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Currents in Biblical Research 2006 5: 123

DOI: 10.1177/1476993X06068701

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The Law of Christ and the Law of Moses: Reflections on a Recent Trend in Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The expression 'law of Christ' (Gal. 6.2) continues to bedevil interpreters of Galatians, not least because it seems entirely out of place in a letter otherwise devoted to distancing Christ from the law (cf. 5.4). While the phrase has traditionally been understood to refer to that which *replaces* the law of Moses, there has been a significant shift of opinion in recent years. Now many interpreters want to read the expression as a *direct reference* to the law of Moses. This essay traces the emergence of this recent trend, situates it within its broader exegetical and theological milieu and considers some of the main exegetical arguments used to support the reading. The essay then concludes with a few reflections on the implications of this interpretive trend for Pauline exegesis.

Keywords: Galatians, law, law of Christ, new perspective, Paul.

Introduction

Nearly three centuries ago Johann Albrecht Bengel referred to Paul's 'law of Christ' as 'a rare appellation' (Bengel 1858–59: 738). Recent interpreters, however, have not felt the need to be so discreet. The 'law of Christ' is now being dubbed 'most remarkable' (Stoike 1971: 237), 'arresting' (Cole 1989: 225), 'strange' (Betz 1979: 299), 'very curious' (Ramos 1977: 299), 'striking' (Stanton 1996: 116), 'extremely baffling' (Hong 1993: 173), 'doubly astonishing' (Barclay 1988: 126), a 'breathtaking paradox' (Hays 1987: 276), a 'much-puzzled-over term' (Stuhlmacher 1986a: 123),

Currents in Biblical Research

Copyright © 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi) Vol. 5.1: 123-144
http://CBI.sagepub.com ISSN 1476-993X DOI: 10.1177/1476993X06068701

an 'astonishing oxymoron' (Perrot 1996: 127), indeed 'a phrase more likely to mislead than to instruct' (Winger 2000: 545).

But why such astonishment over what appears to be a relatively straightforward expression? Perhaps the simplest answer is also the one with a good deal of explanatory power: *many interpreters find the expression 'law of Christ' singularly ill-suited for the argument and theology of Galatians*. In Galatians, Paul's polemic against the law climaxes with what appears to be an outright antithesis between Christ and law. A positive reference to believers fulfilling the 'law of Christ' is, therefore, highly paradoxical, if not completely bewildering (Schrage 1996: 184). Richard B. Hays thus speaks for many when he writes: 'In view of the absolute opposition between "law" and "Christ" that Paul has deliberately established in the letter (see especially 5.4) the expression "law of Christ" must have fallen upon his readers' ears as a breathtaking paradox' (Hays 1987: 276).

As a result, scholars tend to view the 'law of Christ' as an anomaly within Galatians because it fails, on the surface, to harmonize with the rest of the letter. One might even say in Kuhnian terms that the 'law of Christ' violates the paradigm-induced expectations guiding many interpretations of Galatians (Kuhn 1996: 52-65). It introduces serious cognitive dissonance and disrupts perceived theological patterns, not to mention that it seems to run contrary to a number of rather stark sounding statements about the temporality of the law (3.22-25; 4.1-7) and its irrelevance for justification (2.15-16; 5.5-6). The phrase must, therefore, so the thinking often goes, be adapted to fit with the rest of what Paul says about the law in Galatians, that is, with his *more paradigmatic* insights about the law, which are to be derived from elsewhere in the letter (i.e. chs 2-4). Little wonder, then, that when reading Galatians, interpreters sometimes *treat* the 'law of Christ' *as an anomaly*—as an exegetical and theological maverick to be assimilated with Paul's more characteristically negative ways of speaking about the law.

There are signs, however, that things may be changing for the 'law of Christ'. While the phrase has traditionally been harmonized with Paul's negative portrayal of the law by treating the expression either as a circumlocution for Christian living or as a reference to some other 'law', a growing number of interpreters want to treat the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the *law of Moses*. This is not to suggest, of course, that these scholars either agree on the precise sense of the expression or on how exactly it was that Paul could claim that uncircumcised Gentiles 'fulfill'

the law of Moses (5.14; 6.2); only that an increasing number of interpreters are persuaded that the expression itself somehow refers to the law of Moses.

For a numbers of years, scholars have been making similar claims about Paul's 'law of faith' (Rom. 3.27) and 'law of the Spirit of life' (Rom. 8.2)—that they too refer to the law of Moses. As one would expect, this has elicited vigorous discussion (Räsänen 1992a: 48-68; Räsänen 1992c: 69-94; Ito 2003: 237-59; Martyn 2003: 575-87). This recent development in the interpretation of the 'law of Christ' in Galatians, however, appears to have slipped by largely unnoticed—or at least without much comment. One of my primary aims with this essay, therefore, is to bring to light this apparently overlooked interpretive trend.

In what follows, I would like first to trace the emergence of this recent trend in interpretation and highlight a few aspects of the broader exegetical and theological milieu in which it has arisen. I shall then discuss several of the main exegetical observations supporting this proposal and some of the ways in which the phrase has been explained. I shall conclude with a consideration of a few of the implications of this trend for Pauline exegesis.

I should stress at the outset, however, that I shall not be able to deal at great length with the exegetical case for treating the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses. Nor will I be able to take up what is perhaps the more interesting question: what exactly does Paul mean by the 'law of Christ'? Even among those who treat the expression as a reference to the law of Moses, there is a lack of consensus on this point (cf., e.g. Barclay 1988: 131-35; Hong 1993: 176-83; Longenecker 1998: 86). Adding something constructive to this discussion is beyond the scope of the present essay. Instead, my concern is more narrowly focused upon exploring the origins and rationale behind the claim that the 'law of Christ' refers to the law of Moses.

The Emergence of this Recent Trend in Interpretation

It may come as something of a surprise to learn that within the history of interpretation, the expression 'law of Christ' has seldom been taken as a reference to the law of Moses. While it may not be entirely unprecedented, prior to the late twentieth century it certainly would have been difficult to find anyone stating explicitly and unambiguously that with the expression 'law of Christ', Paul intended to refer to the law of Moses.

The near universal view has been that with this expression Paul refers to that which *replaces* the law of Moses. Often this has meant taking the 'law of Christ' to be a reference to some kind of *nova lex* for Christians (Limbeck 1997: 126). Frank Thielman has recently advocated such an approach:

[T]he law of the eschatological era turns out in Paul's understanding to be different from the law of Moses. Aspects of Moses' law such as the famous summary in Leviticus 19.18 are absorbed into this new law, but the covenant that God made with Moses at Mount Sinai is considered obsolete, and in its place Paul has substituted 'the law of Christ' (Thielman 1994: 142).

While the exact character of this 'new law' has been understood in different ways by different interpreters in different traditions, the basic outlook appears to be the same: just as the Church has superseded Israel, so also the 'law of Christ' has replaced the law of Moses (cf. Esler 1998).

One may also wonder at the fact that late nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in the study of the *Jewish* matrix of earliest Christianity appear to have done little to affect this approach to the 'law of Christ'. Increased sensitivity to early Jewish eschatological expectations of course did something to colour the interpretive landscape, particularly by filling it with potential verbal or conceptual parallels to Paul's 'law of Christ'. And this, in turn, encouraged some at least to see in this expression a reference to a 'new law' more akin to the law of Moses, perhaps a Messianic Torah, a transformed 'Zion Torah' or a new Torah comprised of the life and teachings of Jesus (Davies 1952: 110-33; Dodd 1968). Nevertheless, the assumption that the 'law of Christ' refers to that which replaces the law of Moses appears to have been largely unquestioned.

This way of understanding the 'law of Christ', however, begins to be seriously called into question with the work of E.P. Sanders. While Sanders's landmark *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) encouraged the re-evaluation of any number of points in the debate about Paul and the law, perhaps more important for the interpretation of the 'law of Christ' was his follow-up study, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (1983). The central thesis of the latter book is that Paul's seemingly contradictory statements about the law are diverse answers given in response to different questions, which nevertheless stem from a set of coherent (albeit non-systematic) convictions.

Therefore, Sanders insists, these diverse statements should *not* be taken as an indication that Paul either worked with different understandings of

the law (i.e. as a means for boasting vs. as a response to God's election), or knew of various distinctions within it (i.e. moral vs. ceremonial aspects) (Sanders 1983: 4). While such distinctions have been the fare of exegetes for centuries, Sanders argues they are foreign to Paul and foisted upon his letters. Paul appears to have been blissfully unaware of such nuances. Besides, Paul never claims to be operating with such distinctions, which should cause us to wonder, Sanders insists, whether they are more at home in the minds of systematizing exegetes than the apostle to the Gentiles.

According to Sanders, then, the most one can say is that Paul's negative statements about the law appear to arise in response to questions about the law as a requirement for getting into the community of the saved, while his positive statements arise in response to questions about the law as a criterion for behavior once in that community (Sanders 1983: 84). Thus the well-known taxonomy: No to the law for 'getting-in'; Yes to the law for 'staying-in'. Sanders is careful to point out, however, that this distinction is only an attempt at a *description* of the kinds of things Paul seems to say when handling various questions about the law. What is implied, of course, is that systematic consistency is the burden, not of Paul, but of the Pauline exegete. 'Paul had bigger fish to fry than systematic consistency' (Sanders 1996: 117).

The upshot of this approach is that it shifts (perhaps not altogether successfully) the burden of proof off those inclined to take Paul's positive references to the law as references to the law of Moses, where it has traditionally rested, and moves it onto those who would take all such statements either in a loose sense (i.e. as circumlocutions for Christian living) or as references to some other 'law'. The implications of this for the interpretation of the 'law of Christ' are not far to seek. Sanders explains: 'It is futile to try to determine, on the basis of Galatians, how the "law of Christ" would differ from "the entire law" of 5:14 or from the Mosaic law' (Sanders 1983: 97-98).

While one may want to nuance this statement somewhat, it nevertheless provides a strong challenge to much that is commonplace in the exegesis of Paul's reference to believers fulfilling the 'law of Christ'. One cannot simply assume that Paul's 'law of Christ' should be taken in a loose sense or as a reference to some other 'law'. In fact, according to Sanders, the most one can say is that Paul stopped short of explaining how he could affirm that uncircumcised Gentiles nevertheless fulfill the law (of Christ). And while a fully satisfactory explanation to this question may forever evade interpreters, it can hardly be doubted that Paul thought it was so.

Now I suspect that were it not for the fact that several of Sanders's observations were picked up and utilized by John M.G. Barclay in his highly influential monograph, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (1988), we might not be witnessing the present trend to treat the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses. In other words, Barclay, not Sanders, is the key figure here. For it was Barclay who provided us with a winsome and in many ways persuasive case, not only for reading Galatians more holistically, but also for understanding Paul's 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses. A careful reading of Barclay's work shows, to be sure, his indebtedness to Sanders at several points. But while Sanders sees a lack of explicitness (thoughtfulness?) in Paul's affirmations of the fulfillment of the law (of Christ), Barclay sees Paul being *intentionally* ambiguous.

That is to say, Barclay positions Paul's positive statements about the fulfillment of the law (of Christ) against the backdrop of a crisis in which the Galatians were being attracted to the moral benefits of law-observance because of their growing doubts about the adequacy of Paul's own ethical instruction. Given this particular situation, argues Barclay, Paul could not have completely dismissed the law of Moses, which would have been simply irresponsible; still less could he uphold it as a resource for Christian living, which would have been to play into the hands of the agitators. Instead, Paul had the difficult task of having to deny the relevance of the law of Moses for Christian living, on the one hand, while affirming that its moral standards were fully met by walking by the Spirit, on the other. This meant, though, that Paul had to conceal somewhat his affirmations of the law under a veil of ambiguity. Thus, by coining the language of the 'fulfillment of the law' (5.14; 6.2), unprecedented terminology in early Jewish literature, Paul effectively sidestepped the question of the actual observance of the stipulations of the law of Moses (Barclay 1988: 143-44; cf. Westerholm 1986-87: 235).

Barclay is in full agreement, then, with Sanders that the language of the fulfillment of the law (of Christ) is for Paul a 'debating device' used to outflank his opponents (Barclay 1988: 141). Yet for Barclay it is not a *mere* polemical tool. Paul's affirmation of the fulfillment of the law (of Christ) in Galatians also serves one of his vital pastoral interests: to assure the Galatians that the leading of the Spirit provides the moral resources necessary to measure up to the law of Moses.

In sum, it appears to have been Barclay's cogent and carefully argued thesis that was largely responsible for encouraging a number of recent

interpreters to see in the 'law of Christ' a reference to the law of Moses (e.g. Matera 1992: 220-21; Hong 1993: 177; Stanton 1996: 115-16; Lambrecht 1997: 45; Longenecker 2001: 92-94; Longenecker 1998: 85-87; cf. also 1997: 554-58; Martyn 2003: 575-87; Schnabel 1985: 277-78; Wilckens 1982: 175). However, lest I be guilty of trying to trace the flow of scholarly views to a single source, I shall now turn to consider a few aspects of the broader exegetical and theological milieu within which this recent trend in interpretation has arisen.

The Exegetical and Theological Milieu of this Recent Trend

I have highlighted the contributions of Sanders and Barclay as important stimuli for this recent shift in the interpretation of the 'law of Christ'. Undoubtedly, however, there are, as with any development in the history of interpretation, a number of contributing factors, not least the somewhat amorphous though no less real presence of the exegetical and theological milieu within which a trend in interpretation arises. In this particular case, it may be somewhat naïve to try to identify those factors that have contributed to this recent shift of opinion precisely because it is so recent a phenomenon. Nonetheless, it seems possible to identify a few changes in the interpretive milieu that are widely discernible within the guild, yet still relevant to the interpretation of the 'law of Christ'.

Questioning the Law-Gospel Contrast in the Wake of the 'New Perspective' on Paul

The recent trend in interpretation here under review needs, first, to be viewed in light of the larger Copernican shift in Pauline studies conveniently dubbed the 'new perspective' on Paul (Hagner 1993: 111-12). The main contours of this change in outlook are by now familiar and need not be rehearsed here. One should pause briefly only to note that it can hardly be coincidental that a move to take the 'law of Christ' to be a reference to the law of Moses should have arisen in a 'post-Sanders' era, perhaps for no other reason than that the 'new perspective' has encouraged interpreters from a variety of confessional traditions (and none at all) to take a fresh look at some familiar Pauline passages—and see new things.

More than that, this recent trend in interpretation has also capitalized, whether consciously or unconsciously, on the changed theological atmosphere brought about (in part) by the 'new perspective'. Following a century or more of German-Lutheran predominance in New Testament

studies (1830s–1960s), the emergence of the ‘new perspective’ in the 1970s–80s has, among other things, helped to make the world of Pauline studies much more hospitable to positive references to the Jewish Torah from the apostle to the Gentiles. From another angle, one could just as well say that by presenting a serious challenge to, and in some ways undoing, the hegemony of the Reformation law-gospel contrast as the framework for understanding Paul’s view of the law, the ‘new perspective’ has promoted an atmosphere in which it is far easier for exegetes to *hear* positive affirmations of the law in the letters of Paul.

W.D. Davies perceptively pointed this out over twenty years ago in the Preface to the 4th edition of his *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1980; 1945 orig.). Looking back over the past forty years of academic biblical scholarship, Davies found a phrase he thought was best suited to capture the current state of the discipline: ‘the eclipse of dichotomies’ (Davies 1980: xxiii). Harkening back to observations made in his 1964 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Davies observed that there were two fashionable scholarly dichotomies that were now clearly outmoded: the bifurcation of Judaism and Hellenism and the separation of Pharisaism from Apocalyptic. Now, in 1981, riding on the crest of responses to Sanders’s landmark work, Davies sees signs of obsolescence in yet a third scholarly dichotomy: ‘the chief dichotomy which recent scholarship has reopened and even questioned: that between Gospel and Law’ (Davies 1980: xxvii).

As Davies somewhat begrudgingly recognized, however, this dichotomy seems ‘most difficult to abandon’ (Davies 1980: xxvii), an observation somewhat confirmed by the substantial number of responses made to the ‘new perspective’ in recent years (e.g. Seifrid 2000; Carson, O’Brien and Seifrid 2001; Kim 2002; Gathercole 2002; Westerholm 2004). There is, Davies observed (albeit with some exaggeration), something of an ‘ingrained Christian antipathy to the very word “Law”’ (Davies 1980: xxvii). Interestingly enough, he saw this clearly evidenced in how exegetes continue to handle the ‘law of Christ’. ‘It is still extremely difficult in Protestant exegesis’, he explains, ‘to give full weight, for example, to Paul’s use of the phrase “the Law of Christ”’ (Davies 1980: xxvii–xxviii). This phrase, writes Davies, continues to be a ‘stumbling block’ to those who would see in Paul only opposition to the law or indeed any law (Davies 1980: xxxiii).

Not insignificantly, Davies’ sentiment was echoed nearly fifteen years later in an essay written by James D.G. Dunn, one of the chief architects of the ‘new perspective’:

Given the fundamental law/gospel antithesis of Reformation theology, the tendency to deny the law/Torah any role in Christian discipleship would seem to be almost inescapable. In consequence there has been a strong trend in recent studies on Paul and the law to deny that these references to 'the law' [e.g. Gal. 5:14; 6:2; Rom. 3:27; 8:2; 13:10] can be understood in terms of the law of Moses, the Torah. Either a different law must be in view, or the term *nomos* should not be translated as 'law' (Dunn 1996: 63).

Worth noting is Davies' and Dunn's agreement on the *hermeneutical implications* of the law-gospel contrast for interpreting the 'law of Christ'. As Dunn points out elsewhere: 'there is a widespread feeling that Paul *could not* be referring to the Torah when he spoke of "the law of Christ"' (Dunn 1998: 653, emphasis added). He goes on to note the interpretive reflex that ensues for many exegetes when they chance upon this striking expression: 'The usual solution is that whatever the phrase means, it *cannot* refer to the Torah; Paul is once again playing on the term *nomos*' (Dunn 1998: 653, emphasis added).

There is, of course, more to the story than this allows, as Davies and Dunn were both well aware. Nevertheless, as a description of the underlying theological assumptions guiding many Pauline interpreters, their comments are not wide of the mark. Nor is it difficult to understand why calling into question the theological antithesis of law-gospel, which has for centuries provided the interpretive framework for understanding Galatians, might precipitate a new set of exegetical insights and encourage one or two novel readings of Paul's positive references to the law, not least the 'law of Christ' (cf., e.g. Tomson 1990; Müller 1998; Bockmuehl 2000).

The Perceived Failure of Twentieth-century Quests for a Jewish Background

Another feature of the broader exegetical and theological milieu helping to give rise to this recent trend in interpretation is, ironically enough, the perceived failure within the guild of twentieth-century attempts to identify a convincing Jewish background for the interpretation of the 'law of Christ'. Largely missing from the first nineteen centuries of the interpretation of this expression are proposals of possible linguistic or conceptual parallels from *outside* the New Testament. The twentieth century, of course, did much to redress this, yet on the whole these efforts appear to have found few supporters and to have generated little consensus.

Two examples should suffice to illustrate the point. While the Jewish historian of religions, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, may have been the first to propose that Paul's 'law of Christ' should be read in light of rabbinic presuppositions about the law in the Messianic age, he did little to establish this line of interpretation on a firm footing (Schoeps 1961: 171). A judicious assessment of the literary evidence had to await W.D. Davies's *Torah in the Messianic Age and/or the Age to Come* (1952). However, when the time came to state the results of his study, Davies did so with a good deal of circumspection and, it would seem, not a little disappointment: 'The evidence that we have been able to adduce in favor of a new Messianic Torah cannot be regarded as very impressive' (1952: 90). This sort of candid admission, while boosting confidence in Davies's academic integrity, does little to garner support for his position. In fact, with the exception of a handful of follow-up studies, the quest for early Jewish and/or rabbinic parallels to Paul's 'law of Christ' has experienced something of a moratorium, sanctioned in part no doubt by the misgivings expressed by one of its leading and most able exponents. Besides, a number of critics have not only underscored the lack of evidence, but have called into question the whole line of research (cf. Bammel 1997; Banks 1974; Chester 1998).

A second example comes from the New Testament theologian Peter Stuhlmacher, whose reading of the 'law of Christ' is surely the most thoroughgoing history-of- traditions explanation to date. Indeed, for Stuhlmacher this phrase takes on an importance inversely proportional to its size: it has become something of a catchword for his whole biblical theology (cf. Räisänen 1992b: 249). The phrase itself refers to the 'revealed will of God newly established in Christ' and informed by various lines of tradition which have been incorporated into Paul's teaching on the law in the 'new covenant' (Stuhlmacher 1986a: 126). According to Stuhlmacher, here largely dependent upon the work of his colleague Hartmut Gese, the 'law of Christ' stands in continuity with the Old Testament traditions of a 'Zion Torah' and serves thus as an eschatological counterpart to the Sinai Torah, while at the same time representing the Sinai Torah's fundamental transformation (Stuhlmacher 1992: 268). It is, in other words, Paul's way of referring to the messianic Torah Jesus proclaimed, which itself incorporated essential features of the law of Moses (Stuhlmacher 1992: 105; cf. Stuhlmacher 1986b: 87; Stuhlmacher 1994: 126).

Stuhlmacher's ambitious effort with the 'law of Christ', however, was met with heavy fire from, among others, the Finnish New Testament

scholar Heikki Räisänen, whose own oft-cited study of the law in Paul's thought, *Paul and the Law* (1987), dismisses altogether Stuhlmacher's 'Zion Torah' thesis. The exegetical case for a 'Zion Torah' is but 'an artificial conglomerate from widely different contexts' with hardly 'a shred of evidence' in its favor (1987: 239-40). But the criticisms did not stop there. Räisänen went on to write a full-length critique of the 'Zion Torah' theory with devastating results for the vitality of the proposal (Räisänen 1992b). Nowhere does Paul refer to a change in the Sinai Torah as the basis for his setting aside certain stipulations of the law of Moses, something one would have certainly expected were it true (Räisänen 1992b: 249-50; cf. Kalusche 1986). As for Stuhlmacher's understanding of the 'law of Christ', Räisänen was equally acrimonious: it amounts to 'pure conjecture' (Räisänen 1992b: 249).

To decide whether these rather harsh criticisms are fully justified is not my purpose here. The only observation that needs making is that the *overall effect* of these and similar efforts for the interpretation of the 'law of Christ' appears to have been to damper [*sic*] enthusiasm for explanations of the phrase that rely heavily upon Jewish backgrounds or other explanatory parallels. Consequently, the twentieth century, while witnessing a sharp rise of interest in possible parallels or antecedents to Paul's 'law of Christ', may just as well be thought of as the century of the 'demise of backgrounds' for interpreting the expression.

From W.D. Davies to Peter Stuhlmacher, immense energy has been devoted to finding within Christianity's Jewish matrix a hermeneutical key to unlock Paul's 'law of Christ'. On the whole, however, this quest is perceived at least to be something of a failure. Either the required evidence has been found wanting, or the connection to Paul's actual use of the phrase in Galatians is deemed too tenuous. For the interpretation of the 'law of Christ', then, the upshot has been to return attention to the primary context of Paul's letters, not least Galatians itself.

Narrowing the Interpretive Context to Galatians

A third factor in the interpretive milieu deserves brief mention. Since at least the 1970s, New Testament scholars have increasingly shied away from writing the grand syntheses of 'Pauline theology' characteristic of earlier generations, and instead have focused attention more on the distinctive contributions of each of Paul's letters. Indicative of this trend and no doubt encouraging it was the project preoccupying the Pauline Theology Group of the Society of Biblical Literature since the mid-1980s. David M. Hay explains the rationale of this group as follows: 'We thought

that each letter should first be viewed as an individual communication in its own right and its distinctive themes and assertions interpreted without seeking to explain them or explain them away by trying to “harmonize” them with everything else [Paul] wrote’ (Hay 1993: vii).

This methodological reorientation has obvious implications for the interpretation of the ‘law of Christ’. While it was not at all uncommon to find patristic commentators explaining the ‘law of Christ’ by readily appealing to the record of Jesus’ teaching of a ‘new commandment’ in John 13.34-35 (e.g. Theodoret, Jerome, Pelagius; cf. Aquinas), or an earlier generation of interpreters happily turning to similar phraseology in Paul’s other letters (cf. Rom. 3.27; 8.2; 1 Cor. 9.21), scholars are now content to advise that: ‘Such a little-used phrase as *law of Christ*, is best interpreted in the immediate context’ (Schreiner 1993: 159, original emphasis). Indeed, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that few are now courageous enough to venture forth from Galatians itself to hunt for evidence with which to help explain Paul’s ‘law of Christ’.

There is, however, an irony here. While the singularity of the phrase ‘law of Christ’ obviously demands utmost attention to the immediate context of the letter, this same feature virtually propels one to look outside Galatians (and indeed the New Testament) for further elucidation. Yet precisely this sort of move has become methodologically suspect in our present environment. Scholars turn for interpretive assistance to phrases in Paul’s other letters only at the risk of rebuke for being methodologically facile. (Whether this is either a desirable or justifiable state of affairs is not my concern here.)

As a consequence, the context within which one can make sense of Paul’s ‘law of Christ’ appears to have narrowed considerably in recent years. Now scholars offer interpretations that begin and end, as it were, with Galatians itself. Importantly, what this has done is give ascendancy to Gal. 5.13-14 as *the primary datum* for interpreting the ‘law of Christ’, thus dislodging Jn 13.34-35, Rom. 3.27, 8.2 or 1 Cor. 9.21 from the pride of place. And once the link between Gal. 6.2 and 5.13-14, with its clear reference to the law of Moses, has been firmly established in the mind of the exegete, it becomes far easier to begin to *see* Paul referring to the law of Moses in both places.

The Law of Christ as the Law of Moses

Several reasons for interpreting the ‘law of Christ’ as a reference to the law of Moses have been implicit in what has gone before. I want now to

summarize briefly the four main lines of argument supporting this reading. First, the terminological and conceptual parallels between Gal. 6.2 and 5.13-14, with its clear reference to the law of Moses, argue strongly in favor of seeing the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses. The shared terminology includes the language of 'fulfillment', 'law' and 'one another'. The conceptual overlap obviously includes the theme of mutual service and its consequences vis-à-vis the law (of Christ). In fact, 6.1-2 appears to be a more specific application of the general exhortation (v. 13), affirmation (v. 14) and warning (v. 15) of 5.13-15 (Hong 1993: 170). Thus Barclay thinks that such parallels 'necessitate' seeing in 6.2 a reference to the law of Moses (Barclay 1988: 134 n. 89), while Graham N. Stanton concurs that such evidence 'strongly suggests' making this move (Stanton 1996: 116).

Secondly, the proximity of 5.13-14 and 6.2 within the epistle makes it highly unlikely that Paul would have intended to refer to something other than the law of Moses in 6.2, when he has just said virtually the exact same thing a few verses earlier (5.13-14) (Barclay 1988: 134 n. 89; Stanton 1996: 116; Lambrecht 1997: 45). Could Paul really have justified so sudden and subtle a shift (Stanton 2001: 55)? Certainly that kind of move would have been lost on his listeners (Sanders 1983: 98). If one then tries to listen to Paul's words with the Galatians' ears, following J. Louis Martyn's advice, it becomes rather doubtful that the Galatians would have heard anything other than a reference to the law of Moses in Paul's charge to bear burdens and thus fulfill the 'law of Christ'.

This leads to a third point. There is the sheer consistency of Paul's usage of *nomos* in Galatians (let alone in his other epistles). Martyn himself has recently underscored this point with some vigor. The appearance of *nomos* in Gal. 6.2 is the thirty-first in the epistle, and in each previous instance it is a reference to the law of Moses (Martyn 1997: 555). There is no indication that Paul means anything other than the law of Moses when he uses *nomos*. 'There is every reason, then,' Martyn concludes, 'for taking Gal. 6.2 to be the thirty-first juncture in this letter at which Paul refers to *the Law*' (Martyn 1997: 555-56 n. 41).

A fourth and admittedly more speculative point is that if Paul has in fact picked-up the expression from his opponents, who certainly would have meant it as a reference to the law of Moses, it would make sense for him transpose the phrase into a new context but preserve its original reference to the law of Moses. This possibility may be strengthened if one recognizes that Paul's letter to the Galatians serves (at least in part) as an

attempt to provide the proper *perspective* on the compatibility between the law and Christ without entirely dismissing the former for the latter (Hong 1993: 177; Longenecker 1998: 86).

Taking the 'law of Christ' to be a reference to the law of Moses, however, begs an important question: why the '*of Christ*'? If Paul meant to refer to the law of Moses, why confuse things with a notoriously troublesome genitive qualifier? Besides, he has just charged the Galatians to 'serve one another in love' with an unambiguous reference to the law of Moses (5.13-14). Why does he not do so in 6.2? Why would Paul run the risk of misleading the Galatians with what appears to be an extremely paradoxical formulation, when all he wanted to affirm was that burden-bearing, as an expression of love, fulfills the law of Moses?

Explaining the precise significance of the 'of Christ' gives rise to a diversity of opinions, even among those who want to treat the expression as a reference to the law of Moses. One line of approach would be to argue that Paul was at this point in conscious dependence upon Jesus' own summary of the law in terms of the love-command, a tradition of which we have little reason to doubt he was aware (Wenham 1995: 256-59). Perhaps the 'of Christ' is intended to signify that the expression refers to the law of Moses as taught and exemplified by Christ (Dunn 1993: 322-23). More easily demonstrated from the text of Galatians, however, would be the claim that Paul added the 'of Christ' because he saw an inextricable link between love (i.e. 'burden-bearing') and Christ as the example *par excellence* of love (Gal. 2.20; cf. Rom. 15.1-3) (Barclay 1988: 132-33; Schürmann 1974: 286-88). On this reading, to fulfill the 'law of Christ' would be to fulfill the law of Moses in a Christ-like way, that is, through lovingly bearing burdens, as did Christ himself.

Another tack would be to explain the 'of Christ' not as an outworking of Paul's Christological convictions, but as a consequence of the exigencies of the situation in Galatia. Some see Galatians as a sustained effort to dispel doubts about the adequacy of Paul's gospel to provide moral guidance and/or deal with the flesh (Barclay 1988: 106-45; Martyn 1997: 526-28). Yet at the same time, the argument goes, Paul surely wanted to avoid simply reinstating the law for the purpose of ethics. So he affirmed the fulfillment of the 'law of Christ' as a way to *reorient* the Galatians around the One who could in fact provide liberation from the flesh (cf. 1.4; 5.1, 24).

This same point can be given sharper focus. Perhaps Paul invokes the 'law of Christ' not as an apologetic for the sake of the Galatians, but as a

polemic against the agitators. It is not hard to imagine the agitators urging a happy accord between the law and Christ. And while Paul may not have wanted to object to this in principle, he certainly saw the agitators overstepping their bounds by pushing law-observance for Gentile converts. The 'law of Christ' would be well-suited, then, as a rebuff of the agitators, because it shows that Paul's gospel is in no way intended to set aside the best the law has to offer. Instead, by reissuing an important facet of the agitators' theology and perhaps phraseology (albeit with his distinctive impress), Paul can turn their whole argument on its head: only in Christ and in loving service (i.e. burden-bearing) can the law of Moses find its *real* fulfillment (Hong 1993: 177; Longenecker 1998: 86; Sanders 1983: 97-98).

Debate about Paul's motivation(s) for appending 'of Christ' to his affirmation of Gentile fulfillment of the law and the precise nuances this was intended to convey will surely continue for some time. For now, however, I want to leave this behind and press on to consider some of the consequences of this recent trend in interpretation for Pauline exegesis.

Consequences for Pauline Exegesis

The parameters of this present essay have not allowed me to pursue further the question of how Paul can affirm that uncircumcised Gentiles fulfill the 'law of Christ' when it is understood as a reference to the law of Moses. I have also not been able to deal adequately with how the 'law of Christ' understood as a reference to the law of Moses relates to Paul's sharp polemic against the law elsewhere in Galatians. My aim has necessarily been more modest. I have simply tried to draw attention to a recent interpretive trend and explore some of the reasons why one might want to see the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses.

In what remains, I would like briefly to take up the question of what consequences might follow for Pauline exegesis from this recent trend. First, in order to take the 'law of Christ' as a reference to the law of Moses, it would appear that one must be willing to allow some inconsistency or at least a lack of clarity in Paul's thinking on the law. It should be kept in mind that while Sanders denies that Paul knew a distinction between 'the whole law' (5.14) and the 'law of Christ' (6.2), he ends up having to admit that he does not find Paul entirely coherent on this issue.

Barclay appears to be less comfortable with Sanders's conclusion, but only rescues Paul from 'thoughtless self-contradiction concerning the

law' by arguing that Paul was not entirely forthcoming on how precisely it was that he could affirm that uncircumcised Gentiles fulfill the law (of Christ) (Barclay 1988: 144). *Ambiguity* is thus the 'price Paul has to pay for his attempt to claim the law in support of his own proposals for Christian morality' (Barclay 1988: 143-44). Indeed, it would also appear to be the price Paul's *interpreters* have to pay to preserve any modicum of coherence in the apostle's statements about the law.

One of the ironies, then, with this recent trend in interpretation is that while it appears to be a positive move for those wanting to see an abiding presence for Torah in Paul's thinking, it would also appear to be deleterious to the task of actually explaining Paul's view on the law of Moses for the life of the Christian. Here previous approaches to the 'law of Christ' continue to enjoy the stronger side of the argument: they can boast a greater degree of consistency and theoretical satisfaction than can this current alternative, at least in its present form.

Another important consequence of this recent trend in interpretation touches more directly on the place of the 'law of Christ' within the ongoing debate about Paul and the law. Sometimes in these discussions the 'law of Christ' finds itself somewhere on the periphery of the argument, often it would seem because scholars tacitly assume that the expression is an anomaly within the paradigm of what Paul has to say about the law. Taking the 'law of Christ' to be a reference to the law of Moses, however, could encourage exegetes to add the 'law of Christ' to the list of principal passages to deal with when constructing a picture of Paul's overall perspective on the law.

Categorizing the 'law of Christ' as an anomaly has several other consequences. First, as all are wont to do in the face of perceived anomalies, scholars are sometimes quick to develop ad hoc measures to bring the 'law of Christ' into alignment with their own interpretive expectations for Galatians, rather than letting the 'law of Christ' penetrate the core of those expectations (cf. Gager 1985: 198-99, 204-205). Occasionally, scholars will argue that *nomos* in this expression should be taken in a loose sense and thus interpreted as a circumlocution for Christian living, perhaps formulated with polemical intent (cf. Räisänen 1987: 82; Thompson 1991: 132-33; Kuula 1999: 189; Winger 2000: 544; Esler 1998: 231). Alternatively, some account for the phrase by attributing its origin, not to Paul, but to his opponents, though this can sometimes be a telltale sign that things do not quite fit with one's own expectations. After concluding that the 'law of Christ' is indeed an anomaly within Galatians, Donald Stoeke draws the following, somewhat overstated inference:

There is *no explanation* as to why Paul himself would coin or appropriate in a general way such an expression as this and use it as it is here in this debate, even though it might have been available to him from his own part or from the Judaism of his time. The *only explanation* for the appearance of this expression in this epistle is that it was part of the debate, that Paul—with polemical motivation—has seized it from the vocabulary of his opponents (Stoike 1971: 239, emphasis added).

Another consequence of viewing the ‘law of Christ’ as an anomaly is that it can result in the neglect of what would otherwise appear to be a rather exceptional and potentially highly illuminating phrase. This is not to suggest, of course, that only those who treat the ‘law of Christ’ as a reference to the law of Moses can take the expression seriously or think it important to the argument of Galatians or indeed Paul’s theology. There are numerous examples to prove that this is far from being the case. But it is to point out that it is often the fate of anomalies to be (perhaps inadvertently) relegated to beyond the boundaries of the practitioner’s conceptual purview. Because the ‘law of Christ’ violates the operative paradigm for reading Galatians, so the reasoning might go, it is probably a step or two removed from Paul’s primary theological concerns with law. As an anomaly, then, the phrase should only play a secondary, subsidiary role in any reconstruction of the argument and theology of Galatians. According to Räisänen, the ‘law of Christ’ is invoked ‘almost as an afterthought when Paul is no longer discussing the problem of the Torah at all’ (Räisänen 1987: 79; cf. Bammel 1997: 326).

Thus for quite a few scholars the phrase neither provides new insight into Paul’s understanding of the law nor serves as counterpoise to his overall negative portrayal of the law in Galatians. Consequently, they argue, the expression should not be used to link Paul’s contrasting negative and positive statements about the law. In fact, this point is vigorously pressed by some. Räisänen, for example, laments the fact that some of Paul’s positive statements about the law are being treated as references to the law of Moses and thus used as ‘important components in constructing Paul’s theology of the law’ (Räisänen 1992a: 53). As he explains:

What hitherto passed for playful off-the-cuff expressions have almost overnight become *important dogmatic statements of principle*, which form a bridge between the negative and the positive statements of the law in Paul, thereby offering a solution to one of the thorniest problems in Pauline scholarship (Räisänen 1992a: 53, emphasis added).

Instead, as another scholar has recently suggested, Paul's positive references to the law are to be thought of as 'aside comments' and as such should not overly sway one's exegesis (Pate 2000: 209). In the end, to cite the opinion of a third interpreter, these affirmations of the law are to be seen as mere 'passing notes' (Kuula 1999: 182). While they may have something to say about Paul's view of the law, it 'cannot be a very important or central notion' (Kuula 1999: 182). After all, in the words of Hans Dieter Betz: 'if the concept of the "law of Christ" were fundamental to Paul's theology, Paul would have introduced it at the beginning of the letter and the concept would play a more prominent role in his other letters' (Betz 1979: 301).

Thus the 'law of Christ' is at times discounted as providing any fundamental insight into Paul's thinking about the law of Moses (Kuula 1999: 182). Rather, as several of the aforementioned scholars would want to argue, the phrase should be understood as only tangentially related to the main thrust of Paul's perspective on the law. As a result, for these scholars the phrase is often left in the offing to be brought in only when the basic paradigm has already been established on the basis of Paul's *other* statements about the law (in chs 2–4). However, if this recent trend can sustain itself exegetically, something which is yet to be seen, it might serve to call into question the somewhat neglected status of this striking expression, and perhaps provide grounds for moving the 'law of Christ' from the periphery of discussions of Paul and the law closer to the center. This could in turn have far-reaching consequences for Pauline theology.

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