

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is easily the most difficult to understand text for people within today's broad Messianic movement. Galatians has been historically interpreted by Christianity as delivering Believers a stark choice between God's Law and God's grace. Those who choose any obedience to the Law, according to this view of Paul, are unfaithful to the Messiah and the saving power of the gospel. Supposedly, Paul was desperately concerned for anyone who was trying to keep the Torah of Moses. Consequently, Galatians is a frequently-quoted text to today's Messianic Believers, many of whom are simply trying to live a life of holiness by obeying God's commandments in accordance with the example of obedience modeled by Yeshua (Jesus).

Understanding Galatians in its original context, for its original audience, and for the original issues that it addressed, can be a severe challenge. Was the issue that the Galatians faced forced circumcision, followed by salvation—or was the issue ritual proselyte conversion for inclusion among God's people? Likewise, who were the people errantly influencing the Galatians? Were they authorized members of the assembly, or misguided outsiders with a definitive agenda?

In the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee takes a direct look at the issues of Paul's letter as he rebukes the Galatians for errors that have crept into their midst. Engaging with contemporary Christian scholarship on Galatians, critical questions regarding common conclusions of Paul's words are asked. Are Paul and Yeshua truly at odds when it comes to the Torah? Were the Jerusalem leaders and Paul at constant odds with one another? How do Paul's Pharisaical background and views affect the composition of this letter? What were the spiritual dynamics present in Galatia? What does the term "works of law" really mean? These are only a few of the questions that are considered. Likewise, some of the proposals from the New Perspective of Paul in theological studies are also analyzed.

The Epistle to the Galatians gives us a small peek into the world of the First Century Body of Messiah, and the social dynamics and divisions between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers that had to be resolved. Many of the issues that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 would address had yet to be discussed. Many did not understand the Abrahamic blessing of his seed being a blessing to the whole world. Many thought that inclusion among God's people came via ethnicity, rather than faith. Many did not know the proper place of obedience to the Torah in the post-resurrection era. Paul's letter set in motion the need for these issues to be addressed by the First Century faith community.

This commentary will aid many Messianic Believers who have difficulty with Paul's letter to the Galatians. It also provides solid, exegetical answers to those who are skeptical, if not critical, of today's Messianic movement.

Also included in this commentary is an exposition on Acts 13:13-14:28: Paul's visit to Southern Galatia.



# GALATIANS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC



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J.K. MCKEE

**MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS**  
[messianicapologetics.net](http://messianicapologetics.net)

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# ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	Ger: German
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	GNT: Greek New Testament
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	Grk: Greek
Ara: Aramaic	<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community
ASV: American Standard Version	HALOT: <i>Hebrew &amp; Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
b. Babylonian Talmud ( <i>Talmud Bavli</i> )	Heb: Hebrew
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old &amp; New Testament)</i>
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	KJV: King James Version
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	LXX: Septuagint
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	m. Mishnah
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	MT: Masoretic Text
exegetis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)

NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*  
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)  
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*  
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)  
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*  
NIGTC: *New International Greek Testament Commentary*  
NICNT: *New International Commentary on the New Testament*  
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)  
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)  
NJPS: *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1999)  
NKJV: *New King James Version* (1982)  
NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)  
NLT: *New Living Translation* (1996)  
NT: *New Testament*  
orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world  
OT: *Old Testament*

PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*  
REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)  
RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)  
t. Tosefta  
Tanach (Tanakh): *the Old Testament*  
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*  
TEV: *Today's English Version* (1976)  
TLV: *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (2011)  
TNIV: *Today's New International Version* (2005)  
TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*  
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
UBSHNT: *United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition*  
v(s). verse(s)  
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
Vul: *Latin Vulgate*  
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*  
Yid: *Yiddish*  
YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)

# PROLOGUE

Among all the books of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), Paul's letter to the Galatians often presents the most challenges to Messianic Believers. After a surface reading of the text, most readers of Galatians consider its six short chapters to be the "final word" on Christians' relationship to the Law of Moses. Paul apparently sees the Law as being outdated and unnecessary for faith. Paul condemns anyone who claims that the Law of Moses has any place in the life of a born again Believer, and was seriously afraid for anyone giving it any kind of merit, perhaps even suggesting that such a person was on the verge of apostasy.

While some of these conclusions are a bit overstated, even among Christians who do not believe that Torah observance is expected of God's people today, they do summarize a fair amount of the rhetoric that we often encounter. Messianic Believers today advocate that the Lord is restoring a Torah foundation to His people. They practice this by studying the Torah portions every week, and by doing things like keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, appointed times of Leviticus 23, and kosher dietary laws. It should be our hope that in most cases the desire to do such things is because a person is trying to grow in his or her faith and live a life like Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). The motives of a Spirit-led Messianic Believer should not be to try to rely on human actions to gain favor with God, but rather let those actions come as a result of a vibrant relationship with Him. As this relationship grows, not only will our heart be transformed—but we will have a mind that is focused on God and is able to reason with complicated issues as they arise. In spite of their natural differences as people, Jewish and non-Jewish Believers should be one in the Messiah Yeshua (3:28), serving one another in their obedience (6:2).

Galatians is one of those texts of Scripture where a mind able to compute and fathom difficult concepts is needed. More commentaries and Bible studies have probably been conducted on Galatians and its emphasis on "freedom" than any other text. Much of the Protestant Reformation was spearheaded by Galatians, as Martin Luther appropriated its words on justification to refute Catholicism's practice of selling indulgences. But, Galatians is sometimes used when "legalists" enter the community of faith and insist that a person live up to a standard of righteous living. Some pastors and Bible teachers use Galatians to refute those who would believe that a disciplined life of faith is necessary—often taking Galatians out of its original First Century Mediterranean, mixed Jewish and Greco-Roman, context. Messianic Believers who place a high emphasis on the Torah are easy targets for being "legalists," especially when Paul has so much to say about the misuse of the Law of Moses in his writing to the Galatians.

A coherent Messianic view of Galatians is needed in this hour when our emerging Messianic theology is in a state of flux. This commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians has strived to offer careful attention to the text of the letter, and to consider the opinions of Bible commentators, ancient history, and various Greek and Hebrew grammatical issues.

The biggest issue by far which needs to be factored into a Messianic Believer's examination of Galatians, is consideration for what has been termed the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) that has been developing in various academic Christian circles since the 1970s. Even though it has existed for over thirty years, Christian pastors and laypersons are just now having to consider some of its propositions—meaning that people within the broad Messianic movement are largely just hearing whispers about it. The NPP began in the post-Holocaust environment of Christian scholars having to take the perspective of First Century Judaism much more seriously on its own terms. Krister Stendahl's work *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* began some of the earliest discussions in the 1960s. More and more New Testament scholars had to be pointed to the important fact that First Century Judaism was not the Medieval Catholicism that Martin Luther used texts such as Galatians (and also Romans) to protest. 1977 saw the release of the highly important book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by E.P. Sanders. Two-thirds of this massive treatise includes a great deal of data from the various writings of Ancient Judaism (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrashim, Dead Sea Scrolls) and specifically examines its position on works and righteousness. This has widely culminated in the work and perspectives offered by the two major scholars who tend to be associated with the NPP, and have undoubtedly written the most on the issues of the Apostle Paul, First Century Judaism, and the Torah or Law, James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright.

The primary thrust, presented by the NPP, is that readers have to consider Paul's writings in the context of First Century Judaism. Modern readers cannot *first* subject their Twentieth or Twenty-First Century worldview onto those ancient times. Things such as "circumcision," "works of the law," and "righteousness" need to be considered, as best as readers can contemplate, from the perspective of the wider First Century Jewish world. While the conclusions of the NPP have shaken up a few evangelicals—and even a few Messianics for that matter—what it brings to the table cannot be easily discarded. We have to include the NPP in our conversation on texts such as Galatians, as it might help us realize things that have been so easily glossed over—possibly because they have been examined through too much of a "Lutheran" perspective. Undeniable in Paul's argument to the Galatians is how Believers from the nations were to be included in the covenant people of God with the Jewish people.

This commentary of the Epistle to the Galatians will be taking into account some of the proposals and suggestions of the NPP. Generally, the NPP has received its most opposition from Reformed (or Calvinist) theologians, and its most acceptance from Arminians and Wesleyans. I cannot call myself a complete advocate of the NPP, but you will find that I am informed from its proposals and want to include some of its ideas on righteousness being corporate covenant inclusion, along with the more traditional view of righteousness being a

personal, just standing before God. I do not believe the NPP can be ignored if we are to have an accurate First Century understanding of Galatians, which balances personal redemption with membership in God's corporate community. Many of the proposals of the NPP can definitely aid the credibility of the Messianic movement in the future—and most especially help our interpretation of some difficult words in Galatians.

Looking back on the decade of Messianic theological development (2002-2012), it is clear to me that a more thorough and mature approach to Biblical Studies—particularly regarding Galatians—is required. Too many Messianic Believers when testifying of their Torah related convictions to Christian family and friends, have Galatians quoted to them haphazardly. At the very least, this causes them to become discouraged and confused. The worst case scenario is that some Messianics perceive that Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul contradict themselves on the matter of the Law of Moses, and thus one must be discarded in favor of the other. I have heard liberal Messianics who counter claims from Galatians by saying that they only follow the Torah to evangelize their Jewish brethren, but they do not consider it important to follow beyond that. Likewise, I have heard unstable Messianics declare that Paul's letter to the Galatians must be a forgery and that Paul's other works should also be considered suspicious. Somewhere in the middle are those who try to examine Galatians with integrity, but who hold to a high view of the Torah and its continued relevance for Believers today.

A responsible interpreter has much to weigh when considering a text like Galatians. I do not believe that it is difficult to reconcile the seeming differences between Yeshua's and Paul's words on the Torah—but in order to do this we must gain the proper perspective. What are the circumstances surrounding Paul's composition of Galatians? What issues were the Galatians suffering from? What were the spiritual dynamics at work? These are all important questions that we should consider when examining any Biblical text—but *they are imperative to consider when interpreting Galatians*. We cannot simply interject what we think the text might mean, nor can we just throw our hands up into the air and ignore it, either. We have to do the difficult work of exegesis, being guided by a sound ideology rooted in the Torah and embodied in the worldview of Paul.

As you prepare to read this commentary on Galatians, what issues might we be facing today as the emerging Messianic movement that are paralleled in this letter? What is our position on circumcision? (Have we even defined its Galatian meaning properly?) How does one become an accepted member of God's people? What is righteousness and how do we receive a proper standing before God? Perhaps most important, how do we avoid being placed in the position of the Galatians?

You will discover that Galatians' message and what it really communicates is as relevant for our times now as Messianic Believers as much as it was in the First Century. The challenge is whether or not we will actually heed its message. The obstacle to overcome is having the spiritual and reasoning capacities to compute what the ancient challenge actually was—and whether we are indeed facing it in our midst again today. How can we be

people who embody the essence of Paul's declaration, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14, NIV), while responding to some of the criticisms against that Law, commonly derived from passages in Galatians? How can we be men and women who strive to obey God as a *natural outworking* of our faith, rather than something that is required to precede faith?

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*Galatians for the Practical Messianic* has been updated and fine tuned in some areas, for this 2012 paperback printing and release for Amazon Kindle eBook. On the whole, readers will not notice any significant differences between the previous edition and this version. There has been some more information transplanted into this commentary from various articles and FAQ entries from the Messianic Apologetics website, and the 430-page paperback edition of *The New Testament Validates Torah*, in order to shore up the different passages and arguments considered. There have also been updates here and there to reflect some notable developments in the realm of Messianic theology, which have occurred since 2007. Also notable is the addition of "The Message of Galatians" summary article and the Author's Rendering of the Epistle to the Galatians, adapted from the 1901 American Standard Version. And of course, where necessary, some more engagement has been conducted with the Greek source text and other important issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since the initial release of this commentary in 2007, I have added a number of Galatians resources to my library, including: John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986); G. Walter Hansen, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); Scot McKnight, *NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al. *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), pp 183-348; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

While I have employed these publications in other articles and books (as is seen in Appendix B), I did not think them to be significant enough to warrant including them in a verse-by-verse retread of Galatians, as no vastly new propositions were made, which were not already present in the resources consulted for the 2007 release.

# INTRODUCTION

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians<sup>1</sup> (Grk. *Pros Galatas*) is a very difficult text for most of today's Messianic Believers to understand. This is due to any number of factors, the foremost being that Galatians is often examined and interpreted from a perspective that is largely distanced from the First Century situation which it was originally composed to address. Rather than considering the specific spiritual and social dynamics of a group of newly maturing Believers in Yeshua (Jesus), who were challenged that their ethnic condition was not enough for true faith, redemption, and inclusion among God's people—many interpreters and lay readers consider Galatians to be Paul's *magnum opus* on Christians' divorce from the Torah of Moses. These Christian examiners of Galatians are often ill-informed of the *actual situation* of the Galatians, and too many Messianics—who have pro-Torah convictions—are ill-equipped to be able to respond to the claims made against them from this letter.

An engagement with the text of Galatians alone is not sufficient for a pro-Torah understanding of Galatians that will support Messianic convictions and lifestyle practice. (And neither is it sufficient for understanding *any* Biblical text). Most of the examination of Galatians that occurs today among your average Christians *and* Messianic Believers is often removed from its ancient context. Too much of it takes place on the basis of “this verse says this” and “but this verse says that” without consideration for the broader issues and discussions going on both in history and current academic study of Galatians. Furthermore, one must also keep in mind that Galatians is one of the earliest texts ever produced by the emerging Messianic movement of the First Century (save some of the creedal formulas used in some of Paul's letters).<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, we have to temper our examination of Galatians with the understanding that further clarification of various subjects may be given in some of Paul's additional letters and other Apostolic documents.

The message of Galatians, the exact audience of the Galatians, and some of the historical background surrounding Galatians, have all been debated by examiners in the

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in spite of the common reference to Galatians as “the Book of Galatians,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Galatians or Paul's letter to the Galatians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

<sup>2</sup> Including, but not limited to: Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20.

Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), xlii.