

Summary of Paul and "Works of the Law"

Reconsidered

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Paul and "Works of the Law" Reconsidered

Main Topic: Rethinking Paul's Use of "Works of the Law" (Erga Nomou)

- **Participants:** Dr. Mark Nanos (Jewish historian, Apostle Paul scholar), Cindy Parker (host, Holy Land Studies professor), Dr. Gruber, Dr. Ellie
- **Key Points:**
 - Dr. Nanos challenges the traditional interpretation that Paul's phrase "works of the law" refers broadly to Jewish law (Torah) observance or to earning righteousness by good deeds.
 - He proposes that "erga nomou" specifically refers to "rites of passage" or conversion rituals—especially circumcision for males—by which non-Jews (Gentiles) would become Jews (proselytes).
 - Circumcision acts as a synecdoche: a ritual standing for the whole process of conversion and reidentification, not simply a physical operation.
 - Paul is not rejecting Jewish practices (dietary laws, Sabbaths) or Torah observance for Jews or non-Jews, but is arguing against the idea that Gentiles must undergo the conversion ritual to become full members of the community of Jesus followers.
 - The Torah (Hebrew) and Nomos (Greek) are not always equivalent in meaning; Nomos often means "custom" or "norm" and not necessarily the Mosaic law.
 - The conversion ritual for Gentiles is not prescribed in the Torah; it is a later cultural development in Second Temple Judaism.

- Paul's arguments in Galatians and Romans are context-specific, addressing the social pressure for Gentiles to convert formally to Judaism, not a universal rule against Torah observance or Jewish identity.
- **Questions Discussed:**
 - What does "erga nomou" mean in Paul's letters? Is it about general law-keeping, or something more specific?
 - Why would a Gentile in Paul's time want to undergo the conversion ritual? What social or religious advantages did it confer?
 - Are Paul's letters being misapplied when universalized beyond their original historical and social context?
 - Does the use of the definite article in Greek ("the law") always refer to the Torah, or can it refer to custom or norm?
- **Decisions/Conclusions:**
 - The phrase "works of the law" (erga nomou) should be understood as referring to proselyte conversion rituals, not to Jewish law observance in general.
 - Paul's concern is with identity markers and the process of becoming a Jew, not with Jewish cultural practices per se.
 - Misreading Paul's arguments has led to significant misunderstandings in Western Christian thought.
- **Action Plans:**
 - Dr. Nanos advocates for a shift in biblical scholarship and translation practice: translators and interpreters should render "erga nomou" as "proselyte conversion" or "rites of passage" rather than "works of the law."
 - Encourage audiences and scholars to read Paul in his historical context and avoid anachronistic universalizing of his arguments.
 - Further research and publication by Dr. Nanos on the nuances of Paul's references to law and custom.

Additional Topics

- **Translation and Context:**

- Importance of careful translation between Hebrew and Greek (Torah vs. Nomos), and understanding historical-linguistic context.
- The relevance of Paul's arguments for modern Christian communities is limited; understanding context helps avoid misapplication.
- **Promotion and Resources:**
 - Listeners are invited to join Israel Bible Center for courses on Jewish context and culture.
 - Reference to additional roundtable talks and resources for further study.

Language

- The entire meeting and summary are in English.