

## **“Luke, Jesus, and the Law”**

### **Exegetical Symposium 2001**

#### **Introduction**

The third evangelist can hardly be accused of encouraging moral laxity. With the coming of Christ, new and greater demands are put upon God's people. His followers are called to bear crosses (Lk 9:23; 14:27). Disciples are urged to sell their possessions and leave everything for the sake of the Kingdom (5:11, 28; 18:22, 28). The rich are summoned to invite the blind, the lame, and the poor to their dinner parties and to lend money to those unable to pay them back (6:34-35; 14:12-14), thereby mounting a frontal assault on the Greco-Roman social order.<sup>1</sup> Divorce is strictly forbidden (16:18). At the same time, one must be willing to put aside family obligations (18:29; 9:59-62), even to the point of hating one's own family members (14:26-27). Such radical dominical demands make the burden of the Mosaic Law appear light by comparison.<sup>2</sup> No wonder Luke thought that Christianity would turn the world upside-down. Yet, in his presentation of the Mosaic Law, Luke appears remarkably traditional. Unlike Paul, Luke launches no direct critique of the OT Law (see Romans 5:20). Unlike Matthew, he does not portray Jesus as a new Moses standing high on the Mount, offering a better and higher Law (Matt 5-7). Nor does he directly challenge the Jewish Law, at least in his gospel, in the manner of Mark (see Mark 7:15). From the beginning of his gospel to the end of Acts, Luke depicts God's people as pious and Law-observant. Luke's consistent praise for a distinctly Jewish piety has led Jacob Jervell to the conclusion that, in reference to the Law, “Luke has the most

conservative outlook within the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup>

However, I will argue that Luke's position vis a vis the Law is not as conservative as it first appears. He narrates a change which is both theologically adept and strategically diplomatic. Within Luke-Acts the Law begins to lose its binding force. More specifically, the nature of Torah observance changes from divine mandate to pious custom. With the advent of Christ, the Law retains a place of honor, but becomes merely one vehicle by which God's people can demonstrate their allegiance to the one true God. To borrow a phrase from Eric Franklin, the Law, for Luke “is not belittled, but it is downgraded.”<sup>4</sup> The Mosaic Law has become part of the past, happily observed by some, but not entirely necessary for the future.

Perhaps we should begin with a little bookkeeping. The term νόμος appears nine times in the third gospel, and seventeen times in Acts. Luke can speak of “the Law of the Lord” (Lk 2:23), “the Law of Moses” (Lk 2:22), “the customs of the Law,” (Lk 2:27), “the Law of the fathers” (Acts 22:3) or, simply “the Law,” (i.e., Lk 16:17).<sup>5</sup> Frequently the name “Moses” is used as its synonym (Luke 5:14, 16:29, 31; 24:27). In many of these cases the Law is prescriptive, informing and mandating certain actions (see 1:6, 28, 64; 2:4, 25, 36, 41).<sup>6</sup> Since the Law involves performing certain customary duties, it also serves also as identity marker by which God's people are set-apart and known. As such, the Law does not simply govern, but it defines a distinct people with a distinct way of life. Sacrifices, rituals, and feasts shape the very culture of God's people. Significantly, the Law can also have a predictive, Christological sense, especially when the term is coupled with “the prophets.” We think of the watershed moment on the road to Emmaus when Jesus reveals himself to the two disciples, and explains to them that everything in the Law and the Prophets in fact pointed toward him

(Luke 24:27, 44). Likewise St. Paul draws upon the Mosaic Law and the Prophets to preach Christ crucified and risen to those in Rome (Acts 28:23). In this sense, the Law of Moses is, for Luke, pure gospel.

### **Mosaic Law and the Infancy Narrative**

Yet, we are still left to ask how the Jewish ceremonial laws functioned in the life of Jesus and that of his followers. In what sense was the Law normative for Jesus, and in what sense did it remain so for the early church?

It is noteworthy I think that within Luke's gospel the term νόμος occurs most frequently in the infancy narrative (Lk 1-2). As William Loader observes, "The Lukan infancy narratives of John and Jesus are strong in Jewish coloring."<sup>7</sup> The word "coloring" is well chosen, for it captures the artistic essence of the infancy narrative. Luke paints for us a picture of Jewish piety at its best. All of the main characters within the first two chapters appear as righteous and Torah observant. Concerning Jesus' immediate family, Luke informs us, for instance, that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple "according to the Law of Moses" (2:22), where they presented Jesus "as it is written in the Law of the Lord" (2:23). Again, Mary and Joseph sacrificed "in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord" (2:24). Yet again, Luke informs us that they "brought the child Jesus to perform the custom of the Law" (2:27). Finally we are told that the holy family left Jerusalem, only after they had "fulfilled all things according to the Law of the Lord" (2:39).

Now, we may interpret these passages as Christ's active obedience, whereby, even as a child, he fulfills all the duties of the Law.<sup>8</sup> Or, we might see in his circumcision Jesus' first shedding of blood for the sin of the world. Surely, we are meant to marvel as the infant Lord enters his Father's house

(see Malachi 3:1). However, I would contend, Luke's repeated mention of the Law tells us even more about the essential goodness and honor of Christ's Jewish heritage. Borrowing from the OT palette of colors, Luke paints an idyllic picture of Jesus' earthly family.

However, *the* Holy Family is not the only holy family in the infancy narratives. John's parents, for instance, are portrayed as "righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly" (1:6). We meet Zechariah as he performs his priestly duties in the temple (1:5-23). Though he initially doubts Gabriel's message, he soon becomes an OT prophet (1:67-79). Elizabeth, introduced as a member of the priestly family of Aaron, likewise appears as the consummate OT mother, a Sarah who gives birth in old age (1:25). Simeon, as he waits for "the consolation of Israel," is portrayed as "righteous and devout" (2:25). Anna, an 84-year old widow likewise is pictured as a temple-dwelling prophetess, who worships night and day, fasting and praying (2:36-38). Each of these characters represents a recognizable OT type, whose piety is formed and informed by the Mosaic Law.

It should also be noted that the language of the infancy narrative, littered with Semitisms, is decidedly Septuagintal.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Luke writes a type of King-James Greek, by which he hopes to capture the texture and feel of Old Testament life.<sup>10</sup> After opening his gospel with an elegant literary preface (1:1-4), Luke shifts into a stylized, archaic writing style meant to jar the reader. Through a type of literary time machine, Luke transports his reader from the modern-day Greco-Roman world back into the world of OT Jerusalem. "Once upon a time" might serve as a dynamic equivalent of "And it came to pass in those days." Luke's literary style leads us to conclude that Jesus' family tree is Jewish down to its very roots. Yet, the archaicizing style may also lead us to wonder whether Jesus

was born into an older world which no longer exists, a world which he himself had transformed and turned upside-down.

Indeed, by filling the infancy narrative with winsome, pious characters painted in OT colors, Luke creates an impressionist portrait of OT life, a picture which is, ironically, rarely to be found within the OT itself. Contrast Luke with Matthew, whose genealogy exposes the sins of the past, and highlights the Jewish heroes' inability to keep the Law.<sup>11</sup> Again, imagine that St. Paul had written the third gospel. Simeon, Mary, and Anna would surely have declared themselves to be wretched sinners, unable to fulfill the Law's demands. By contrast, the subjects in Luke's painting are happy to serve the Lord, and they do it blamelessly (Lk 1:6). Luke describes Jewish piety as a way of life which is both beautiful, and yet has become part of the past. What is happening, I propose, is that Luke has come to see the Law less as a universally binding force, than as a series of customs; noble and ancient customs, but customs nevertheless.

### **Ethos, Ethnos and the Law**

In a number of places Luke actually uses the terms "nomos"/Law and "ethos"/custom interchangeably.<sup>12</sup> In this Luke is unique among NT writers. For instance, within the infancy narrative itself we are told that Zechariah was chosen to serve in the temple "according to the custom of the priesthood" (Lk 1:9). Again, when Jesus was 12, we are told that he and his parents went to Jerusalem "according to the custom" (2:42). The term comes to be associated with Moses, especially in Luke's second volume. Frequently Luke refers to the "the customs which Moses delivered to us," (Acts 6:14; 15:1; 21:21; 28:17). The term "ethos" is, for all intents and purposes, a term of the ethnographer, the type of word one might use in describing the particular religious customs of an ethnic group. As such,

Luke would have written good copy for National Geographic, for instance. Josephus and Philo, Luke's near contemporaries in the Hellenistic-Jewish world, both speak of the Law in this same way. Philo, for example makes it clear that every nation has its own customs, and that these customs are at times noble, and at other times superstitious (*Somn.* 2.56; *Spec. Leg.* 3.13).<sup>13</sup> The Jews, Philo contends have their own customs such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, which compare favorably to those of other nations (see, i.e., *Spec. Leg.* 1.3; *Spec. Leg.* 2.148). By labeling the Sabbath and circumcision as "customs," Philo does not deny that they have the force of Law for the Jews. However, the term does describes the way people live. Religious custom equals Law minus divine mandate. Likewise, Josephus can speak of the attendance at annual festivals, Sabbath observance, circumcisions, and the like as Jewish "customs" (*War* 1.26; *Ant.* 12.324; *Ant.* 1.214). As did Philo, Josephus uses the term "custom" especially when comparing Jewish Law with the practices of other religions. As such, the term is used apologetically. S.G. Wilson writes, "He uses it to locate the religious observances of Judaism within the broader context of national customs and at the same to time appeal for tolerance."<sup>14</sup>

How is it that Luke has come to label the Law of Moses as a type of custom? Perhaps, it has to do with Luke's own apologetic interest. He was keen to paint a favorable portrait of Christianity. To God-fearers, Luke was intent on demonstrating that Christianity, via Judaism, had a long and revered tradition; that it had, in essence roots and antiquity. That Christianity should be seen as having continuity with Judaism, and that the customs of the Jews should be respected. At the same time, Luke would have his gentile readers know that the observance of the Law, at least in its ceremonial aspects, was not necessary. Thus within the infancy narrative Luke is less concerned to further the reader's

understanding concerning the place of Law in the Christian life than he is in portraying the Jewish faith as a pious and honorable way of life. As such the Jewish people and their customs provide noble stock from which the Savior would arise.

### **Jesus and the Law/The Second Period of Salvation History**

Luke, we should note, was not just an artist, but also a theologian. His understanding of the Law is intertwined with his vision of salvation history. Hans Conzelman famously proposed that Lukan salvation history can be divided into three periods: 1) the Period of Israel, 2) the Period of Jesus, 3) the Period of Church.<sup>15</sup> Such a labeling of history is problematic for those of us who see every age as the age of Christ. Yet, the division has merit. Jesus himself asserts that he is ushering in a new age, in which people drink new wine (5:39) under a new covenant (22:20). This new age is consummated at Pentecost, where the apostles' Spirit-filled prophecy makes some think that have had too much wine (Acts 2:13).

In the first age, the age of Israel, the Law was binding and normative. Rather than being assessed critically, the Law is taken for granted, a theological "given." Rituals involving purification, circumcision and the like constituted the God-given way of life. Law served as both custom and divine mandate. This is the age which Luke depicts within the infancy narrative. In Christ's Ministry, a transition begins to take place, and the Law finds its fulfillment in his very person. Throughout his Ministry Jesus plays the part of a Law-observant Jew. Jesus challenges the Law, even appears to bend the Law, but he never breaks it. At the same time he prepares the Church for a time when the Mosaic Law, at least in its ceremonial sense, will no longer hold sway. Through his teaching, Jesus begins to offer theological reasons for the Law's end, all the while recognizing that he must first fulfill the

Law perfectly before he sets it aside.

### **Law in the Period of Jesus**

Consider the question of the Sabbath. Luke would have us know that Jesus was, in fact, a Law-observant Jew. Thus we are told that when he went to Nazareth, he went to the synagogue, “as was his custom” (Lk 4:16; also 4:31, 13:10). Yet, the Sabbath issue is also one in which Jesus is challenged, and in which he issues his own challenge (Lk 6:1-5; 13:10-17; 14:1-6). In Lk 6:1-5 some of the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples of breaking the Sabbath command by picking grain. Did Jesus’ disciples, and by association, Jesus break the Law? According to Deuteronomy 23:25, plucking grain from a neighbor’s field is, in fact, permitted.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while ploughing was prohibited, plucking was not (Exodus 34:21). Technically, Jesus’ disciples are innocent, and so is he. Yet Jesus does not argue on technical grounds.

To the Pharisees’ challenge Jesus offers a three-fold riposte. First, he appeals to precedence. Had not the great King David eaten priestly bread (6:3)? Perhaps there is here a claim to Messiahship.

Second, he appeals to the notion that mercy must take precedence over rules and regulations. David took the priestly bread in order to feed hungry companions. In this the Law is made for man, not man for the Law. Thirdly, and most importantly, he claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath, and therefore not subject to it (6:5). As such the Law becomes somehow less relevant, subservient to the one who first gave it. Thus Jesus wins the argument and theologically paves the way for the abrogation of the Sabbath Law by means of teaching. As times goes on, Jesus takes the offensive, tweaking his opponents, healing on the Sabbath not only for the sake of the one who is ill, but also as a teaching device (see 14:1-6 and the Healing of the Man with Dropsy). However, before putting the Law to the

side, he must first fulfill it. His final fulfillment of the Sabbath-day Law comes by his own Sabbath-day rest in the tomb.<sup>17</sup> With the death and resurrection of Jesus everything is in place for the age of the Church, during which the Sabbath changes from Law to Custom. Yet, until all is fulfilled, Jesus remains Law-observant.

Consider also Jesus' approach to the OT Law in regards to purity. As we have seen in the infancy narrative Jesus was born into a family in which the purity laws were piously observed (Lk 2:22).

Throughout his Ministry, Jesus remains Kosher and urges others to do the same. Consider the man with leprosy in Luke 5:12-16. The leper cries out to Jesus, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (Lk 5:12). Having expressed his willingness, Jesus declares, "Be clean" (Lk 5:13). Yet, that is not the end of the story. After cleansing the leper, Jesus commands him to show himself to the priests according to the Levitical mandate, adding, "Offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them" (Lev 13:2-3; 14:2-32). Once again Jesus remains Law-observant and encourages others to do likewise. However, he paves the way for a new age, one in which Levitical purity will be superseded. By sending the lepers to the temple, Jesus sends a message: he is the one who makes men clean. By cleansing the lepers, by healing those with hemorrhages, and by his practice of inclusion, Jesus lays the theological foundation for setting aside the Levitical Laws for Purity.

Finally by his death as the spotless lamb, Jesus tears open the temple's veil thereby purifying all peoples, places, and things. God is impartial (Acts 15:9) - - all people are called to be holy. Christ's presence, not geography makes space sacred. All has been redeemed and sanctified.

Consider briefly the Passover. Jesus celebrated the Passover regularly according to the custom

of the Law (Lk 2:41-42; 22:8). Yet, through his New Covenant he assumes the place of the Passover Lamb (22:7), thus fulfilling and completing the Law within himself. Soon, the Passover is replaced with a new and better meal. As Art Just puts it, Jesus “followed the OT Law and often commanded others to do the same (e.g., 5:14; 17:14). However, Jesus also began to lay aside the OT Law after completing it (e.g. 6:1-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6).”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Topic of the Law Directly Addressed**

Perhaps Luke addresses the topic of the place of the Law most directly, if not clearly, in chapter 16. Here Luke offers us a picture of salvation history: “The Law and the Prophets [were] until John. From that time the kingdom of God is being preached and every person is forcing his way in. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (16:16-18). Fitzmyer and others have interpreted this to mean that with the coming of the kingdom, “the Law remains valid.”<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, the passage is enigmatic. Luke appears to relegate the Law to the past: “The Law and the Prophets were until John” (16:16). Yet, he seemingly reasserts its permanence: “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (16:17). By comparing the end of the Law to the passing away of heaven and earth does Jesus claim that the Law will remain in effect forever? Perhaps we find a parallel in Luke’s statement concerning the possibility of a rich man entering heaven. Surely, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (18:25). Yet, rich men do enter heaven, because with God all things are possible (18:27).

Likewise, the Law is not easily fulfilled. Yet, through the Cross, Jesus accomplishes what had appeared impossible. And with the life and death of Jesus, the Law is fulfilled.

Does such a reading make Jesus an antinomian? By no means. Having said that a new age has come, Jesus reasserts the Law against divorce. Only this time, there are no Mosaic exceptions (16:18). As such the Mosaic Law, even in its moral application, gives way to the moral law upon which the Mosaic Law is based. The Decalogue may thus be seen as a summary of the moral law, perhaps the best summary, and yet it is not the final word. Since indeed Christ inaugurates a time of salvation it is incumbent upon Christians to act accordingly. Luke encourages a type of situational ethics: the kingdom has come. Family obligations are clearly understood in the commandment to honor one's parents. However, when a would-be follower expresses his wish to bury his father before joining the Lord, he is admonished to "let the dead bury the dead." The Lord tells others that discipleship involved the hating of one's own family, that is to count in nothing in comparison with him. Again, the Torah informs us that we should not steal. Jesus, the radical kingdom preacher, encourages would-be disciples to give up everything they own for the sake of the kingdom. Yet again, Moses makes exceptions in his divorce law, but Jesus closes the loopholes. As the kingdom of God arrives, the moral law remains in tact, however it is not completely contiguous with the Mosaic Law; the ceremonial concerns are laid aside, and often the moral bar is raised.

### **The Law and the Book of Acts**

Given Jesus' teaching and his fulfillment of the Law, we might have expected that the early Christians would quickly put aside the Mosaic Law, especially in its ceremonial aspects. No less a

leader than Peter calls the Law “a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear” (Acts 15:9). Yet the early Christians remain largely Torah observant. Christ’s disciples continue to make the Temple central to their piety (e.g., Acts 3:1), and to observe the Jewish hours of prayer (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:42). Again they continue to practice circumcision (16:3), and regularly attend synagogue on the Sabbath (e.g., Acts 17:2, etc.). Jewish converts in Jerusalem are explicitly praised by James as being “zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20). Even the Gentiles are called upon to keep parts of the Law, abstaining from “the meat of strangled animals and from blood (Acts 15:20; Lev 17:10-12). The “Torah-Faithfulness” of Jewish Christians in the Book of Acts has led William Loader to assert that even in the early church, “the Law remains in force.”<sup>20</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer concurs, “As for the Period of the Church the normative character of the law of Moses is further recognized.”<sup>21</sup>

I would agree that the Law does continue to play a significant role in the Book of Acts. However, it begins to take on another character; namely, that of pious religious custom. Circumcision, Sabbath observance, attendance at the Temple, the keeping of purity laws, and the like remain viable means to express Christian piety. However, they are no longer the only means, nor are they necessary means. Decisions on keeping the Law begin to have more to do with tradition, diplomacy, and strategy.

### **Things Change Slowly**

Early Christian beliefs and observance of the Law change slowly, if at all. Why? I think there are a few reasons. First, the Law served as an identity marker. Think, for instance, of Peter’s vision, in which he is commanded to eat unkosher food. Peter replies, “Surely not Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (10:14). Peter’s response is that of one who has been startled. Surely, he

had sinned. In fact, he had denied his Lord three times. Never, though, had he eaten anything unclean.

To do so would amount to a radical change in life, or at least lifestyle. It would shake the foundations of who he was, or thought himself to be. Peter's experience may be analogous, on a smaller scale, to the Philippine missionary who, for the first time, is served dog for dinner. It may not be forbidden, but it is simply not done. Such social taboos govern our self-identity and have a stronger hold on us than even the moral Law. Not surprisingly, at the Council of Jerusalem, food laws remained in place for the Jews. Further, Gentiles were called upon to abstain from blood and the meat of strangled animals.<sup>22</sup>

The second reason for the Law's persistence was this: while it was no longer considered necessary for salvation, it remained a strong and often beneficial *ẽ̀eò*. Custom may not carry the weight of divine mandate, but it is important. Through custom Christians learn to worship in specific ways which link them to the past and unite them as a people. Through various customs Jewish Christians expressed themselves in praise to God. Consider the practice of keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath day may no longer have the force of Law, but who would deny that practiced as a custom, it provides certain benefits? The Sabbath allows time for prayer, worship, and rest. Thus, we should not be surprised that when the Jews of Jerusalem came to believe in Christ, they honored God in the way they knew: they became "zealous for the Law" (Acts 21:20). Yet, given Jesus' own claim to be Lord of the Sabbath and the import of the resurrection, neither should we be surprised that Sunday, the day of the Lord would eventually trump the Sabbath tradition. It fit the theology of the age of the church, in which Christ had completed his creation on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and it also served as a new identity marker, by which Christians would define themselves. Thus the day of the Lord gradually replaced the

Sabbath, without duplicating it. But this would take time.

Things change slowly for a third reason: the church has to engage in theological dialogue in which it considers the ramifications of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Theology does not happen overnight. In order for the Council of Jerusalem to issue its decree a number of things had to happen. The missionary activity of Paul turned the question of circumcision into a very practical issue that urgently needed an answer. Peter's own experiences offered a needed apostolic sanction. Thirdly, the presence of James, the Bishop of Jewish Christendom, provided the necessary imprimatur from the Jerusalem church.

There is, surely, a fourth reason why Christians remained Law observant throughout the book of Acts. That is, for the sake of unity. As the Christian message was received by the gentiles, two things happened. First, the Jerusalem Church had to concede that such things as circumcision were no longer necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1), or for citizenship in God's Kingdom. Secondly, a little diplomacy was in order. Those promoting the Gentile mission would have to show a certain sensitivity towards God's Covenant People and their long held, divinely given, customs. Otherwise, the Jerusalem church, offended by Paul's missionary work might have rejected him.<sup>23</sup> Or else, the Gentile church might have gone off on its own, abandoning its Jewish roots and turning into the type of church which would make Marcion proud. And so we turn to Luke's portrayal of Paul.

### **Paul and the Law**

Nowhere is Luke's stance toward the Law more nuanced and interesting than in his presentation of Paul. In fact, the Lukan Paul appears so different from the Paul of the epistles that many scholars

have concluded that Luke either misrepresented or misunderstood Paul, or perhaps that he did not know Paul at all.<sup>24</sup> In his epistle to the Galatians Paul asserts, “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse” (Gal 5:20). To the church at Rome Paul boldly claims that the Law, rather than diminishing sin, actually causes sin to increase (Rom 5:20). Perhaps on account of such teaching, a report went out that Paul was teaching the Jews “to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to their customs” (Acts 21:25). In response to such charges, Luke was keen to demonstrate that Paul was not an antinomian, and that though his teaching appeared radical, it had the sanction of the Jerusalem church.

Consider then how Luke portrays Paul’s attitude towards the Law. Luke would have us know that Paul customarily attends synagogue, where he preaches on the Sabbath (Acts 14:1; 17:2; 17:10; 17:17; 18:4; 18:19). He honors Jerusalem, even as he is received warmly by the leaders in the Jerusalem (21:17). In fact, he still practices circumcision. After the Jerusalem council, at which it was decided that circumcision was not necessary, Paul had Timothy circumcised. He even cuts off his hair as part of a Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18).<sup>25</sup> Further, Paul undergoes purification rites and pays the expenses for four men that they might also be purified (21:23-24). When Paul further claims to be thoroughly trained in the ancestral Law (22:3). Before Governor Felix Paul proclaims to believe “everything that agrees with the Law” (24:14). Paul speaks of purifying himself before entering the temple (24:17). Before Festus, Paul proudly claims, “I have done nothing wrong against the Law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against Caesar” (25:8). In fact, Paul appears the consummate Jew and a faithful adherent of Torah. Thus, in many respects nothing had changed. Even Paul, the great apostle to

the gentiles, remains a pious Jew.

### **What Has Changed**

Yet, things had indeed changed. Paul's Law observance is not like that of Mary and Joseph in the infancy narrative. Paul's adheres to the Law for different reasons: the first apologetic, and the second, diplomatic. Admittedly, these reasons overlap.

Many of Paul's claims to be Torah observant come during trials at which he is accused of being a "ring leader of the Nazarene sect," a "trouble maker," who "stirs up riots among the Jews," and who "tried to desecrate the temple" (24:5-6). Thus before Festus he defends himself by saying that he was "ceremonially clean" when he entered the temple (24:17). And when faced with the same charges before Festus, Paul claims, "I have done nothing wrong against the Law of the Jews or the Temple or against Caesar" (25:18). Was Paul telling the truth, or was he merely saying what needed to be said to in order to secure his release? There are two answers to the question. On one level, Luke would have us know that Paul indeed remained a faithful Jew, and surely followed the customs of purification and the like. His teaching was meant to be provocative, not offensive. As such, much of the book of Acts is an apology for Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Luke was sending a message to the Jerusalem church and also to the God-fearers, that Paul was not as radical as he might appear.

On another level, when Paul claimed allegiance to the Law, he was claiming allegiance to Law properly interpreted: the Law that had been fulfilled in Christ. Thus, before Agrippa, Moses sums it up this way: "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen: that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the

Gentiles” (26:23). As such, Paul demonstrates that he indeed keeps to the letter of the law, or at least he is not guilty of what he has been charged. Moreover, he points to the fulfillment of what the Lawgiver had foretold: the death and resurrection of Christ, which would bring the salvation of all peoples. In this his strategy echoes that of Jesus himself, who when he is accused of breaking the Law, changes the subject in order to demonstrate that he himself is the Law’s fulfillment. Thus, as the book of Acts comes to an end we find Moses preaching from “the Law of Moses and the Prophets” (28:23).

### **Free to Obey the Law/Honoring the Customs of the Jews**

As we have noted, at times in the book of Acts, Paul appears to be the most Law-observant of Jews, performing Nazarite vows and other works of supererogation. However, when he makes a point to conspicuously follow the Jewish Law, it is not a question of divining the letter of the Law, as much as it is acting in a spirit of reconciliation with the church at Jerusalem.

The pattern of Paul’s Torah observance is largely modeled on that of the Council of Jerusalem, which might be seen as a decree of reconciliation. Gentiles were told avoid blood and the meat of strangled animals. Concerning these stipulations, Thomas Schreiner writes, “They [these requirements] were suggested as a means of facilitating fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles did not have to observe the decree to be saved, but their acceptance of the decree would make relationships between Jews and Gentiles smoother.”<sup>26</sup>

As Gentiles were asked to make concessions for the sake of the Jews, so also did Paul act in such a way as to keep peace with the church at Jerusalem. In gospel freedom, Paul submitted himself to the yoke of Jewish Law. For example, when Timothy joined the apostle to the gentiles on his

missionary journey, Paul had him circumcised. Is this the same Paul who claimed that circumcision is a matter of the heart (Rom 2:29). Is this the same Paul who admonished the Galatians, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" ? (Gal 5:20). Considering Paul's teaching in the epistles, many scholars have dismissed the story of Timothy's circumcision as "sheer fantasy." Others think it is misplaced, occurring before the Council at Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> However, such criticism misses the point. Paul circumcises Timothy not because the rule of the Law required it, but "because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (16:3). The Jews have not challenged Timothy's salvation, they are only made uncomfortable by his way of life. So, Paul fulfills the Law not because he is under it, but for the sake of Christian unity. Even as he was known as a "Gentile for the Gentiles," he proves himself a "Jew for Jews." Gospel freedom, as such, involves freely submitting to the customs of others, for the sake of others, even though the custom is not divine command. As Paul says in the fourteenth chapter of Romans: "Therefore let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom 14:19).

What can we say of Acts 18:18, in which Paul at his hair cut off as part of a Nazarite vow? No reason for the vow is given. At best we can conclude that Luke aims to demonstrate that Paul continued to live as a Jew. The underlying message is clear enough: Paul, and his mission to the Gentiles should not be feared, but embraced. Paul is no radical.

A more clear motivation for fulfilling the Jewish Law may be seen in chapter 21, where Paul is accused of turning Jews away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children (21:21). James asks, "What shall we do? They (the Jews of Jerusalem) will certainly hear that you have come, so do

what we tell you: “There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay for their expenses , so that they can have their head shaved” (21:22-24). On the surface, we could see this as yet another example of Paul, the Law-observant Jew. Yet, looked at more closely, Paul’s motivation is two-fold. First, he submits to James, and therefore the church. Second, he wishes to show no offense to the Jerusalem church. Once again, Paul fulfills the Law, not because he is under it, but for the sake of peace and unity.

### **Closing Observations**

Having skipped and hopped our way through Luke and Acts, it would be perhaps too much to say that Luke has an explicitly articulated theology of the Law. However, he shows good instincts for what is taking place. He recognizes that the Law’s significance is fading. The ceremonial Law has only historical interest for Luke, especially as he thinks of the gentile mission. The Law, at least in its moral aspect, remains in tact. However, this moral law is not to be completely equated with the Mosaic Law. Surely, the Mosaic Law is the best summary of the moral Law, but the moral law existed before Moses. The most important truth of Moses, and of the Law, that is the Torah, is that Jesus is its fulfillment.

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1. See Jerome Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) esp. 385-386. See also, David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 95-119.
  2. Interestingly, Luke does not record the words of Jesus found in Matt 11:30: "For my yoke is easy and my burden light."
  3. See Jacob Jervell, "The Law in Luke-Acts" in *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House) 141.
  4. Eric Franklin, *Luke Interpreter of Paul, Critic of Matthew* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 1999.
  5. For a more thorough summary of Luke's use of the term νόμος see S.G. Wilson's *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 1-11.
  6. For a discussion of the normative use of the Law in Luke, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 176-81.
  7. William R.G. Loader, *Jesus' Attitude toward the Law* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 300.
  8. For a helpful description of how the infant Jesus fulfills the OT Law, see Arthur Just, *Luke* (St. Louis: CPH, 1996) 117-119.
  9. For a discussion of the language of Luke 1-2, see Gregory Sterling, *Historiography and Self Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) 352-363.
  10. This was common literary practice. Lucian, for instance, spoke of the need for historians to make the language suitable to their material. See *Quomodo Historia Conscribenda sit*, 45.
  11. See for instance Matt 1:6, where he reminds the reader of David's infidelity.
  12. The best discussion I have found of Luke's use of νόμος is S.G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) esp. 4-11.
  13. See S.G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 5-7.

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14. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 9.
15. Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper, 1960).
16. See Joseph Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 184-185.
17. See Arthur Just, *Luke*, esp. 957-960.
18. Arthur Just, *Luke*, 377.
19. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 180.
20. William Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 378.
21. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, 185. Similarly, Jacob Jervell (*Luke and the People of God*, 145) writes, "For Luke it is impossible that the law should be abrogated, replaced, or conceived as an epoch."
22. Jacob Jervell, William Loader and others take Peter's vision to have a purely symbolic meaning: namely, that the Gentiles are not to be considered unclean. However, such a view does not take into account the totality of Jesus' work of purification: peoples, times, places, and foods have all been sanctified by Christ's work. See Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 149, and Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law*, 370.
23. Here I think that Jacob Jervell is correct when he sees Luke's picture of Paul as a defense for his gentile ministry. See Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 185-207.
24. See P. Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinismus' of Act," in L.E. Keck and J.L. Martyn, eds. *Studies* 33-55.
25. Samson and John the Baptist are the best known of those who have taken such a vow. For them it was a lifelong vow, however, one could take on the vow temporarily, as did Paul. For the duration of the vow one was prohibited from cutting one's hair or from taking strong drink. At the end of the vow, one would make a sacrifice to God. See John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992) 390.
26. Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993) 231.
27. See S.G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 64-65.