

WORD STUDY: ΝΟΜΟΣ

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## WORD STUDY: ΝΟΜΟΣ

### *Lexical Data for νόμος*

#### Statistics

The New Testament authors use the word νόμος (law) 194 times in 154 verses. The overwhelming majority of these occurrences are in Paul's epistles: 121. Luke-Acts contains twenty-six uses of νόμος. John's Gospel has fifteen occurrences; his epistles and Revelation have none. Hebrews contains νόμος fourteen times; James ten times. Mark, Peter, and Jude do not use the word at all.

In Paul's writings, Romans contains the most occurrences of νόμος: seventy-four. Galatians has the heaviest saturation of the word: its six chapters contain thirty-two uses of νόμος. First Corinthians has nine occurrences, mostly in introductory formulae for Old Testament quotations. Six other instances of νόμος are scattered through Ephesians (1), Philippians (3), and I Timothy (2).

#### Definition

The New Testament uses νόμος with one main sense. At its most basic level, νόμος simply means "a governing principle or rule." In the New Testament, νόμος can *judge* (κρίνω – Jn. 7.51), *rule* (κυριεύω – Rom. 7.1), *bind* (δέω – Rom. 7.2), and *appoint* (καθίστημι – Heb. 7.28). Νόμος can do these things because it was put into place authoritatively (δίδωμι – Jn. 7.19; κείμαι – I Tim. 1.9).

Several verbs indicate active obedience to the authority of νόμος. These verbs include *doing* (ποιέω – Jn. 7.19; πράσσω – Rom. 2.25), *keeping* (τηρέω – Acts 15.5; φυλάσσω – Gal. 6.13), *submitting* (ὑποτάσσω – Rom. 8.7), *servicing* (δουλεύω – Rom. 7.25), and *upholding* (ἵστημι – Rom. 3.31). On the other hand, people can disobey law by *breaking* it (λύω – Jn. 7.23), being a *transgressor* (παραβάτης – Rom. 2.25), and *warring against it* (ἀντιστρατεύω – Rom. 7.23).

Νόμος occurs thirteen times after the preposition ὑπό, identifying people who are *under* the Law’s authority.<sup>1</sup> Repeated references to purification, devotion, judgment, worship, and sacrifice being done *according to* the Law (κατὰ [τὸν] νόμον) also indicate that law governs behavior.<sup>2</sup>

#### Referents

The primary referent for the word νόμος is the Mosaic Law. The phrase “law of Moses” occurs eight times in the New Testament, and there are six other references to the law that Moses gave, commanded, or wrote.<sup>3</sup> In many passages where Moses is not named, there are several other indicators that the Mosaic Law is in view. The Law is often linked deliberately to the Jewish nation (Rom. 2.12ff), mentioned along with the Temple (Acts 25.8), and discussed in Jewish contexts (Mt. 5.17). Unless otherwise noted, “Law” will refer hereafter to the Mosaic code.

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 3.21; 6.14f; 1 Co. 9.20; Gal. 3.10, 17, 23; 4.4f, 21; 5.18; Jas. 2.9.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. 2.22, 39; Jn. 18.31; 19.7; Acts 22.12; 23.3; 24.14; Phil. 3.5; Heb. 7.5, 16; 8.4; 9.19, 22; 10.8; Jas. 2.8.

<sup>3</sup> Lk. 2.22; 24.44; Jn. 1.17, 45; 7.19, 23; 8.5; Acts 13.38; 15.5; 28.23; Rom. 10.5; 1 Co. 9.9; Heb. 9.19; 10.28.

Νόμος can also refer to the Old Testament Scriptures. This metonymic use of the word stems from the tripartite division of the Old Testament: Law, Prophets, and Writings. Though this use most commonly appears in the phrase “the Law and the Prophets,”<sup>4</sup> occasionally νόμος alone stands for portions of Old Testament Scripture beside the Pentateuch.<sup>5</sup>

The third type of referent for νόμος relates closely to its sense: the word can be used generally for any sort of governing principle. Besides the Mosaic Law, various “laws” in the New Testament include a law of *faith* (Rom. 3.27), of *marriage* (Rom. 7.2), of the *mind* (Rom. 7.23), of *sin* (Rom. 7.25), of the *Spirit* (Rom. 8.2), of *Christ* (Gal. 6.2), and of *liberty* (Jas. 1.25; 2.12). In each of these cases, the author has in view a specific ruling principle other than the Mosaic code.

#### Νόμος as Subject

Besides the actions of authority noted above,<sup>6</sup> νόμος performs several other key actions in its New Testament usage. Νόμος speaks to people. Besides the basic speech verbs (λέγω – I Cor. 9.8; λαλέω – Rom. 3.19), it also *prophesies* (προφητεύω – Mt. 11.13) and *testifies* (μαρτυρέω – Rom. 3.21).

The Law has *inability* (ἀδύνατος – Rom. 8.3); there are some things it cannot do. The Law cannot *liberate* people (ἐλευθερώω – Rom. 8.2) or *perfect* them

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<sup>4</sup> Matt. 5.17; 7.12; 11.13; 22.40; Lk. 16.16; Acts 13.15; 24.14; 28.23; Rom. 3.21. Lk. 24.44 includes the fullest phrase: “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

<sup>5</sup> Jn. 10.34; 12.34; 15.25; I Cor. 14.21; Heb. 10.8.

<sup>6</sup> The aforementioned authoritative actions are judging, ruling, binding, and appointing.

(τελειώω – Heb. 7.19), nor can it *annul God’s covenant* (ἀκυρόω διαθήκην – Gal. 3.17).

### Nóμος as Object

Other than the previously mentioned responses related to obedience and disobedience,<sup>7</sup> νόμος receives action in a number of notable ways. In response to νόμος, people can agree mentally by *knowing* (γινώσκω – Rom. 7.1), *agreeing with* (σύμφημι – Rom. 7.16), or *delighting* (συνήδομαι – Rom. 7.22). Both Christ and believers *fulfill* the Law (πληρώω – Mt. 5.17; Rom. 8.4; 13.8; Gal. 5.14; τελέω – Jas. 2.8). Yet believers also *die* to the Law (θανατάω – Rom. 7.4; ἀποθνήσκω – Gal. 2.19)

People can also respond negatively to νόμος. They might try to *destroy* (καταλύω – Mt. 5.17), *render powerless* (καταργέω – Rom. 3.31; Eph. 2.15), or *set aside* (ἀθετέω – Heb. 10.28) the law. A hostile hearer might also *speak evil against* (καταλαλέω – Jas. 4.11) or *judge* (κρίνω – Jas. 4.11) the law.

### Collocates

Nóμος occurs alongside of several important words that clarify its meaning. Paul uses it often with “works” (ἔργον), indicating that Law is not merely doctrine.<sup>8</sup> “Commandments” (ἐντολή) identifies the individual components of the Law.<sup>9</sup> “The

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<sup>7</sup> Those verbs of obedience are doing, keeping, submitting, serving, and upholding. The actions of disobedience are transgressing, and warring against.

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 2.15; 3.20, 27f; Gal. 2.16; 3.2, 5, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 22.36, 40; Rom. 7.8f, 12; Eph. 2.15; Heb. 7.5, 16; 9.19.

Law” refers to the body of regulations as a whole; “commandments” refers to individual rules.

The careful reader will also notice a number of contrasting words that tend to follow νόμος through the New Testament. The Law cannot save; faith saves.<sup>10</sup> The Law does not justify; it does not bring righteousness.<sup>11</sup> One cannot be under Law and under grace simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> The Law does not control the believer; the Spirit does.<sup>13</sup>

### *Distinctions from English Translation “Law”*

#### Jurisprudence

The first idea that “law” brings to the mind of many American readers is the legal system. From police officers to the Constitution to a courtroom, the judicial system may overshadow and distort the word “law” and confuse Bible readers. There are some similarities: both American law and biblical Law were given to regulate the behavior of a nation. The dissimilarities, however, are stark. Modern law has its basis in fair human interaction; biblical Law is based on God’s character. Human law can err, both in its creation and its enforcement; God’s law was created perfectly and is enforced by the ultimate, omniscient, omnipotent Authority.

The word “lawyer” needs biblical definition as well. To most people, lawyers are professional trialists, skilled in persuading juries and judges. In the New

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<sup>10</sup> Rom. 3.27; 4.14ff; Gal. 3.2, 5, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 3.20f; Gal. 2.16; 3.11; Gal. 2.21.

<sup>12</sup> Rom. 6.14f.

Testament, lawyers were experts in the Mosaic Law (and in the centuries of tradition that had grown up around it).

*Applications for Exegesis: Paul and Νῶμος*

Purpose of the Law

God is a holy God, and sin is entirely inconsonant with His nature (Hab. 1.13). Thus, Paul's assertions about the Law's purpose may strike his readers as strange. "The Law came in to increase the trespass" (Rom. 5.20). It increases transgressions by arousing sinful passions (Rom. 7.5). The problem, of course, is not with the Law: it's holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7.12). The problem is with the people: they are unable to obey the Law. The Law and its covenant are good; the people's sin is not. (Heb. 8.8).

Historical Limitation of the Law

God did not give the Law forever. It started with the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai and lasted until the time of Christ (Gal. 3.17; 4.4). The phrase "the Law was our schoolmaster (παιδαγωγός)" is frequently misunderstood (3.24). It has no reference to "using Law to convince someone that he needs Christ" in the evangelistic context that comes to mind all too quickly. Rather it is a historical statement about the Law's temporary function as a guardian for God's people from Sinai to Christ. The Seed of the promise (3.16) would bring life (2.20) through His Spirit (6.8). With the coming of the promised Seed, the Law's primary purpose was finished. To return to the Law is to choose slavery over freedom (Gal. 4.4-9).

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<sup>13</sup> Rom. 7.6; 8.2; Gal. 5.18.



### Alleged Contradiction in Paul's View

How can Paul both call the law good (Rom. 7.12) and identify it as a form of slavery that provokes sin (Gal. 4)? Is this a contradiction between Galatians and Romans? The problem is not a matter of Paul speaking positively of the Law in Romans and negatively in Galatians: it is a matter of Paul speaking positively and negatively of the Law in Romans and more negatively in Galatians.

Part of the answer is found in situations each church is in when Paul writes to them. The problem in Galatia was a Judaistic abuse of the Law. There was no need for Paul to tell them anything good about the Law – their problem was making too much of the Law. In Rome, however, there is no indication of rampant Jewish legalism. On the contrary, Paul addresses both Jews and Gentiles for Law-based arrogance. Some Jews were trusting the Law for their standing with God (Rom. 2.12); some Gentiles were boasting that they had been grafted into God's people because the Jews stumbled over the Law (Rom. 11.11, 17). Dealing with both sides of the issue, Paul naturally points out the positive and negative aspects of the Law.

### Law and the Believer Today

The Mosaic Law no longer has a regulative role in the believer's life. Its function was specific to the time between Sinai and Christ (Gal. 3.24). Its works cannot justify anyone (Gal. 2.15-16; Rom. 9.31-32). Paul repeatedly tells Christians that they are not under law (Rom. 6.14; 8.2; Gal. 5.18). Instead, the Spirit reigns in the believer's life (Rom. 8.2-6; Gal. 5.18, 22-23). Gal. 5.23 is often misunderstood. It does not mean "no one passes laws against love, joy, et al." It means that the Law is

not opposed to the Spirit's fruit; that is, the Law exercises no opposing jurisdiction where the Spirit is ruling. In fact, the details of commandments are vastly simplified so that the entire Law is fulfilled by loving (Rom. 13.10; Gal. 5.14).

Incidentally, the actions of a Spirit-led, loving believer will look like obedience to the moral regulations of the Law, but this is no proof of the Law's validity. For the believer, the Spirit is the controlling factor, not the written Mosaic code.

