

QUESTION 1

What Does the Word *Law* Mean in the Scriptures?

The word for law in the Old Testament is *torah*; in the New Testament it is *nomos*. It is often said that *torah* in the Old Testament does not refer so much to commands (to the *keeping* of commandments) as it does to *instruction* (to teaching). According to this view, the word *torah* does not focus on admonitions, commands, and requirements. Instead, the word has a more general referent, so that it includes God's *instruction* more generally. Hence, if one follows this view, the word *torah* also includes God's promises to save his people, his threats if they do not obey, and also narrative accounts that we find, for example, in the Pentateuch. But such a wide definition for the word *torah* is almost certainly wrong.

Torah usually refers to what human beings are commanded to do.¹ In some instances, a broader sense (that goes beyond commands and prescriptions) aptly captures the meaning of *torah* (e.g., Job 22:22; Ps. 94:12; Prov. 1:8; 4:2; 13:14; Isa. 2:3; 42:4; 51:4; Mal. 2:6–8), although even in some of these passages the instruction probably consisted of what was required by the law. In the vast majority of instances, however, the word *torah* focuses on doing what is commanded in the law, that is, the commands and requirements that were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The emphasis on observing the law and carrying out what it demands is evident from the verbs of which *torah* is the direct object (see figure 1a).

1. Cf. Stephen Westerholm, "Torah, *nomos*, and Law: A Question of 'Meaning,'" *SR* 15 (1986): 327–36; Douglas J. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* (1983): 73–100.

Other terms that are used with the word *torah* and are roughly synonymous with it confirm that the term *torah* focuses on regulations and prescriptions (see figure 1b). All these words convey the idea that Israel must obey what God has required in his law.

We see something quite similar with verbs that describe a wrong response to the law (see figure 1c). In every instance Israel’s disobedience to the law, i.e., their failure to keep what the Lord demanded, is featured.

FIGURE 1A: VERBS USED FOR OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW	
Keep	Gen. 26:5; Deut. 17:19; 28:58; 31:12; Josh. 22:5; 1 Kings 2:3; 1 Chron. 22:12; Ps. 119:34, 44; Prov. 28:4; 29:18; Jer. 16:11; Ezek. 44:24
Walk in	Exod. 16:4; 2 Kings 10:31; Ps. 78:10; Jer. 26:4; 32:23; 44:10; Dan. 9:10
Do	Deut. 27:26; 29:29; 31:12; 32:46; Josh. 1:7–8
Break	Ps. 119:126
Obey	Isa. 42:24
FIGURE 1B: WORDS FOR GOD'S COMMANDS	
Commandment(s)	Gen. 26:5; Exod. 16:28; Deut. 30:10; Josh. 22:5; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 17:34; 2 Chron. 19:10; Neh. 9:13
Statute(s)	Gen. 26:5; Exod. 18:16; Deut. 4:8; 30:10; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 17:13, 34; 2 Chron. 19:10; 2 Chron. 33:8; Ezra 7:10; Neh. 9:13; Jer. 44:10; Ezek. 43:11
Rule(s)	Lev. 26:46; Deut. 4:8; 33:10; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 17:34; 2 Chron. 19:10; 33:8; Ezra 7:10; Ps. 89:30
Testimony(ies)	1 Kings 2:3; Jer. 44:23
FIGURE 1C: VERBS USED FOR DISOBEDIENCE TO THE LAW	
Forget	Hos. 4:6; Ps. 119:61, 109, 153
Transgress	Dan 9:11
Abandon	2 Chron 12:1
Forsake	Pss. 89:30; 119:53; Jer. 9:13
Rejects	Isa. 5:24; Jer. 6:19; Amos 2:4
Do violence to	Ezek. 22:26; Zeph. 3:4
<i>Note:</i> The list of verbs in figure 1a is representative, not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the examples demonstrate that in the Scriptures a focus on the prescriptions of the law is pervasive.	

Often a particular regulation is introduced especially in Leviticus and sometimes in Numbers, with the words, “this is the law.”² The law often is associated with a book.³ In most instances what is written or found in the book are the *regulations* of the law. The emphasis on *doing* what the law commands, on *keeping* it, and on *obeying* what the Lord has prescribed is quite extraordinary. When the word *torah* occurs in the Old Testament, the emphasis is not on instruction in terms of teaching, as if the word *rehearses* God’s saving work on behalf of his people. It is quite the contrary. The term *torah* concentrates on what God *requires* his people to do: his commands, statutes, and laws.

The use of the term *law* (*nomos*) in the New Testament is comparable. In some instances the word *law* refers to the Old Testament Scriptures, and the focus is on the Pentateuch: “the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21; cf. Matt. 11:13). In some texts “Law” alone seems to refer broadly to the Old Testament Scriptures (Matt. 22:36; Luke 10:26; John 7:49; 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 14:21, 34; Gal. 4:21), though in some of these texts a particular precept from the Mosaic law may be in view as well (John 7:49; 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 14:34). Nevertheless, in the New Testament, as we saw in the Old Testament, the term *law* most often refers to what is commanded in the Mosaic law. Matthew speaks of every “iota” and “dot” of the law (Matt. 5:18), and it is clear from the next verse that he is referring here to the “commandments” found in the law (Matt. 5:19). Elsewhere Matthew considers particular matters commanded in the law (Matt. 22:36; 23:23). Similarly, Luke often uses the word *law* to refer to what is prescribed in statutes (Luke 2:22, 23, 24, 27, 39; Acts 23:3) or uses the term to refer collectively to what is commanded in the Sinai covenant (Acts 6:13; 7:53; 13:39; 15:5; 21:24; 22:3, 12; 25:8). Similarly, when John does not use the word *law* to refer to the Pentateuch or the Scriptures, he uses it to refer to the Mosaic law (John 7:19, 23, 51; 8:17; 19:7).

Paul regularly thinks of the law in terms of its commands, and this is evident because he speaks of those who sin by violating the law,⁴ of the need

2. Leviticus 6:9; 7:1, 37; 11:46; 12:7; 13:59; 14:2; 15:32; Numbers 5:29; 6:13; 19:2. Again, the list is representative. The regulation in view in some texts relates to multiple instructions that are given.

3. Deuteronomy 17:18; 28:58, 61; 29:21; 30:10; 31:24, 26; Joshua 1:8; 8:31; 23:6; 24:26; 2 Kings 14:6; 22:8; 2 Chronicles 17:9; 25:4; 34:14–15; Nehemiah 8:1, 3, 8. Or, the law refers to what is written in the Old Testament (Exod. 24:7; Deut. 28:58; 29:21; 30:10; Josh. 1:8; 23:6; 2 Kings 14:6; 1 Chron. 16:40; 2 Chron. 23:18; 25:4; 31:3; 35:26; Ezra 3:2; Neh. 8:14; 10:36; Dan. 9:11, 13).

4. Romans 2:12, 23, 25; 3:20; 4:15; 5:20; 7:2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 22; 8:3, 7. Note how “commandment” is used alternately with “law” in Romans 7, referring specifically to the tenth commandment of the Decalogue (Rom. 7:8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13).

to do what the law says,⁵ and of relying upon and being instructed in the law (Rom. 2:17, 18, 20).⁶ When Paul speaks of righteousness (Rom. 3:21; 9:31; 10:4; Gal. 2:21; 3:11; 5:4; Phil. 3:6, 9) or the inheritance (Rom. 4:13–14, 16; Gal. 3:18) not being attained via the law, he has in mind doing what the law commands. Most scholars now agree that “works of law” refers to the deeds required by the law (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5; 10),⁷ as does the phrase “the law of commandments” (Eph. 2:15). The law is conceived of as a body of commands summarized in the Mosaic covenant, which came at a certain time in history (Rom. 5:13; 7:4, 6; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20, 21; 15:56; Gal. 2:19; 3:17, 19, 21), and the phrase “under law” fits here as well (Rom. 6:14, 15; 7:1; Gal. 3:23, 24; 4:4, 5; 5:18). In Hebrews the word *law* always refers to the commands of the Mosaic law and to the Mosaic covenant (Heb. 7:5, 11, 12, 19, 28; 8:4; 9:19, 22; 10:1, 8, 28), with the focus being on the prescriptions for priests and sacrifices that are offered.

Scholars debate intensely whether in some cases Paul uses the word *law* metaphorically to refer to a “principle” or “rule” (see Rom. 3:27; 7:21, 23, 25; 8:2) or whether in every instance the Mosaic law is in view. Deciding this matter is not vital for the purposes of this book, but it seems preferable to think that Paul uses the term metaphorically in these texts.⁸ It is hard to conceive of Paul saying that the law in conjunction with the Spirit frees people from sin (Rom. 8:2), since elsewhere Paul emphasizes that those who are “under law” are under sin. In addition, it is most natural to take the noun “law” as a direct object in Romans 7:21 (“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand”) instead of an accusative of general reference (“So I find with reference to the law”). And if “law” is the direct object, the term is clearly metaphorical. Finally, it is quite awkward to say that the phrase “another law” (Rom. 7:23) refers to the Mosaic law. It is more natural to conclude that Paul is playing on the term *law*, using it to refer to another principle or rule in his members. Indeed, understanding what Paul might possibly mean by saying the Mosaic law is in one’s members is difficult, but it makes eminent sense to think of another “principle” or “power” in one’s members. Hence, it is more likely that Paul uses the term *law* in some texts to refer to a principle or power.

5. Romans 2:13–14, 26, 27; 8:4; 10:5; 13:8, 10; 1 Corinthians 9:8; Galatians 3:12, 13; 5:3, 14; 6:13; 1 Timothy 1:7, 8, 9. Here “fulfilling” and “doing” the law are placed together, but the two terms must also be distinguished.

6. Older scholarship distinguished between “law” with the article and “law” without the article. Virtually all agree today that positing distinctions based on the presence or absence of the article is illegitimate. So Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 33–34.

7. See the discussion on works of law in question 5.

8. I have changed my mind more than once on this matter. In support of the Mosaic law, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1988), 392–95. In support of a metaphorical reading, see Douglas J. Moo, *Romans 1–8*, WEC (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 251–53, 487–88, 490–92.

SUMMARY

In both the Old and New Testaments, the word *law* focuses on the commands and regulations of the Mosaic covenant. In most instances the word *law* does not refer to instruction in a general sense but concentrates on what God demands that his people do. In both the Old and New Testaments this is apparent, for verbs like “keep” and “do” are linked with the law.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Does the word *torah* (law) in the Old Testament focus on instruction in a general sense or on God’s commands?
2. What is the relationship in the Old Testament between the law and the Mosaic covenant?
3. What meaning does the word *law* usually have in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline letters?
4. What other meanings does the term *law* have in the New Testament?
5. Do you think Paul ever uses the word *law* to mean “principle” or “rule”?