

# A Torah-Positive Summary of Sha'ul's Letter to the Galatians | by Ariel Berkowitz

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[A]ny discussion on the subject of Torah almost always mentions Sha'ul's *Letter to the Galatians*. Many assert that this letter absolutely prohibits the practices of the first five books of the Bible by believers in Yeshua or that the Torah can have a meaningful place in the everyday life of the believer. Because of this thinking we thought it would be helpful to present a different approach to the Book of Galatians, one which we think is more in tune with the tenor of the rest of Scripture.

An accurate study of Galatians is a good exercise in observing context. There are two kinds of context that we need to examine: 1) that of the entire book itself, specifically how the book states and develops its theme, and 2) that of the immediate context of any given passage.


## Sha'ul's Life


Before we survey the letter, it is first necessary to explore the life of the author, Sha'ul of Tarsus. Knowing something about the author of any writing helps the reader to better understand his writings. This is especially true concerning Sha'ul and his letters.

It is plainly evident that Sha'ul was a Jewish believer in Yeshua who was totally faithful to the teachings of Moshe and lived them out in his everyday life. There are two key passages that support this assertion, both from the *Book of Acts*.

The first passage is in [Acts 21: 17f](#). This is an account of when Sha'ul returned to Jerusalem from one of his ministry journeys. After returning to Jerusalem, he met with the leadership among those embracing Yeshua as the Messiah. This leadership informed him of a rumour circulating that he was teaching against the Torah, specifically that he was discouraging Jewish believers from following the Torah. Ⓛ

Note in the beginning that at this time of history, approximately early to mid 60's CE, the Scriptures indicate that not only was the leadership in Jerusalem (including the apostles themselves) faithful to the Torah, but that there were also in the city, thousands of Jewish people who believed in Yeshua — and all of them were zealous for the Torah ([Acts 21:20](#)). The Greek in [Acts 21:20](#) translated “thousands” is the word, *myrides* (μυριάδες), which actually means “tens of thousands.” That is a significant number of Torah-faithful Jewish believers in Yeshua! Ⓛ

The leaders instructed Sha'ul that if the rumours were, in fact, just rumours, then, according to [Acts 21:24](#), he was to pay for four men who were under the Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6) to help them to conclude the vow. This was, in effect, the leaders' way of seeing if Sha'ul would, in fact, be faithful to the Torah and help others to be faithful to it as well. Accordingly, we are told in verse 24 that the purpose of this was so that "everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the Torah." Sha'ul did just as they asked, proving that, as a believer in Yeshua, he lived out the Torah in his life. 

The second important passage is [Acts 23:6](#). Here Sha'ul, after having been arrested, was standing before the Sanhedrin, the highest religious governing board among the Jewish people in Sha'ul's day. History tells us that the president of the Sanhedrin at that time was Sha'ul's famous mentor, Gamliel the Elder. He was, perhaps, the most powerful Pharisee in Judaism at that time. To this day, he ranks as one of the most revered sages among the Jewish people. 


To begin his defence, Sha'ul states in unequivocal terms, and in the Greek present tense, "I am a Pharisee," ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι (*ego Pharisaios eimi*). He could not have truthfully made this statement before this council — and before his teacher — unless he was speaking the truth. Among other things, to be a Pharisee meant that there was unqualified faithfulness to the teachings of Moshe.

Thus, from both of these passages, we can clearly see that Sha'ul followed and lived the instruction of the five books of Moses (which we are calling "Torah") faithfully in his every day life, even as a believer in Yeshua. We need to remember this information about Sha'ul when we attempt to interpret his writings. Sha'ul would certainly have chosen to live his personal life in a way that would be consistent with what he taught. Accordingly, not only did he live the Torah, but he would also never write anything against others living the Torah — unless he had good reason to do so, as we shall see in the letter to the Galatians.

## **A Survey of *Galatians***

We will not attempt a detailed exegesis of Galatians. That is beyond the scope of this essay, and actually quite unnecessary for our purposes. Rather, we will provide a brief survey of the theme of the letter and how this theme is brilliantly developed. When we are finished, we will have demonstrated Sha'ul's reasons for writing some seemingly negative remarks about following Torah. We will state the theme, then give some examples from each chapter on how this theme is supported, and finish with a short discussion of Sha'ul's conclusions.

### **1. The Purpose of the *Letter to the Galatians*: 1:7**

[Galatians 1:7](#) states, "Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion, and are trying to pervert the gospel of Messiah." Here, Sha'ul announces that the purpose of this letter is that some people in the Galatian congregation were perverting the gospel. He wrote this letter to defend the gospel. The contents of the gospel were being challenged. Sha'ul wanted to set things straight. 

### **2. The Theme of the Letter: Galatians 2:15–16**

In what way specifically was the gospel being perverted? We read in 2:15–16 that some people in that congregation were turning away from the principle that justification is by grace through faith in Yeshua — alone. Sha'ul writes, "We...know that a man is not justified by observing the Torah, but by faith in Yeshua the Messiah. So we, too, have put our faith in Messiah Yeshua that we may be justified by faith in Messiah and not by observing the Torah, because by observing the Torah no one will be justified."

Some people in the congregation were teaching a gospel of works, that one might be justified by what he does. If this was not bad enough, they were using God's Torah and making a law out of it. They were trying to use God's revelation to His people through Moshe as a means of works salvation, hoping to gain their justification by doing the Torah.

We can see from the beginning, therefore, that in truth, Sha'ul had nothing against the Torah. Nor did he have anything against the Torah as a lifestyle for believers, as is evident from his own life. However, he was against anyone misusing the Torah. God never gave the Torah so that people could attempt to earn their salvation/justification from God by performing it. That philosophy is called "legalism." Legalism is fatal! The Torah was never given by God to be a legalistic document. Some of the Galatians were attempting to do just that!

### 3. Comparing the Covenants: Galatians 3:1–14

Sha'ul's next strategy is to compare the two major covenants that God made with His people: the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant. He says that, among other things, the Abrahamic Covenant pictures what it is to be justified by faith. All of us who are relying on faith for our justification are just like our father, Abraham. Thus, Sha'ul writes in [Galatians 3:6–9](#), "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'.... Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Where does the Covenant of Torah fit in? Sha'ul says that it is an entirely different kind of covenant. While the Covenant of Abraham is, on the one hand, a covenant of promise and faith in those promises, the Covenant of Torah, on the other hand, is a covenant of obedience. In the Covenant of Torah, the ones who received God's promises by faith would enjoy and bear fruit in those promises by their obedience. Accordingly, Sha'ul writes in [Galatians 3:12](#), "The Torah is not based on faith..." This is Sha'ul's way of stating what we have declared above, that the purpose of Torah was not for salvation. If the Covenant of Abraham pictures salvation, then the Covenant of Torah would picture life as a redeemed person in Yeshua.

Sha'ul says that anyone who relies on observing the Torah for his/her justification is under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Torah" ([Galatians 3:10–12](#)). The key word here is not "observing," but "relies on." The one who is relying on doing the Torah to earn, merit, or keep their justification/salvation is not saved or justified. Justification is only by grace through faith.

Actually, the word "rely" is not in the Greek text. Rather, Paul expresses his thought literally like this: "For as many as are of the works of the Torah..." The KJV has a good translation of this passage. But, NIV seems to accurately reflect the thought of the text. The passage is speaking about people who are trusting in what they do, including obeying the Torah, to earn their salvation/justification. Simply stated, if one sought to earn salvation by doing the instructions of the Torah, one must be perfect at it. Unless one practiced everything written in the Torah, he/she would be cursed. That is true only for those who are attempting to secure their justification by Torah obedience. It is a completely different story for those who are already justified by faith as we see from Sha'ul's life (and others like him).

### 4. Another Purpose of Torah: Galatians: 3:21–29

Immediately following the comparison of the covenants, and as a result of this comparison, Sha'ul then gives another purpose of the Torah.

Please note that the Bible portrays several purposes for the Torah in his writings. Each statement of purpose needs to be examined in its context. We have already seen one of those purposes in 3:10-12. In this context, Sha'ul is presenting another purposes of the Torah. He says that for anyone who attempts to use the Torah as a means of salvation, the Torah can only serve to point him or her to Yeshua, the true source for salvation.

To help make his point, Sha'ul draws upon a well-known Roman and Greek custom in his day. Well-to-do people often sent their children to a hired teacher for their education. To guide them along the way and to make sure that they arrive to their instructor, they often employed a protector. The Greek text refers to this "protector" as a *paidagogos*, (παιδαγωγός). The *paidagogos* was not the teacher, but he was merely the

protector and the one who guided the student to the teacher<sup>[1]</sup>. For those who are not yet justified by God's grace, the Torah can function in the same way. Sha'ul states in [Galatians 3:24–25](#), "So the Torah was put in charge to lead us to Messiah, that we might be justified by faith."



Messiah Yeshua is the Teacher, to use Sha'ul's illustration. The Torah is designed by God to safely bring His chosen children to Him, that He Himself would then be their teacher. This is Sha'ul's way of saying what Yeshua Himself taught about the Torah. Luke wrote that when the resurrected Yeshua revealed Himself to his followers he opened up the Scriptures to them: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" ([Luke 24:27](#)).



Thus, one of the most important functions of the Torah (and the Spirit of God together) is to lead people to Yeshua. It is not the only function of the Torah, but it is one of the most important purposes of the Torah for those who are yet unbelievers.

## 5. The Difficult Midrash – Abraham Must Come Before Sinai: Gal. 4:21–31

In chapter four, Sha'ul, having been thoroughly trained in the best rabbinic methods of Bible interpretation of his day, makes a *midrash*. A midrash is the Jewish way of saying that an allegorical or sermonic interpretation of the Scripture is about to take place.

This midrash is in 4:21–31. It is difficult to understand, as all midrashim (plural of midrash) are. Its difficulty has thrown many an earnest Bible interpreter aside. We will not analyze all of the midrash. We will only summarize the main point, because that is the point that is most pertinent to our present study of Galatians.

Sha'ul uses this midrash to illustrate the point he made in chapter three with his comparison of the two important covenants, the Abrahamic and Mosaic. Just as Abraham was putting Hagar before Sarah in order to fulfill God's promises of descendants, so are those who are attempting a works justification putting Sinai before Abraham. Let us explain.

God called Abraham to a life of faith. God promised Abraham that He would give him children in his old age. God meant that the children would come through Sarah. Time went by and no children came.

Apparently, Abraham thought he would attempt to secure God's promises by his own effort instead of relying on God to perform it. Thus, he had a child through Hagar. Although this was perfectly in keeping with the established customs of his day, it was not perfectly in keeping with trusting God! Abraham should have trusted God and waited for Sarah to have a child. Ishmael, therefore, was a child of works, but Isaac was the child of faith.


Sha'ul says that anyone who tries to secure God's gracious promises of salvation and justification by obeying the Torah (going to Sinai) is like Abraham trying to secure God's gracious promises through his own effort with Hagar. In the Galatian congregation, they were putting "Sinai" before "Abraham," when they should have put "Abraham" before "Sinai."


## 6. To Circumcise? Yes and No: Galatians 5:1–6

We come now to another commonly misinterpreted passage in Galatians. This is the section about circumcision. Any reader of this letter written by Sha'ul who does not pick up the context of the *Letter to the Galatians* by now has one final opportunity to observe the context.

In verses 2 and 3, it appears at first sight that Sha'ul is teaching against circumcision. In turn, by doing so, he would appear to be teaching against following the teachings of Moses. On the one hand, Sha'ul is teaching against circumcision – and against Moses – *if* people follow those practices in order to earn, merit, or keep their salvation. Sha'ul, the staunch defender of justification by faith, seems almost at a loss for words in his determination to convince his students to abandon any effort to use God's Torah, or any teaching, in order to achieve their justification by doing the works of that teaching.



The context for understanding why Sha'ul is against circumcision (and the Torah) for legalistic purposes is found in [Galatians 5:4](#), which states, “You who are trying to be justified by Torah have been alienated from Messiah; you have fallen away from grace.” Here, the writer clearly states the problem he was having with their practicing circumcision: They were “trying to be justified by Torah.” This is in perfect keeping with the theme of the letter, which we saw in chapter two. 


On the other hand, Sha'ul had absolutely no problem with circumcision (or living the Torah) — as long as it is done with the proper motives and for the right reasons. There are two reasons why we say this. First, we have already seen that his was a life of consistent Torah observance. Second, he had Timothy circumcised ([Acts 16:1–3](#)). One may debate about the reasons why Timothy was circumcised, but one 

cannot deny the fact that it was done and that Sha'ul was behind it. For these two reasons alone, we can see clearly that Sha'ul was not against circumcision per se, and consequently, not against proper Torah practice. But he was very much against it all if someone attempted to earn, merit, or keep his/her justification by performing it.

## Summary of the Appendix

Through this short survey of Sha'ul's letter to the Galatians, we have tried to demonstrate a very important principle: observing the context is critically important to Bible interpretation. By observing the context of the entire letter, it is clearly evident that Sha'ul is not writing a letter that teaches against believers in Yeshua following the teachings of Torah. Instead, he is writing an epistle that admonishes anyone who attempts to use the teachings of Moses — or any teaching, for that matter — as a means to earn, merit, or keep his/her justification and eternal salvation before God.

Legalism is wrong. Justification is, always has been, and always will be by God's grace through faith in the Person and Work of Yeshua the Messiah. In such faith, one is born from above. The Torah, then, is the description of the life-style of a born-again believer. When one lives according to the Torah, he lets Yeshua's life flow in and through him. Yeshua is the Living Torah, written upon our minds and he is the DNA of the innermost being of all truly born again believers. It is as simple as that.

Our prayer is that all of us will let ourselves be free to allow the Scriptures to say what they say and not allow any theological system to determine one's interpretation of them. Rather, our theology must come from the Scriptures. Our desire is that we will be able to see that the Scriptures declare a good news that is a radically good news, that is, we are new creations. The old has gone. The new has come. And the new has the Torah as his/her very being. Yeshua Himself the Living Torah lives in us. Indeed, we have this Treasure in our jars of clay ([2 Corinthians 4:7](#))! 

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[1] See the comments on [Galatians 3:24](#) found in the Expositor's Bible Commentary. We used the version found on Accordance 6.9 Bible Study Software. 