

Paul, “Works of the Law” and MMT

By Martin Abegg, Jr.



The usual translation of *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah*—MMT—obscures its relationship to Paul's letters. This Dead Sea Scroll and Paul use the very same phrase.

On March 15, 1988, as part of my duties as the new graduate research assistant to Professor Ben Zion Wacholder, I climbed the three flights of stairs of the Klau Library at Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College to pick up his mail. The large brown envelope at the bottom of the stack was not in itself strange, but the lack of a return address seemed odd. Back in his office I opened the envelope and found a 12-page photocopy of a handwritten Hebrew manuscript whose first line read “*elleh miqsat debareynu*” (these are some of the words).

This was all I had read before Professor Wacholder reasoned that this could only be a bootleg transcription of *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah*, already well-known in the scholarly world by its acronym MMT. Three years earlier John Strugnell and Elisha Qimron had described it in two preliminary articles.¹ And indeed MMT it was. The following spring, Hebrew Union College listed

¹ Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran,” *Israel Museum Journal* (1985), pp. 9–12, also in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology*, Jerusalem, Apr. 1984, ed. J. Amitai (Jerusalem; Israel Exploration Society, 1985), pp. 400–407.

in its graduate catalog a course entitled “Hellenistic Literature 25”; in fact, the course was devoted solely to studying MMT.² From that time until now, MMT has never been far from my thinking.³

As of this writing, I have not seen the official publication of MMT, but I understand that it does not discuss the importance of MMT for New Testament studies. This short article will discuss one significant aspect of that subject. If I am correct, MMT enables us to understand in a new way what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, and perhaps to the Romans as well.

The connection lies in the very title given to this obscure Dead Sea Scroll. MMT, as noted earlier, stands for *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah*, which Strugnell and Qimron translate “Some of the Precepts of the Torah.” This translation unfortunately obscures MMT’s relationship to Paul’s letters.

In this case, *miqsat* does not mean simply “some.” The same word is used in Genesis 47:2, where Joseph presents five of his brothers to Pharaoh. Here the word could be understood to mean the most important of the brothers or perhaps the choice or select. In other words, when the word is used in MMT, it does not refer just to some random laws; these laws are important to the writer. A similar understanding of the meaning of the word can be gleaned from its use in the Talmud.⁴ Thus we might translate the word more accurately as “some important” or “pertinent.”

More significant for our purposes, however, are the other two words, *ma'ase ha-torah*. Strugnell and Qimron translate this phrase as “precepts of Torah,”⁵ while Lawrence Schiffman offers “legal rulings of Torah.”⁶ These translations are accurate enough, but they nonetheless cloud the Paul connection.

A few minutes with a concordance of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, leaves little doubt that the Greek equivalent of *ma'ase ha-torah* is likely *ergon nomou*.⁷ *Ergon*

² I owe much of the content of this article to the other members of this class: Rabbi Shira Lander, Dr. James Bowley, Mr. Lee Fields, Dr. Wave Nunnally and Dr. Keri Wynn; we all are indebted to Professor Wacholder for a unique experience.

³ In February 1993, after Professor Wacholder and I had begun to publish fascicles of Dead Sea Scroll transcripts that had been reconstructed with the aid of a computer (see “BAS Publishes Dead Sea Scrolls,” **BAR** 17:05; “Computer-Generated Dead Sea Scrolls Texts 98% Accurate,” **BAR** 18:01; “BAS Reprints Facsimile Edition of Scroll Photographs,” **BAR** 18:04), we received a letter from Professor Qimron’s attorney warning us that we could not “make any use” of his and Strugnell’s reconstruction of MMT. Admittedly, we cannot expunge from our minds the results of our study of the handwritten transcript we anonymously received in 1988. We are continuing our work on MMTs as well as on other scrolls. We have also brought suit against Professor Qimron in an American court, not for damages, but simply for a declaration that Professor Qimron does not own the copyright in MMT, so that we can proceed with our work (see “American Professors Seek to Block Qimron’s Control of MMT,” **BAR** 19:06).

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Yebamot* 47a-b.

⁵ Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran,” p. 400.

⁶ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (1990), p. 67.

⁷ The most common Greek word for *ma'ase* is *ergon*. The Greek word *nomos* most commonly translates *torah*.

nomou is commonly translated in English versions of the New Testament as “works of the law.” This well-known Pauline phrase is found in Romans 3:20, 28 and in Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10.

It is striking that when the British Bible Society translated the New Testament into modern Hebrew in 1976—at a time when the text of MMT was known only to half a dozen scholars—they consistently translated *ergon nomou* (works of the law) as *ma‘ase ha-torah*.

In short, *ma‘ase ha-torah* is equivalent to what we know in English from Paul’s letters as “works of the law.” This Dead Sea scroll and Paul use the very same phrase. The connection is emphasized by the fact that this phrase appears nowhere in rabbinic literature of the first and second centuries A.D.—only in Paul and in MMT.

The works of the law that the Qumran text refers to are obviously typified by the 20 or so religious precepts (*halakhot*) detailed in the body of the text. For the first time we can really understand what Paul is writing about. Here is a document detailing works of the law.

To appreciate what can be learned from this connection, let us probe a little more deeply into MMT. The remains of nearly two dozen legal issues are recorded in MMT. Perhaps there were as many as a dozen more precepts that perished; the aim of the work, however, as seen by its composer, was clearly to call attention to matters that trespass the boundaries between the pure and impure. The topic of the work is reflected in the phrase *tohorat haqodesh*, “the purity of the holy.” Stated simply: “Do not allow the holy to be profaned by what is impure.”

The issues include bringing Gentile corn into the Temple, the presentation of Gentile offerings, and the cooking of sacrificial meat in unfit (impure) vessels. Other rulings concern cleansing of lepers, admitting the blind and the deaf into the Temple; and permitting intermarriage with Ammonite and Moabite converts, long forbidden to enter the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3). Other issues involve the transmission of impurity by a flow of water (*musaq*), the intermixture of wool and linen (*sha‘atnez*), plowing with diverse animals (*qilayyim*) and perhaps the climax of the discussion: the intermarriage of priests with the common people.

Most of the rulings espoused by the author of MMT are based directly upon Biblical law (for example, the prohibition against plowing with unlike animals in Deuteronomy 22:10). A few others are interpretations or amplifications of Mosaic prescriptions (for example, bans on Gentile offerings and dogs in the Temple). The list clearly reflects a conservative reaction against a relaxation of Torah precepts.

As Professor Schiffman has noted, the Qumran sect spurned the rabbinic extensions called *Talmud*, which effectively built a fence around the Torah, successive layers of which have become codified

in the rabbinic works of the Mishnah and the two Talmuds.⁸ The Qumranites were the “Bible only” group of their day.

The fact that the phrase *miqsat ma‘ase ha-torah* (“pertinent works of the law”) appears nowhere in rabbinic literature suggests that the theology of the Qumran sect was not destined to become normative for Judaism. That of course was the case. We find no certain record of the Qumran sect after the Roman suppression of the first Jewish revolt (66–70 A.D.). But that was after Paul wrote.

Looking at Galatians and Romans in the light of MMT, it seems clear that Paul, using the same terminology, is rebutting the theology of documents such as MMT. I do not mean to suggest that Paul knew of MMT or of the zealous members of the Qumran community, but simply that Paul was reacting to the kind of theology espoused by MMT, perhaps even by some Christian converts who were committed to the kind of thinking reflected in MMT. Paul’s answer is that “No human being is justified by works of the law but only through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

Let us look more closely at MMT to see what Paul is reacting against.

Both Galatians and MMT are efforts to guide and correct compatriots; they are not addressed to enemies. MMT was written by one sectarian to another, much along the lines of Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “I [we] exhort you [who have wandered from the truth] to stand firm against them [the trouble makers].”

In the past, Strugnell and Qimron, as well as some others, have argued that the oft-quoted MMT phrase, “and we separated ourselves from the majority of the people,” used toward the end of the document, denotes the sect’s departure from mainstream Judaism, its separation from Pharisaism. In part, this interpretation depends on the reconstruction of the word translated “the people.” The Hebrew is *ha‘a[m]*; but, as the bracket indicates, the last letter has been reconstructed; it is not there. There are other possible reconstructions, however: *ha‘etsah* (the council) or, even more likely, *ha‘edah* (the congregation). These terms appear frequently in Qumran literature and are much more likely to be the correct reconstruction in MMT. That is, the separation is probably not from the people, but from the council or the congregation—in other words, their own crowd. This leads me to conclude that MMT concerns an intra-communal dispute that precipitated a schism among sectarians. And the tone, as in Galatians, is conciliatory. Near the end of MMT, the writer characterizes what he has written as “what we thought would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen [that] you possess insight and knowledge of the Torah [law].” This is hardly the tone one would expect if the Qumran sectarians were addressing their mortal enemies. The author of MMT seems to be trying to persuade his disciple or colleague to rethink the differences that have separated them.

⁸ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “New Light on the Pharisees,” in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Hershel Shanks (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 219–20.



The author is clear about what will flow from adherence to the important precepts being espoused. Toward the end of the document, the reader is told to “consider all these things and pray to Him” with the positive result “that He might set your counsel/council straight.” In other words, meditation on the law and a calling out to God will result in His acting to mend your council. Secondly, the addressee is told to “keep yourself away from evil thought and the counsel/council of Belial” [i.e., Satan; perhaps a reference to the Pharisees]. In other words, separate yourself from those who have infected you with their evil thought and teaching. The addressee and his associates had evidently expressed willingness to compromise with Belial’s council/counsel. The addressee may have advocated a compromise with both group’s mutual opponents, the Pharisees. If you follow my advice and adhere to these precepts, MMT says, “you shall rejoice at the end of time when you find the essence [again the word *miqsat*] of our words true.” The messianic era, it is implied elsewhere, will arrive soon. And “you will be *reckoned righteous*, in that you have done what is right and good before Him.” This claim is “to your own benefit and to Israel’s.”

I have italicized the word “reckoned righteous” because of their special importance—both to the author of MMT and to Paul. Unlike Paul, however, the Qumran author does not offer righteousness on the basis of his reader’s belief, but rather “in that you have done what is right and good before Him.” For MMT’s author, it is the “works of the law” that fuel such a reckoning.

The provocative final statement in MMT, “you will be reckoned righteous,” is reminiscent of Genesis 15:6: “And Abraham *believed* God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” This Biblical quotation was of course used by Paul to support his understanding that faith, rather than works, leads to a reckoning of righteousness. But this is not the view of MMT’s author. How then did he arrive at his conclusion, despite the implication of Genesis 15:6? One possibility is that he relied on Genesis 22:16, where, following Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God’s command, God blesses Abraham because of “what you have done.” I believe, however, that MMT relies on another text.

Psalm 106 commemorates an incident recounted in Numbers 25:1–8, in which the Israelites, on their trek to the Promised Land, fraternize with the Moabites, worship their gods and sleep with their daughters. As punishment, God sends a plague on the Israelites. When Phinehas the priest catches an Israelite in *flagrante delicto* with a foreign woman, he spears the couple through their bellies with a single spear. And the plague is lifted. For his deed, we are told in Psalm 106, Phinehas was regarded as eternally righteous:

“Then Phinehas stood up and interposed;
And so the plague was stayed.
And it was reckoned to him as righteousness,
from generation to generation forever.”
(Psalm 106:30–31)

Upon examination of the Hebrew text of MMT, it becomes clear that MMT echoes this passage from Psalm 106. The same passive verb—“it was reckoned” in Psalm 106 and “you shall be reckoned” in MMT—is one clear reflection of this dependence. The only difference is that the past tense of the verb in Psalm 106 is changed to the future tense in MMT to convert it into a promise for the addressee.⁹

Two other considerations point to this relationship between Psalm 106 and MMT. In the psalm, the poet celebrates what Phinehas did when there was an unholy mixture of an Israelite with a foreign woman. Similarly, the central theme of MMT is the call to turn from the sin of unholy mixture. Secondly, the Qumran covenanters refer to themselves as the Sons of Zadok. Zadok was the high priest during the reigns of David and Solomon. He was a direct descendant of Phinehas, both Zadok and Phinehas being of the priestly line of Eleazar the son of Aaron. For the Qumran sect, a priestly paradigm of righteousness would have been especially pleasing.

MMT is couched in the exact language of what Paul was rebutting in his letter to the Galatians. MMT claims that adherence to the works of the law “will be accounted to you as

⁹ In addition, the MMT text echoes the Hebrew text of Psalm 106:31 by using the passive *niphal* stem of *hashab*, rather than the active *qal*. Also, the preposition *lamed* is used to indicate the “product” of the reckoning in both Psalm 106:31 and MMT (“as righteous”), whereas in Genesis 15:6 “righteous” is the direct object of the verb. Psalm 106:31 and Genesis 15:6 are the only Biblical verses that contain both the verb *hashab*, to reckon, and the noun *sedaqah*, righteousness. Jubilees 30:17 records this same statement (probably referring to Psalm 106 as well) made to Simeon and Levi concerning their zealous act against the Shechemites (Genesis 34:25), even though in the Biblical passage their father condemned them (Genesis 34:25, 49:5).

righteousness”; Paul’s answer is that “No human being is justified by works of the law but only through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).¹⁰

MMT espouses works of the law as exemplified in Phinehas’s deed; those who perform works of the law will be reckoned righteous unto eternity. So says Psalm 106, recounting Numbers 25:1–8.

Like MMT, Paul too is addressing his wandering flock:

O foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you ... ? Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ... Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In thee shall all the nations be blessed.” ... For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. (Galatians 3:1–10)

It is quite possible that some Essenes or other Jewish sectaries who were familiar with the phrase “works of the law” had become followers of Jesus the Nazarene. They would understandably have concerned Paul, lest his teaching that the Mosaic law played only a supporting role in God’s program—that of “tutor” or “schoolmaster” (Galatians 3:24)—be undermined. Paul must have felt his missionary work threatened by those teaching that the law was the channel of God’s salvation.

Some scholars have suggested that Paul misunderstood the Jewish teaching of his day or, at the very least, that he created a straw man to bolster his own teaching regarding faith versus law. In the past, this view was supported by the fact that the phrase “works of the law” nowhere appears in the foundational books of rabbinic Judaism. MMT, however, provides the “smoking gun” for which students have been searching for generations, not from the pages of rabbinic literature, but from the sectarian teachings of Qumran. MMT demonstrates that Paul was not jousting with windmills, but was indeed squared off in a dramatic duel—not with mainstream Judaism but with a sectarian theology—that ultimately defined Christianity. If I have understood rightly, the importance of MMT for New Testament research is nothing short of revolutionary.

MARTIN ABEGG, JR. is the Ben Zion Wacholder Professor of Dead Sea Scroll Studies and co-director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Institute at Trinity Western University in British Columbia. He collaborated with Michael Wise and Edward Cook on *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (1996; revised edition 2005).

¹⁰ I am in agreement with Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), in connecting “works of the Law” with the Apostle Paul; and “reckoned as righteousness” with Phinehas and Psalm 106:31.