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MINISTRIES

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Did Christ Abolish the Law of Moses? (Ephesians 2:15)

Did Christ abolish the Law of Moses? Many say that he did based on Ephesians 2:15. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote that Gentile believers were once excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. However, through Christ, they have now become fellow citizens and members of God’s household (Ephesians 2:11-13, 19). How were these Gentile believers excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and what did Christ do to include them? Well, Paul explains that a “dividing wall of hostility” existed between Jews and Gentiles, which Christ broke down (Ephesians 2:14). According to Paul, Christ tore down this wall “[by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)”:

Ephesians 2:14-16

[For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances**, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.](#)

So, the division between Jews and Gentiles had something to do with this “[law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#).” And Christ brought Jews and Gentiles together as one people of God by “abolishing” it. But this raises the question: what exactly *is* the law of commandments expressed in ordinances?

The antinomian interpretation of Ephesians 2:15 is that the “[law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)” refers to the Law of Moses, the Torah. Antinomianism, which literally means “against law,” is a doctrine that states that Christians are freed from the obligation to obey the Law of Moses (Encyclopedia Britannica, “antinomianism,” britannica.com/topic/antinomianism). Proponents of this idea argue that the Law of Moses was the source of division between Jews and Gentiles, so Christ had to abolish it to bring Jews and Gentiles together. R. L. Solberg’s comments are representative of this interpretation:

The Law of Moses was the source of the “dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14) between Jews and Gentiles...And what do you suppose the phrase “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” would have meant to Paul’s first-century Jewish audience? **It is an unambiguous**

reference to the Mosaic Law, under which the Jewish people had been living for 1,500 years. **And what does the text say Jesus did to that law? He abolished it.**

— R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 86.

Is the law of commandments expressed in ordinances really “an unambiguous reference to the Mosaic Law”? Is the Torah really a source of division that needed to be abolished? Actually, there are several problems with this interpretation. We’ll mention four.

Problems with the Antinomian Interpretation of Ephesians 2:15

The first and most obvious problem with the idea that Christ abolished the Law of Moses is that Christ himself prohibits us from thinking that he came to abolish the Law of Moses:

Matthew 5:17

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Here, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—commanded his listeners *not even to think* that he came to abolish the Law or Prophets. In the next verse, he states that not even the smallest detail of the Torah would pass away until heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished—that is, until the end of the age, when the present created universes will pass away (Matthew 5:18; cf. 2 Peter 3:7, 13; Revelation 21:1). And in the verse after that, he urges his followers to do and teach even the least of the commandments (Matthew 5:19). Why would Paul say that Christ did something that Christ himself said he did not come to do?

Second, if Paul is saying that Christ abolished the Law of Moses, then he contradicts not only Yeshua but also himself. Paul says this in Romans:

Romans 3:31

Do we then **overthrow** [καταργέω] the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Here, Paul states that our faith does not “overthrow” the law. This is the same Greek word translated as “abolish” in Ephesians 2:15. If Paul thought that Christ abolished the law when he died on the cross, why does he say that the law is not abolished in Romans 3:31?

Third, Paul directly affirms the validity of the Law of Moses. Just a few chapters later in Ephesians, Paul instructs children to obey their parents, directly quoting the Fifth Commandment in support of this instruction:

Ephesians 6:1-3

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Beyond Ephesians, Paul makes many other statements that affirm the Torah’s ongoing relevance and authority. In 2 Timothy 3:16, he states that “**all Scripture**” is profitable for training in righteousness. In

context, Paul specifically has in mind the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament” (2 Timothy 3:15). Paul also states that the Torah is “[holy and righteous and good](#),” (Romans 7:12), that he “[delights](#)” in it (Romans 7:22), and that the Holy Spirit empowers believers to fulfill its righteous requirements (Romans 8:4). These statements contradict what we would expect from someone who believed that Christ abolished the Law of Moses.

Fourth, there is nothing inherent in the Law of Moses itself that causes division between Jewish and Gentile followers of the God of Israel. In fact, the Law of Moses repeatedly states that any “stranger”—that is, any non-Israelite, any Gentile—who desires to join the people of God is to be loved and treated as a native Israelite:

Leviticus 19:33-34

[When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD \[YHWH\] your God.](#)

So, the Law of Moses demands that strangers who join the people of Israel be treated as native Israelites. And if that isn’t clear enough, the Torah gives many specific examples. For instance, the Torah explicitly requires that these strangers not be restricted from giving offerings at the tabernacle (Numbers 15:11-16), or from resting on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14), or from celebrating the festivals (Exodus 12:19; Leviticus 16:29; Deuteronomy 16:11). Like native Israelites, strangers are prohibited from eating blood (Leviticus 17:10-12), engaging in sexual immorality (Leviticus 18:26), and committing blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16). The strangers are treated the same as native Israelites concerning the laws of compensation for loss (Leviticus 24:17-22), meaning there is equal justice under the law for native Israelites and strangers. And the Torah explicitly regards the strangers who follow the God of Israel as members of the covenant (Deuteronomy 29:1, 10-15; cf. Joshua 8:30-35). We could go on and on about all of the ways that the Torah includes Gentiles.

For more on this topic, see our teaching, “[Is the Torah for Gentiles, Too?](#)”

So, the “[law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)” in Ephesians 2:15 is something that causes division between Jews and Gentiles. This can’t be referring to the Law of Moses because that’s simply not what the Law of Moses does. The Law of Moses prohibits mistreating and expressing hostility toward Gentile believers, and it also goes to great lengths to express that Gentile believers should be loved and included. If Jewish and Gentile believers obeyed the Law of Moses, they would be *unified*, not divided. So, again, it makes little sense for Paul to refer to the Law of Moses as a source of division and hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

But if Paul is not referring to the Law of Moses in Ephesians 2:15, what does he mean by “[the law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)”?

What is “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances”?

If Paul meant to refer to the Law of Moses in Ephesians 2:15, he could have just said “law.” However, in this verse, he says “law” with several qualifying terms: “of commandments” (τῶν ἐντολῶν) and “expressed in ordinances” (ἐν δόγμασιν). According to New Testament scholar Lionel Windsor, these qualifying terms make a significant impact on how this phrase should be understood:

[T]he qualifications perform more than a descriptive function. Rather, they perform a defining

function: they specify what would otherwise be ambiguous. In other words, the qualifications indicate that what has been abolished is not necessarily the law in every sense, **but rather the law as understood and used in a certain way**: “the law of the commandments in decrees.”

—Lionel J. Windsor, *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission Through Israel to the Nations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 136-137

So, as Windsor notes, these qualifying terms function to define “law” more specifically as a particular understanding and use—or more accurately, *misuse*—of the law. Again, if Paul wanted to reference the Law of Moses itself, he could have just said “law.” There would be no need to add these qualifications.

So, what is this understanding and use of the law that Paul says Christ abolished? Well, according to the previous verse, this “[law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)” is related in some way to “[the dividing wall](#)” that Christ broke down. What is this dividing wall? In Greek, the term refers to an internal wall in a building (μεσότοιχον). Considering the temple imagery that Paul uses a few verses later (Ephesians 2:21-22), many scholars have suggested that Paul is alluding to the barrier in the Jerusalem temple that excluded Gentiles from the more sacred parts of the temple precincts (See sources cited in Lionel J. Windsor, “Israel and the Apostolic Mission: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Ephesians and Colossians,” *Religions* 14, 7).

So, there was a physical “dividing wall” between Jews and Gentiles in the Second Temple. Josephus records that there was an inscription on this wall warning that any foreigner who entered “forbidden” spaces would be put to death (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.417; *Jewish Wars* 5.193-94; 6:124-26). It is true that the Law pronounces a death sentence on anyone who enters the tabernacle improperly (Numbers 1:51), but God never commands that “foreigners” cannot worship at the temple, nor that any kind of wall should be built to separate Jews and Gentiles. On the contrary, the Law of Moses allows any Gentile who desires to draw near to God the same access to his presence that native-born Israelites have (Numbers 15:11-16). This separation between Jew and Gentile, enforced by a literal wall, was a command that was established by the Jewish leaders in the first century, not by Moses.

In any case, as Windsor notes, this inscription on the dividing wall at the temple is a good example of an “ordinance” (Lionel J. Windsor, *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission Through Israel to the Nations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 137).

The Greek word translated “ordinances” in Ephesians 2:15 is δόγμα. This word means “a formal statement concerning rules or regulations that are to be observed” (BDAG 4th ed., “δόγμα,” 225). In other words, δόγμα refers to official decrees about *the application of* laws. In Scripture, such “ordinances” often come from earthly leaders or rulers (e.g., Luke 2:1; Acts 16:4; 17:7; LXX Esther 4:8; 9:1; Daniel 6:12). Hence, the use of this word confirms the idea that Paul is addressing not the Law of Moses itself, but rather a particular understanding and use of the Law.

So, in light of the immediate context and the precise words that Paul uses in Ephesians 2:15, “[the law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)” is best understood as *extrabiblical* rules developed from a misunderstanding and misapplication of the Law—rules that resulted in hostility and division between Jews and Gentiles. The whole context of Ephesians 2 is about having Jewish and Gentile believers worship together in unity, and so the extrabiblical and divisive laws that hinder that unity are what Paul says Christ abolished.

In what way did Christ abolish these man-made rules? By establishing a community that rejects them

and instead follows the Torah. For example, in the first century, there was a man-made rule prohibiting Jews and Gentiles from fellowshiping and eating together because Gentiles were seen as “common” and unworthy of fellowship. The Torah never commands that Jews and Gentiles must eat separately, but extrabiblical texts like the book Jubilees did (Jubilees 22:16). We see in the New Testament that some Jewish groups that disputed with the apostles held to this unbiblical and divisive “law” (Acts 11:2-3). Even Peter himself held to this unbiblical rule until the Lord revealed to Peter in a vision that he should not consider any person common or unclean (Acts 10:15, 28). For the Messiah’s community, these extrabiblical rules are abolished—the Messiah’s followers are to reject these man-made rules, and they did. Hence, Paul describes this abolishment of man-made, divisive rules as Christ metaphorically breaking down the dividing wall between Jewish and Gentile believers in the temple. Christ did not abolish the Law of Moses; he abolished the misuse of the Law of Moses that created man-made rules resulting in unbiblical division between Jews and Gentiles.

Windsor provides a good summary:

[W]hat has been abolished is the law understood primarily as a set of “commandments” as expressed and promulgated by certain authoritative “decrees” concerning the observance of these commandments. The law understood in this way had indeed produced hostility between Jews and gentiles—as illustrated by the officially sanctioned inscription at the dividing-wall in the temple. This is what Paul is claiming to have been abolished by Christ. Paul is not denigrating the law itself, nor is he ruling out any possible attempt to apply the law to the lives of believers. This is confirmed by the fact that Paul later quotes a Mosaic “commandment” as the basis for moral instruction of gentile believers, noting that it is (literally) “[the] first commandment in promise” (ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελίᾳ, Eph 6:2). The “promise” in view here involves Israel’s inheritance of the promised land (Eph 6:3), an inheritance in which the gentiles have also come to have a share (Eph 1:13-14; 3:6, cf. 2:12).

—Lionel J. Windsor, *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission Through Israel to the Nations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 139-140

Conclusion

The antinomian reading of Ephesians 2:15, which posits that Christ abolished the Law of Moses, not only contradicts other statements from both Christ and Paul in Scripture, but also fails to account for the immediate context and Paul’s precise wording in Ephesians 2. It seems strange that Paul would declare that Christ did something that Christ himself said he did not come to do. Moreover, as we have seen, Paul elsewhere affirms the ongoing validity of the Law of Moses. Besides these contradictions, Paul’s description of “[the law of commandments expressed in ordinances](#)” does not match what the Law of Moses states concerning how Gentiles should be treated. Hence, a more accurate interpretation is that Paul is referring to extrabiblical rules based on misapplications of the Law of Moses which resulted in hostility and division between Jews and Gentiles. *That* is what Paul says Christ abolished. This interpretation makes the most sense of the immediate context and Paul’s exact words in the verse. This interpretation also has the benefit of not forcing Paul to contradict the Law of Moses, the Messiah, and himself.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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

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

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