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Response to Papers Presented at the American Academy of Religion Conference

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDING*Response to Papers Presented at the
American Academy of Religion Conference*

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Papers presented on *The Torah and the Continuity of Scripture in Jewish Christian Dialogue* at the Christian Systematic Theology Section of the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in 2008 reveal creative attempts to depart from long-standing Christian views about the Torah. As the authors illustrate from decisions of church councils and statements of prominent theologians from antiquity through the present, the observance of the laws of the Torah has long been discouraged or flatly prohibited in Christianity. From an early date, many Christians said it was unacceptable to grant any binding status to (some of) the biblical commandments after the coming of Christ.¹ The contributors, while aware of this dominant tradition, directly challenge it. Provocatively, they reject, in their own distinctive ways, highly negative perceptions of the law, by creatively reinterpreting Paul's writings, despite these writings having long been used to support precisely these perceptions. While the specifics and the implications of their essays vary, all seek to carve out some positive space for the observance of the law.

David Rudolph, insisting on the continuing legitimacy of law-observant Christianity, emphatically challenges a millennia-old dominant tradition.² Co-presenters Jodie Boyer Hatlem and Douglas Johnson Hatlem,³ and Holly Taylor Coolman⁴ argue as well that observance of the law is not mutually excluded by faith in Christ. All seek to recover what they see as an authentic (if neglected) and more accommodating view of the law. The harsh denunciations of it in the past are unacceptable for various reasons. Furthermore, all are aware of the dangers of Christian supersessionism, and the negative views of Judaism encouraged by this tradition. Though none focus on the stunning post-WWII / post-Holocaust changes in Christians' views of Judaism and the Torah, their critical readings of historic Christian hostility to the Torah reflect their awareness of them.⁵

I want to concentrate on these three authors' essays, and specifically on their readings of Paul, for they draw on his letters in questioning or even undermining a near-monolithic Christian tradition. Some engage seriously with other Christian writers, especially Aquinas (Coolman), which situates their readings in the broader Christian tradition. All propose alternative interpretations of their own, and, in some cases, their readings are insightful. However, they are more often unconvincing, and frequently strained. A few verses bear too much weight, without full consideration of context. Paul's overriding concern with justifying the inclusion of Gentiles in an originally

¹ For a helpful recent study see Ronald E. Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church: Exploring the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

² "Paul's 'Rule in All the Congregations' (1 Cor 7:17-24) and God's 'Call' to Torah-defined Ecclesiological Variegation".

³ "Unmuzzling the Ox: Why the Torah Should Be Normative for 'Gentile' Christians".

⁴ "The Christological Torah".

⁵ Such changes have been encouraged by the work of scholars such as E. P. Sanders, Rosemary Reuther, James Dunn, and Amy-Jill Levine, for example.

all-Jewish movement; his eschatological expectations; the Christological assumptions undergirding his biblical interpretation—these and other features of his thought are neglected, as the authors sometimes focus on questions that were peripheral or irrelevant to Paul. I will argue that this lack of attention to central aspects of Paul's thought undermines attempts to enlist Paul's support for changed attitudes toward the observance of biblical law and thereby weakens the presentations. Furthermore, the omission of any discussion of the implications of their re-evaluations of Christian attitudes toward law-observance for (non-Christian) Jews today limits the relevance of the contributions to Jewish-Christian dialogue.

All of the authors offer their own exegesis of Paul's views on the law.⁶ They sometimes include critiques of the views of earlier commentators.⁷ The Hatlems, relying on 1 Cor 8-11, deny that Paul championed a "Gospel vs. Law distinction," and say that earlier interpreters of Paul failed to recognize that he affirmed the continuing authority of Torah law in his churches. Coolman, offering an admittedly "uncommon" reading in dialogue with Aquinas, makes a roughly similar claim that Paul did not deny the righteousness of the law or argue for its wholesale replacement. Rudolph, focusing on 1 Cor 7:17-24, believes that Paul expected that Jews who worshiped Jesus would remain law-observant, not forsaking any of the distinctions that separated them from Gentile members of the church (e.g., circumcision, food laws). Luke, he adds, also accepted the division of the church into a Jewish and Gentile wing, and obligatory Jewish observance of biblical law.⁸

Rudolph's exegesis of Paul is the most provocative and thorough, and provides a good starting point for my response. He goes against centuries of Christian tradition, implying that Paul's views in 1 Cor 7:17-24 have long been misunderstood. To summarize, he argues that Paul endorses a fundamental division of the church into two groups of believers: Jews and Gentiles. Paul demands that the former continue to observe all traditional Jewish biblical laws. He writes, "Jesus-believing Jews [are] to continue to live the circumcised life as a matter of calling and not to assimilate into Gentile lifestyle." This reflects Paul's favorable views both of observance of the Torah by Jewish believers and of a divided church, with Jewish and Gentile factions.

I would like to offer two critiques. First, Rudolph, by focusing on only a few verses, does not attend to their larger context. He neglects to consider how Paul's views fit into his overall argument in the chapter, and the letter as a whole. Second, he does not consider the intense eschatological fervor that undergirds everything Paul says. This seriously compromises his attempts to derive rules for a future church from Paul's writings, which in many cases (such as in 1 Corinthians) reflect his expectation of an imminent end of days.⁹

⁶ For an important survey of research scholarship see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

⁷ On modern attempts to challenge the traditional view of Paul, see John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21-42.

⁸ Jacob Jervell's works, which deal extensively with Luke's views of Judaism, are surprisingly absent from Rudolph's analysis; see Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002). Rudolph overstates Luke's favorability toward the law; see Edvin Larsson, "Paul: Law and Salvation," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 425-36.

⁹ Because of different audiences, circumstances, and reasons for writing, comparisons of Paul's views between different letters is always complex. For this reason, I have chosen to focus here primarily on 1 Corinthians, which is also the primary source for Rudolph's interpretation.

My first critique has to do with the context of 7:17-24 in the letter. Rudolph's main focus is on (in his words) Paul's views of "Jewish continuity." By this, he refers to a dispute over whether Jews can remain Torah observant in a church otherwise filled with Gentile believers. However, the only hint that this is a concern in the entire letter is Paul's statement that those who are circumcised should not wish that they were uncircumcised (7:18-19). It is doubtful that this letter is even suitable for such an investigation into Paul's views of Judaism and the ritual of circumcision. It was written to a majority- or exclusively-Gentile church (12:2), and Paul is not interested in the issue of Jewish continuity; the topic of circumcision appears only here, in these verses. Paul mentions it only to buttress a different point, unrelated to Jewish ritual *per se*. In a community riven by disagreements over issues large and small, he repeatedly implores believers to overlook distinctions that provoke inner-church disputes and are ultimately irrelevant to their salvation.

Some distinctions threaten to tear the community apart. For example, Paul complains bitterly that the wealthy shun the poor (11:21), and that believers form factions under various leaders (3:4). He responds by emphasizing in all cases the need for unity, and the insignificance of that which divides them. In particular, in chapter seven he responds to issues that presumably provoked disagreement, over sexuality and marriage, and his underlying assumption is that such disputes can be accommodated.¹⁰ He may have preferences about how individuals should behave (he favors celibacy if possible; 7:7), but is unwilling to force them on others (7:6-7). Above all, disagreements need not be disastrous or divisive, and can be relativized by an awareness of what is most important: church unity and harmony (1:10; 12:25).

The community was untouched by any of the disputes over Jewish law, unlike in other places (e.g., Galatia). The controversies in Corinth—over sexuality and incest, worship, relations with outsiders, meals, etc.—never include disagreements over, for example, circumcision or *kashrut*. In light of these disputes, Paul's mention of circumcision is illustrative, to make a point about the irrelevance of present distinctions in a community whose final redemption is imminent (see below). It seems almost impossible that Paul in this section is responding to earlier questions about circumcision. The topic is treated cursorily, as part of his plea for an acceptance of difference. His readers need to overcome painful divisions in the community and to overlook differences in social status and religious practice. Their focus should be above all on maintaining their shared faith. This is Paul's main concern, and his different examples—e.g., circumcision does not matter, slavery does not matter—are meant to demonstrate this same point.¹¹

I disagree with Rudolph's claim that Paul's statements in these few verses are a "lynchpin" for reconstructing his views on "the church as a body of Jews and Gentiles." Paul does nothing to underscore the significance of this section, nor does he ever mention such a "rule" (7:17) again in other letters. It is speculative to call this a "universal" rule for future Christians (as Rudolph does eight times), to be followed when considering the place of law-observant Jewish Christians in the church. Even the word "rule" (or words related to the same Greek root) is used elsewhere in Paul's letters without any special emphasis, and sometimes means simply "instruction" (1 Cor 9:14; 11:34; 16:1). Rudolph hints at a complex methodological question, without unfortunately addressing it: how does one generalize about Paul's views when he expresses ideas in one

¹⁰ On reconstructing the questions to which Paul responds, see John Coolidge Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

¹¹ Rudolph energetically argues that (as he sees it) Paul's endorsement of both circumcision for Jews and uncircumcision for Gentiles is not equivalent to an endorsement of continued bondage for slaves and liberty for free persons. However, this unpalatable conclusion should stand, as the same point is made in a conclusion to the entire section: "In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God" (7:24).

letter that are either missing or contradicted in another? I wish Rudolph had explored this question, for the occasional nature of Paul's correspondence complicates any attempt to describe Paul's views in general from solitary statements. Instead, Rudolph too easily moves from one statement to just such a generalization.

To the extent that Paul mentions circumcision in 1 Corinthians at all, there is no hint, *pace* Rudolph, that he insists on its observance. Rudolph argues that Paul is not offering Jewish believers a choice about circumcision, but issuing a demand. That is, Paul does not simply concede that some might cling to these practices. He affirmatively insists that they remain binding. However, the verses Rudolph relies on—7:18-22—are at best a grudging accommodation. Even if Rudolph is correct that Paul, in saying that “circumcision is nothing” (7:19), is not saying that it is worthless but only “less important” than faith in Christ, this proves little about its necessity.¹² At most it is toleration, in the pejorative sense of the term.¹³

Second, the eschatological context of 1 Corinthians is essential to understanding Paul's views (and may make them more palatable; e.g., his views on slavery). This chapter reflects Paul's intense eschatological expectations. Repeatedly he emphasizes the nearness of the end (e.g., 7:26, 29, 31; also, 1:8; 10:11; 11:26).¹⁴ Though Rudolph largely ignores this feature, one must remember that all Paul says reflects his belief that the end of days is almost here. It is this which justifies his advice. His indifference to traditional distinctions between believers—including his indifference (seen by Rudolph as support) for circumcision—reflects this, for in the last moments before Christ's return it is best simply to ignore them. Paul is offering guidance for a brief period, rather than offering long-term guidance to a non-raptured church.¹⁵

Rudolph neglects this by applying Paul's views to circumstances unrelated to those Paul had in mind. While Paul thought “the present form of this world is passing away” (7:31), Rudolph thinks it is possible to draw on a few verses in order to, he says, “sustain” a church that continues indefinitely in time. But Paul did not want to sustain a church, in the sense that Rudolph uses the term, as offering fixed rules for a stable community. Paul seeks only to emphasize what is most important for the community at a moment of great intensity and fervor, while damping down internal divisions. These could be ignored, for presumably they were temporary.¹⁶ Also, in Corinth, these divisions have nothing to do with Jew-Gentile conflicts. Rudolph's overriding goal is inculcating respect for Jews as Jews in an almost entirely Gentile church. In his reading of Paul, he assumes a stable state of affairs, so that Paul's teachings can be used to foster a balanced and respectful relationship between different, even conflicting Christian groups. Interestingly, Rudolph fails to grapple with the contentious issues that disturbed Paul's churches, such as the tensions in mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile believers in which Jews observe restrictive food laws. These would inevitably be reignited if his reading of Paul were accepted. I wondered

¹² The language is difficult, but repeated Greek “*me*” (not) suggests a conditional request, not a demand.

¹³ Other passages in Paul's letters, though likewise addressed to predominantly Gentile readers, reveal a more hostile attitude that is difficult to reconcile with Rudolph's positive portrayal of Paul's attitude toward circumcision; cf. Gal 6:15. On the difficulty of reconstructing Paul's attitude toward Jews who support circumcision, see Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1983), 5; Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 214-15.

¹⁴ An important treatment of Paul's eschatology can be found in J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 135-81.

¹⁵ Naturally, his indifference to slavery seems far less defensible when eschatological anticipation waned, and often became a justification for a cruel practice.

¹⁶ In other communities, divisions over Jewish law were so heated they could not be ignored, of course.

whether Rudolph would have any more success dealing with them than Paul, for they were painfully divisive.¹⁷

I should make clear that, logically, Paul's eschatological context does not render everything he says irrelevant to later readers seeking religious guidance from these texts. My critique is not all-encompassing, as if Paul's expectation of the end completely undermines the relevance of all his views in later generations. However, the verses that Rudolph cites directly reflect Paul's eschatological expectations, and cannot be separated from them, for this passage in particular appears in a section focused on behavior before the eschaton. In this case, it is essential to situate these verses in this eschatological context, and Rudolph's argument is weakened by his not doing so.

Coolman is interested in the writings of both Paul and Aquinas, with the latter's views used to clarify the former's. She seeks to rebut the (in her eyes) overly simplistic claim that faith in Christ and observance of the law are mutually exclusive. I hoped for some explicit delineation of her comparative methodology or even her reasons for juxtaposing these two thinkers, for I was puzzled by her movement backwards across many centuries and between vastly different contexts. However, I do think Aquinas' struggle to explain why the so-called "ceremonial law" (i.e., distinctive Jewish practices) was not irrelevant despite Christians' refusal to observe it can be clarified by Paul's own writings. As I will argue, similar concerns are present for both writers. Unlike Coolman, I do not seek to find some coherence in Aquinas' justification for rejecting some parts of the Torah and affirming the binding authority of others. Rather, I want to address this attempt at division of the Torah at a more fundamental level, and it is here that Paul's views are relevant. Paul too faced a strikingly similar situation—his opposition to parts of the law—and his response I believe enables us to understand not Aquinas' complex division (it is far more self-conscious than Paul's) but rather his *motivation* for even offering such a complex division of the law into "four forms." This ultimately makes it possible to appreciate his arguments. First, I will explain Paul's motivation, for this, I believe, is the proper starting point; then, the relevance to Aquinas' will be demonstrated.

Paul, as a missionary to the Gentiles, consistently denies that they need to observe Jewish law in order to join his churches. While a thorough investigation of his views of the Torah cannot be offered here, his primary motivation is clear: to remove barriers to their inclusion.¹⁸ Those Christians who demanded observance of distinctive Jewish rituals such as circumcision and food laws (e.g., Gal 2:4, 12; 5:12) risked dividing the church into separate factions that were unable even to eat together. Also, such demands, which would be onerous for non-Jews, could hinder his missionary work. I believe that Paul's opposition to what he calls works of the law (Rom 3:27; 4:2; Gal 2:16; 3:5-12) reflects concerns with the disruption that demands for observance caused in majority- or exclusively-Gentile communities. By focusing on the disruptive threat of the demand that Gentile believers follow biblical law, I do not want to deny that Paul also offers theological (not just pragmatic) critiques of the demand: namely, he rejects the idea that anything, other than faith in Christ as Lord and Messiah, made one righteous before God (Rom 10; 1 Cor 7). However, with his overriding interest in unity and inclusion, he simply could not accept this demand.

This is the relevant point to be made here, for Paul's thinking, as E. P. Sanders most prominently has shown, moves backward, from the emphasis that all people can be saved exclusively

¹⁷ E.g., Acts 10-11; 15; Gal 2.

¹⁸ See the classical study by Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

through faith in Jesus (“the solution”) to the critique of the law (“the problem”).¹⁹ The “solution” is where he begins, for this is the status in his own churches: Gentile communities united by shared affirmations of Jesus’ messianic status. The problem with the law is when it raises barriers to this ideal *koinonia* (1 Cor 1:9), as inevitably happened when rules about food or circumcision were introduced, and his critique follows from there. Still, as a Jew, Paul was unwilling to simply deny the authority of Torah, prompting complex ruminations about why it was given and yet was not obligatory for membership in an originally all-Jewish movement (Rom 7; Gal 3).²⁰ He even argues that Gentiles who do not observe the law fulfill it better than those who observe it in the traditional way (Rom 2:26; Phil 3:3). Nonetheless, he faces overriding reality, in which the law is likely not observed by Gentile believers and would stand in the way of that which is more important to Paul. His justifications for dispensing with the demands of the law, and even his harshest statements about the law (e.g., Rom 7:8; Gal 3:21-25), are attempts to explain both what has already occurred (an influx of non-law observant Gentile believers) and what Paul independently concluded (that faith in Christ unifies the community and nothing should be allowed to divide them). This is his starting point, his “solution,” apart from which one cannot understand him. Paul’s arguments, in which he valiantly (some would say incoherently²¹) struggles to explain why he adopts a position of unprecedented hostility to the law, reflect these prior convictions.

The weakness of Coolman’s argument is her failure to recognize that the same logic—i.e., moving from a prior conviction, based on present circumstances, to an after-the-fact justification—explains Aquinas’ views as well. She makes her own valiant attempt to show how Aquinas justifies two apparently contradictory claims—the ceremonial laws of the Torah are “no longer to be kept,” yet the ceremonial laws are “the embodied affirmation of that [which is] true”—by arguing that Aquinas is not really supporting abrogation as such. Rather, she says, he claims that Gentile Christians, by following Jesus even when not observing the law themselves, nonetheless are faithful to it. According to this redefinition of observance, worship of the one who himself followed the law (i.e., Jesus) is comparable, even superior to, actual observance. Sometimes this is because the law is (in her words) “a pointer to Christ,” not obligatory statutes; sometimes this is because observance means, vaguely, that “relatedness to the Law” happens through Christ. These specific claims, though murky, are actually far less important than Aquinas’ underlying motivation for making them: to justify now-universal Christian opposition to observance of Jewish law. While it may be interesting to see how Aquinas does this, one cannot fail to note that all his arguments reflect this underlying reality; he could not but argue this. As in Paul’s case, of course, it is not an easy argument to make, for the law makes no provisions for its own abrogation.²² This does not matter, for Aquinas’ conclusion is completely fixed before he even begins, as it is with Paul.

Without denying the value of scholarly efforts to grasp Aquinas’ or Paul’s arguments, I regret Coolman’s failure to indicate some awareness that their reasoning cannot be understood apart from their contexts and motives. Presenting the arguments that one can be faithful to the law while simultaneously rejecting it, while likely persuasive to those who already agree, is alone of limited value. The underlying assumptions should not be neglected, for these make the

¹⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 552.

²⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 103.

²¹ Heikki Raisanen, *Paul and the Law* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1983).

²² Coolman incorrectly posits a rabbinic parallel to Christian divisions of the law into two categories—binding commandments and abrogated commandments. While rabbis sometimes divide the law into different categories or prioritize a few commandments as especially important (b. Shab. 31a; b. Mak. 24a), they do not do this in order to justify non-observance.

argument explicable. However, Coolman does neglect this in her analyses of selected verses from Paul's writings. For example, when Paul criticizes Torah observance—for example, saying “believers died to the law” because the law makes fallen humans aware of, and inclined to commit, the sins it prohibits (Rom 7:4)—he does not deny that the law is from God and meant to aid humanity. Coolman rightly says that Paul does not believe that the law “has been abrogated or spiritualized.” Nonetheless, the force of his argument is undeniable, as he, like Aquinas centuries later, seeks to square the circle of simultaneous rejection and acceptance. Paul believed that his position “fulfilled” the law, to quote Coolman (and Paul; Rom 8:4). But the argument alone reveals little about the motivations for making such an argument, especially since the argument alone would have struck (and strikes) most Jews as unacceptable. By simply addressing the issue of *how* Paul defends this position, without attention to the vital “meta-issue” of *why* Paul, and later Aquinas, defends this position, Coolman overlooks a critical issue in Christian understandings of the validity and authority of Torah.

Finally, in the Hatlems' paper, they helpfully highlight the intensity of continuing disagreements in the church over observance of the law and the diverse topics for which these disputes were relevant. These could even be more disruptive than disputes over Christology, though scholars tend to focus on the latter. It is true, as they argue, that there was a range of opinions in early Christianity regarding the authority of the law, despite the perception of widespread rejection. Their own views, though less radical or far-reaching than Rudolph's, offer a similar challenge to traditional interpretations of Paul's writings.

They focus on 1 Cor 8-11, and Paul's citation of biblical laws in response to questions about, for example, salaries for missionaries and consumption of food offered to idols. In one example from this section (9:9), Paul says the ox that is to be allowed to eat while working in the fields (according to Deut 25:4) refers to the apostle who is to be paid for his work. The Hatlems' argument is that Paul cites this law because he believed that “lessons from the Torah are for [the readers'] instruction.” That is, for Paul, this verse is a legally binding commandment. They distinguish it from parts of the Bible that they say Paul used not for legal instruction but rather for guidance in “salvation history.” Alternately, they set up a contrast between Paul's use of the Bible elsewhere only as a “disciplinarian” (Gal 3:25) and its authority here to offer a “theological norm.” The latter interpretation, but not the former, should “exercise authority” in the Christian communities.

They recognize that Paul is interpreting the verse in a way that resembles traditional allegory. He admits that his concern is not for the ox, but rather for the rights of apostles. Nonetheless, they believe that their interpretation goes further than that of “many” other interpreters of Paul, because they see here not strictly speaking an allegorical interpretation but what they call a “jurisprudential” interpretation. That is, Paul appears to have been quite like other ancient Jews in applying a specific written law to other related cases in order to offer binding rules for community life.²³ He too relied on the Torah for such practical guidance, contrary to what, they suggest, many others have said, thereby demonstrating that he never declared the law “null and void.”

Their use of terms however confuses the argument, because important terms are not defined. While “jurisprudential” is said to be “casuistic or legal” and presumably binding in a practical sense, “allegory,” especially when undefined, does not mean its opposite. Paul's jurisprudence (if that is the right word) is surely allegorical, at least as commonly used by ancient Jews and Christians, for in making one thing stand for another he is able to apply a verse to an entirely

²³ Related to this are rabbinic rules of legal reasoning; see H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 20-30.

different topic from the topic addressed in the verse's original context.²⁴ The same criticism applies to their use of "salvation history" and "disciplinarian," which are also not defined or explained. They seem to use these to refer to Pauline citations of the Torah that have no binding authority on the believer's life, though neither term seems correct. Salvation history, a scholarly term for God's actions in history on behalf of his people, is not appropriate here. Likewise, disciplinarian is not helpful either, for it is a Greek term *paidagogos* that Paul harshly applies to the Torah for its supposed role in condemning pre-Christian Gentiles. Actually, such a formal division is not indicated with any such technical term in Paul's writings, and he does not make any explicit divisions of this kind.

That is not to deny that Paul's views of the authority of the commandments vary. This leads to a more serious weakness in their argument. They argue that they demonstrate that the dichotomy, affirmed by most interpreters, of "Gospel versus Law" is incorrect, for Paul, in this example from 1 Corinthians, cites Torah law as a legal guide for the community. However, this neglects what is most contentious about Paul's view of the Torah, for he does set up just such a dichotomy. Admittedly, Paul, like other Jews, often appeals to the Bible to prove a point (about ethics, worship, eschatology, etc.). The Hatlems are therefore right, though no one disputes this, for citations of the Torah to provide guidance for his community fill his writings, as one might expect. In those cases, there is no Gospel-law dichotomy.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that Paul, in his mission of preaching the Gospel to unconverted Gentiles and founding churches in which such Gentiles are no less members than Jews, emphatically argues that sometimes the Bible is not binding. It does not furnish legally-authoritative rules. In those cases, the Gospel and the law *are* mutually exclusive; these are at the heart of Paul's polemic against the law. For example, though some Christians believed otherwise (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5; Gal 6:12), he angrily rejects the demand that those who seek membership in the people of God must undergo circumcision. Paul is strenuously opposed to a few distinctly Jewish rituals that threatened the equal status of the Gentiles. That these are, some said, required by the Torah, is irrelevant to Paul. They hinder the spread of the Gospel, and set up a standard of behavior likely to divide the church.

By arguing that Paul is in a sense close to non-Christian Jews in his "Gospel centered relationship to the Law," for he like they read parts of the Bible jurisprudentially, the Hatlems understate Paul's radicalism. On certain laws, Paul's Gospel-centered relationship is typically manifested in his reading the Bible against itself. That is, he rejects straightforward biblical commandments (e.g., circumcision) by midrashic readings of other parts of the Bible (e.g., Rom 4; Gal 3). The purpose of such readings is to rebut attempts to force Gentile believers to follow the commandments. To call this in any way a "relationship to the Law," as they do, is to overlook the surprisingly hostile conclusions he draws with regard to the binding authority of some of the commandments (e.g., Phil 3:7).

Furthermore, there is a distinctly Pauline hermeneutical assumption in his interpretations that reveals once again a tension between the demands of (spreading) the Gospel and observance of the law. While all ancient readers in fact picked and chose how they read a verse—sometimes more true to its original context, sometimes allegorically—Paul's method is remarkable because of his statement of unprecedented freedom in interpretation: "to those outside the law I became as one outside the law" (9:21). He elevates his method to the level of a principle, saying he can, in essence, pick and choose which parts of the law he will follow, depending on his missionary

²⁴ James L. Kugel, "Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Late Forms of Biblical Exegesis," in *Early Biblical Interpretation*, ed. James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986): 9-106 (207).

needs.²⁵ Most often, the parts he opposes are the distinctive Jewish rituals that might divide the community or elevate one group of believers above another. That he does, in some cases, cite a biblical verse in order to establish obligatory norms of behavior for a community does not, however, contradict his fundamental assertion of his right to freely choose whether to follow the law. Even if his decision, as in this case cited by the Hatlems from 1 Corinthians, is that the law must be followed, the claim that he can choose when to do so inevitably undermines the binding authority of the law. The Hatlems' claim then that Paul transmits a "halakha" based on the Bible is incorrect, at least in the legal sense, for the law has no independent legal status separate from Paul's own *ad hoc* judgment. Paul at least does not put himself under the law. If the law is sometimes binding, and sometimes not binding, then the law is not a "jurisprudential norm" but an occasionally useful prop to Paul's missionary and leadership strategies.

In all these essays, the contributors offer readings of Paul that reflect their own religious views about the proper relationship between Christianity and the Hebrew Bible. For example, Coolman encourages Gentile Christians to "recognize the importance of the Torah." The Hatlems cite Paul's writings in order to convince contemporary Christians that the "Mosaic Law can and should exercise authority within Christian churches." Rudolph uses Paul's writings to buttress a broad defense of modern Messianic (Christian) Judaism, his own religious tradition, in which believers fully observe Jewish law. This argument is made at length in his conclusion. These are vital issues in contemporary Christianity, and this panel encourages such reflections. While one might question how much we learn about Paul's actual views by the reception they receive from later Christians, all these authors express the hope that their interpretations are not just correct but also acceptable and beneficial for their religious communities. There is an implied challenge in all their essays to their co-religionists, that they heed their interpretations, a sort of test of the truth of their exegesis.²⁶

Yet there is an insularity to the essays that limits their relevance, for all the authors (with scattered exceptions) look inward, to their own Christian traditions. They propose new understandings of Paul and the law to modern Christians, that is, to co-religionists. However, they almost entirely neglect to consider how a shift toward a more positive view of law-observance might affect Jewish-Christian dialogue and relations, the focus of this AAR panel. One wonders if they are restrained by excessive humility or even indifference. The implications of some of these arguments about the law, while perhaps daunting for even the most open-minded Christian, cannot be avoided. For as the authors themselves show, Christians have long distinguished themselves from Jews precisely by their rejection of the law as literally followed by Jews. But none actually take up this subject.

The law is of course also a central feature of Jewish identity in both Paul's day and our own, and deeply connected to the fragmented relationship between Jews and Christians. The failure to consider how these arguments might affect the relationship between Jews and Christians is disappointing. If Mosaic law can function as a legal code for Christian churches (the Hatlems), if the "ceremonial" commandments are not simply moot after Jesus (Coolman), if Christian churches can affirm a positive value for Torah observance by fellow Christians (Rudolph), then serious thinking about how Christians have viewed *Jewish* observance of the Torah is in order.

²⁵ Unlike the verses cited by Rudolph, this verse does suggest a general principle, at least for Paul's missionary activity.

²⁶ Rudolph's plea that contemporary *Christians* respect Jewish Christians' continued observance of the laws for the Sabbath, food, etc., is unusual; more often Messianic Jews have sought *non-Christian Jews'* recognition that they too are Jews despite worshipping Jesus.

Christians have long derided such observance, and claimed that the Bible was only properly understood by Christians or was even an exclusively Christian text.²⁷ None of these modern authors say anything like this, but their re-evaluations of near-universal Christian convictions necessitates such a consideration. I would have welcomed some reflection on this vital and directly relevant topic.

²⁷ This idea appears as early as the second century; see Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 123. See also Rowan A. Greer, "The Christian Bible and its Interpretation," in *Early Biblical Interpretation*, ed. James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986): 107-99 (142-46).