ εἰς ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον ποιῶν εἰρήνην

Christ has not united Jew and Gentile by destroying the moral will of God. It is at least plausible to render this: "For he is our peace, who has made them both one, and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility by his flesh, having abolished the Sinai covenant with its commandments and ordinances..."

III. Passages where it is evident that νόμος means "the covenant made at Sinai":

Gal. 3:17 τοῦτο δὲ λέγω· διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ μετὰ τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτη γεγονώς νόμος οὐκ ἀκυροῖ εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν.

The only significant event in the history of redemption that took place 430 years after the Abrahamic promise was the giving of the law at Sinai. It is at least plausible to render this: "The Sinai covenant, that came 430 years after the promise previously ratified by God, does not annul the covenant so as to abolish the promise."

Gal. 3:19 Τί οὖν ὁ νόμος; τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν προσετέθη, ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπήγγελλται, διαταγεῖς δι' ἀγγέλων ἐν χειρὶ μεσίτου.

The moral will of God is not added “until” Christ comes; it continues afterward. It is at least plausible to render this: “Why then the Sinai covenant? It was added because of transgressions...”

[n.b., this usage is consistent with the usage of the Old Testament also, where the “law” or “ten words” were virtually a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant. E.g.: 1Kings 8:20 Now the LORD has fulfilled his promise which he made; for I have risen in the place of David my father, and sit on the throne of Israel, as the LORD promised, and I have built the house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. 21 And there I have provided a place for the ark, *in which is the covenant of the LORD* which he made with our fathers, when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.” Of course, what was “in the ark” was not the “covenant of the Lord,” but the ten words.

IV. Passages where it is evident that νόμος (at least in the substantive form in which it here appears) means “those who belong to the covenant made at Sinai”:

Rom. 2:9 θλιψις καὶ στενοχωρία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν, Ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνος· 10 δόξα δὲ καὶ τιμὴ καὶ εἰρήνη παντὶ τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι· 11 οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. 12 ὅσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως ἤμαρτον, ἀνόμως καὶ ἀπολοῦνται, καὶ ὅσοι ἐν νόμῳ ἤμαρτον, διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται·

Paul twice (in 9 and 10) describes the equal standing before God of the Jew and the Greek, then (with a connecting γὰρ) grounds this in the general principle of their being no favoritism in God’s justice, then (with another connecting γὰρ) puts the same truth differently: that those who sin, whether Jews under the law or Gentiles without the law, will perish before God’s judicial presence. If all humans are “in the law,” then who are these who sin “without the law”? Paul establishes two categories here; those whose sin takes place within the Sinai covenant, and those whose sin takes place outside of it; and these categories are the same as the “Jew or Greek” mentioned before. Plainly, Gentiles here are not under the law.

Rom. 2:17 Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ καὶ ἐπαναπαύῃ νόμῳ καὶ καυχᾶσαι ἐν θεῷ 18 καὶ γινώσκεις τὸ θέλημα καὶ δοκιμάζεις τὰ διαφέροντα κατηγούμενος ἐκ τοῦ νόμου,

As with the earlier part of the chapter, the Jew is distinguished from the Gentile because of his boasting in the law and because of his being instructed in the law. The Gentiles are not so instructed.

Rom. 2:23 ὃς ἐν νόμῳ καυχᾶσαι, διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζεις·

Same as above.

Rom. 3:19 Οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι ὅσα ὁ νόμος λέγει τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ λαλεῖ, ἵνα πᾶν στόμα φραγῆ καὶ ὑπόδικος γένηται πᾶς ὁ κόσμος τῷ θεῷ·

Interestingly, Paul refers to those “who are in the law.” If everyone is “in the law,” what would the point be of saying this?

1Cor. 9:20 καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὦν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω·

Note that Paul can refer to the Jews in two different ways, by calling them τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις or by calling them τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον.

V. Passages admittedly difficult by any reading of νόμος·

Rom. 7:23 βλέπω δὲ ἕτερον νόμον ἐν τοῖς μέλεσίν μου ἀντιστρατευόμενον τῷ νόμῳ τοῦ νοῦ μου καὶ αἰχμαλωτίζοντά με ἐν τῷ νόμῳ τῆς ἁμαρτίας τῷ ὄντι ἐν τοῖς μέλεσίν μου.

Rom. 8:2 ὁ γὰρ νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἠλευθέρωσέν σε ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου τῆς ἁμαρτίας καὶ τοῦ θανάτου.

VI. Passages where νόμος evidently means “God’s Sinai revelation in the holy scriptures”:

Rom. 3:21 Nunὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν, (the first use here may very well be a reference to the Sinai covenant, but the second use, coupled with “prophets,” refers to the revelation in the Torah)



1Cor. 9:9 ἐν γὰρ τῷ Μωϋσέως νόμῳ γέγραπται, Οὐ κημώσεις βοῦν ἀλοῶντα. μὴ τῶν βοῶν μέλει τῷ θεῷ

1Cor. 14:21 ἐν τῷ νόμῳ γέγραπται ὅτι Ἐν ἑτερογλώσσοις καὶ ἐν χείλεσιν ἑτέρων λαλήσω τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ καὶ οὐδ' οὕτως εἰσακούσονται μου, λέγει κύριος.

1Cor. 14:34 αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν, ἀλλὰ ὑποτασέσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει.