

THE LAW OF LIBERTY IN JAMES

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Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, “Christian love is sheer action, and its every work is holy, because it is the fulfilling of the Law.”¹ In the history of Christianity theologians have strived to reconcile the seeming contradictions between the Apostle Paul and James the brother of Jesus, but here at this point, namely love fulfilling the Law, these New Testament writers both agree. Paul, immediately after he quotes Leviticus 19:8, writes in Romans 13:10, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”² Likewise, James in his letter also declares, “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well (James 2:8).” In both locations, the NT writers speak of love being the fulfillment of the Law in relation to Lev 19:18. However, James posits a nuanced understanding of the Law that separates his description of it from the rest of the NT canon.

Nowhere else in the NT writings is the Law qualified as the “royal law” or “the law of liberty” as it is in the epistle of James (Jas 1:25, 2:8, 12). Still, even though James speaks of the Law in a way that is unique to his own writings, his basic understanding of

¹Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 99.

²Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

its relationship to one's love for his neighbor and daily Christian living is not foreign to or at odds with NT theology. Yet, in the context of his epistle, James has chosen to reference the Law in this manner for apparent reasons that are meaningful and necessary for coming to terms with his understanding of the Law and its role in the Christian's life. Therefore, in order to fully grasp James' usage and conception of the Law, one must discover the meaning and significance of his phrases "the law of liberty" and "the royal law." However, it is the aim of this paper only to address one of these aspects.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze James' use of "the law of liberty" in order to demonstrate that the meaning of this phrase holds Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the new covenant promise as its primary theological reference point. This paper will accomplish this goal in three main ways. First, "the law of liberty" will be assessed in terms of James' usage of it in relation to the Christian's regeneration. Second, this paper will investigate "the law of liberty's" association to the Christian's works. And third, "the law of liberty" will be analyzed in the context of James' efforts in connecting it to the Christian's final judgment.

The Law of Liberty and Regeneration

At first glance, discussing how the Law has any role in the Christian's regeneration seems paradoxical, especially in light of Pauline texts such as 2 Corinthians 3:6 where Paul says, "[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Nevertheless, when νόμος first appears in the letter of James in 1:25, the context points towards the fact that James is able to substitute νόμος for λόγος without altering the salvific content of the discussion at hand. James clearly demonstrates a unity in his

soteriology that equivocates being “doers of the word, and not hearers only (v 22)” with “the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres (v 25).” But, in order to properly comprehend how these two concepts are connected, one must trace the development of James’ usage of λόγος in 1:18-23.

In 1:18, James says, “Of his own will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth,” which is to be taken as a reference to the believer’s regeneration. In this text, James demonstrates the new birth of the Christian as an occurrence that happens by means of the λόγῳ ἀληθείας.³ Undoubtedly, “word of the truth” refers to the gospel truth as presented through the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. James further qualifies this statement later in v 21 when he exhorts his readers to “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The Greek phrase τὸν ἔμφυτον λόγον is unique only to the letter of James in the NT. But, its meaning is clear in relation to James’ usage of λόγος in v 18.

The Greek word James uses which the ESV translates in v 18 “brought us forth,” is the verb ἀποκυέω. James applies the same word earlier in v 15 when he writes, “. . . and sin when it is fully grown *brings forth* (ἀποκεύει) death (emphasis added).” He uses this verb to demonstrate the manner in which God, by means of “the word of truth,” produces new life in a person.⁴ Therefore, James’ implementation of “the word of truth”

³Moo argues that “word of truth” in each of its four other occurrences in the NT is used by God as an instrument of regenerating the souls of his people (2 Cor 6:7; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15). Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 79.

⁴In light of the creation metaphors in Jas 1:15, 18, one must not neglect to recognize the life-giving nuance of the lexical meaning of ἀποκυέω (give birth to). James seems to be deliberately using this verb in order to illuminate the regenerating work of God in v 18 in contrast to what sin “gives birth to” in v 15, namely death. Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 947, CD-ROM.

in v 18 is logically linked to his mentioning in v 21 of “the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” In both cases, λόγος is efficacious for salvation. In addition, in both v 18 and v 21, λόγος is something that is not already present in the believer; instead, James teaches that God uses “the word of truth” to “birth” new believers while the Christian must meekly receive the “implanted word.”⁵ Therefore, once a person has been born again, he evidences his salvation by humbly receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ as his standard of doing good works thereby wholly submitting to its teachings and commandments.⁶

In v 22, James begins to close out the major introduction to his letter with the command, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”⁷ This statement which immediately follows the plea to receive “the implanted word” further demonstrates that James interprets true acceptance as obedience.⁸ Moreover, James communicates to his readers that the one who has been saved by the *word* and has meekly received the *word*, must live out the *word*. This point is of great importance due to the fact that James suddenly substitutes νόμος for λόγος in v 25 without deviating from the theme of being obedient to the life-giving word of the gospel. Furthermore, the equivocation of λόγος and νόμος is substantiated by their synonymous relationship in

⁵Moo, *The Letter of James*, 87.

⁶ Davids builds upon this point stating, “But the stock characteristic of the language of receiving the word and the fact that the gospel consists of both a word about Jesus and ethical content point to the sense ‘act upon the word you accepted at conversion.’” Peter H. Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 95.

⁷ George H. Guthrie and Mark E. Taylor, “The Structure of James,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (Oct 2006): 683.

⁸ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 88-89.

vv 22-25, as a part of James' introduction (1:2-27), which rises to its crowing point under the heavy overtones of obedience.⁹ The main idea of vv 22-25 is that Christians are to do the word, not merely hear it and profess it. Instead, a true believer is the one who in fact does what "the law of liberty" says. Thus, James unifies the ideas of doing "the word" and doing "the law of liberty". Hence, the Christian that does "the law of liberty" is in effect doing "the word".

But why does James choose to interchange λόγος for νόμος if in his theology they are so synonymous? And, how does "the law of liberty" relate to the regeneration of God's people? James' switch to νόμος in v 25 shows that most likely he had in mind the new covenant promise of Jer 31:31-34. In particular, Jer 31:33 prophecies, "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.* And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (emphasis added)." The imagery of "the implanted word" (1:22) and its connection to salvation seems to be the antecedent of "the law of liberty" in 1:25. With this figurative language in mind, when James replaces λόγος with νόμος in v 25, one wonders to what "law" is James referring. In other words, was there a law that was intended to be "implanted" in a person's soul? The Greek word ἔμφυτος occurs only once in the NT which is here in Jas 1:21. The word alludes to something that is not original or innate in a person. Figuratively, ἔμφυτος sets forth the

⁹Guthrie and Taylor argue that Jas 1:2-27 forms a double-introduction for James' epistle. The first half includes 1:2-12 and the second half involves 1:12-27. The latter part of the introduction is made up of four coherent sub-units: 1:13-15, 16-19a, 19b-21, 22-25. These smaller parts of the second half of the introduction build upon the theme of deception with regards to being a doer of the word and not only a hearer. Thus, these units lead up to the practical examples of doing "the law of liberty" in the transitional statements of 1:26-27. Guthrie and Taylor, "The Structure of James," 688-91.

imagery of someone “implanting” something that at one point was external to the host but now will reside in the inside just as if it was a natural part of the being.¹⁰ This concept points explicitly to the nature of the new covenant promise spoken of in Jer 31:33.

In Jer 31:33, as quoted earlier, God declares that in the future, the major difference between the new covenant and the old covenant will be in the transference of the Law from tablets of stone onto tablets of the heart. Whereas previously the Law had been externally available to the people of God, now in the new covenant, God’s law would be “implanted” into his chosen ones. A new transformation of the heart characterizes the nature of God’s relationship to his people in the future new age of salvation. The book of Jeremiah emphatically stresses the divine activity of God in redemption which was not based upon legalistic covenant stipulations, but rather focused upon the possibility of a personal relationship between Yahweh and his people.¹¹

Therefore, when James speaks of “the law of liberty” in Jas 1:25 under the presupposition that “the word of truth” and “the implanted word” are identified as God’s gospel message presented in the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus Christ, he appears to be recognizing that Jer 31:33 has been fulfilled and is presently true for his Jewish Christian audience. Moreover, for James, in light of Jer 31:31-34, “the law of liberty” includes aspects of the Mosaic Law, but is not excluded to it.¹² Furthermore, James

¹⁰BDAG elaborates on the meaning of ἔμφυτος in Jas 1:21 by stating, “. . . the word of the gospel *implanted* in you **Jas 1:21** (as something implanted the word is permanently established in the individual and like inborn assets functions in an exceptional manner).” BDAG, 2580.

¹¹Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 59.

¹²Adeyemi notes that in the book of Jeremiah, לְדָבָר does not always refer to the Mosaic Law. He claims “that ‘law’ in Jeremiah is sometimes parallel to the ‘sayings of the prophet,’ which are Yahweh’s fresh words.” In addition, he posits that Jeremiah’s usage of ‘law’ can also stand for whatever represents

ascribes to the Law in his letter both the ability to save and also the characteristic that it still must be obeyed (Jas 1:18, 21; 2:8-12; 4:11-12). This approach reflects the influence and authority of the gospel and teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the new covenant “law of liberty” in James is the Mosaic Law interpreted and fulfilled in Christ’s messianic mission.¹³

In Jas 1:25, “the law of liberty” is related to the regeneration of the Christian insofar as James alludes to the prophecy of Jer 31:33 coming to fulfillment in the messianic work of Jesus Christ. Thus, just as God promised in the new covenant in Jer 31:31-34, he writes “the law of liberty” on his people’s hearts by implanting his word of truth into their souls, regenerating them to new life in Christ.¹⁴ Therefore, being made alive by having God inscribe his freeing law on a person’s heart in turn enables him or her to keep its commandments and teachings and “produce the righteousness that God requires (Jas 1:20).” Hence, “the law of liberty” frees the soul to be regenerated by God and permits that person to claim the promise that is a result of receiving “the implanted word” where God says, “And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer 31:33b).”

The Law of Liberty and Works

In the previous section, the question was raised, “Why does James replace

the revealed word and will of God. Femi Adeyemi, “What is the New Covenant ‘Law’ in Jeremiah 31:33?,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 163, no. 651 (July 2006): 320.

¹³Thomas R. Schreiner, “Law,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 645.

¹⁴Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 146.

λόγος with νόμος if in his theology these two concepts are united?” The first answer was given with respect to James’ insertion of “law” as a semantic allusion to Jer 31:31-34, and in particular, Jer 31:33. The second answer relates to the role of “the law of liberty” as the standard of Christian obedience. In Jas 1:25 when νόμος is first mentioned, James teaches that the one whose actions flow from hearing and doing “the law of liberty,” is accurately practicing the mandates of the gospel. This flow of thought naturally then leads to the practical examples of “true religion” in vv 26-27. Thus, as the brother of the Lord transitions from speaking of the saving effects of λόγος (vv 18-21) and into a section emphatically focused on obedience (vv 22-25), he utilizes νόμος in order to communicate the imperatival side of the gospel message.¹⁵

However, the construct, “the law of liberty,” appears to be necessarily contradictory. How can a law give freedom? The Greek word ἐλευθερία in the NT frequently refers to being freed from the slavery and bondage of the Mosaic Law (Galatians 2:4; 5:1, 13).¹⁶ Yet, only here in the epistle of James is the Law itself referred to as liberating. The authorial intent of defining “the perfect law” as “the law of liberty” must be determined by the immediate context of what type of obedience characterizes being “doers of the word, and not hearers only” as well as understanding the relationship between “freedom” and the Law in the new covenant.

Initially, the Law is freeing in the sense that it signifies the regenerating work of God as promised in Jer 31:33, where in the new covenant he will write his laws on the

¹⁵Leonard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament: The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ*, trans. John Alsup, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 203.

¹⁶BDAG, 2489.

hearts of his people, which is a prerequisite to God being able to testify, “And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer 31:33b).” But, “the law of liberty” is dually liberating insofar as the gospel is not only to be heard, but also acted upon; and therefore, having the Law internalized sets the Christian free to keep its commandments and teachings. Thus, “the law of liberty” is the standard and measure of what constitutes true Christian works.¹⁷

The summary of what keeping “the law of liberty” looks like is rooted in Jas 2:8 which says, “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.” Although the phrase “the law of liberty” is not present in v 8, James perceives fulfilling “the royal law” as equivalent to keeping “the law of liberty”. This point is evident when he implements the conjunction οὕτως in v 12 in order to connect the previous examples of abiding by “the royal law” to describing the manner in which someone ought to speak and act according to “the law of liberty”. Still, the love command of Lev 19:18 and charity towards one’s neighbor is the essence of what “the law of liberty” demands.

Upon reception of “the implanted word,” James immediately warns the believer by using the contrastive conjunction δὲ to introduce the command: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (Jas 1:21-22).” Therefore, the role of the Law in producing righteous deeds is that the content of “the law of liberty” informs the mind, the affections, and the will of a Christian as to what God desires for his people to do in correspondence with his divine character. James evidences this truth as he

¹⁷Cain H. Felder, “Partiality and God’s Law: An Exegesis of James 2:1-13,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 39, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 66.

transitions from the double-introduction of chapter one in vv 26-27 which lists three different ways someone is obedient to “the law of liberty,” namely in speech, action, and inward purity.¹⁸ These themes continue into the first essay of the body of the letter in 2:1-13. James uses the topic of partiality to demonstrate how fulfilling “the royal law” includes right speaking and right acting (2:1, 9, 12).¹⁹ In fact, James summarizes the content of vv 1-11 when he writes in v 12, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under *the law of liberty* (emphasis added).” Therefore, his statement in v 8 reveals that anyone who has “the implanted word” and is abiding by “the law of liberty,” he or she will be in essence fulfilling the sum total of God’s will. In Matthew 22:38-39, Jesus responded to the lawyer’s question that the second greatest commandment was, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Thus, James appears to be relying upon the Law, as noted above, as it is fulfilled and reinterpreted through the Jesus Tradition, especially in light of his other title for the Law which he mentions in Jas 2:8 as “the royal law”.²⁰

Since a transgressor of the law is someone who shows partiality and violates the “whole law,” then one can assume that looking into the mirror of “the perfect law, the law of liberty” and becoming a doer of “the word of truth” ought to produce works in a person that reflects the character of God, which can be summarized in the love command of Lev 19:18 (Jas 1:18, 21, 25; 2:8-10). Thus, James has no inhibitions defining “true

¹⁸Moo, *The Letter of James*, 95.

¹⁹Guthrie and Taylor, “The Structure of James,” 694.

²⁰Martin agrees that James is influenced by the Jesus Tradition, but also adds that “Though James is not limiting his thinking to the OT law with his use of ‘supreme law,’ neither is he advocating an abandoning of it. He-like Jesus and Paul-insists that the ‘new law’ includes, expands, and deepens the demands of the ‘old’ law.” Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Glenn W. Barker, vol. 48 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 67.

religion” in the manner that he does as religion that is “pure and undefiled before God, the Father (Jas 1:26-27).

With respect to the relationship of “the law of liberty” and the Christian’s works in connection to the new covenant promise of Jer 31:31-34, the ability of God’s people to keep and to be obedient to his Law is also included in the prophecy. In Jer 31:33, God brings new life to his people by writing his law upon the tablets of their hearts. But also, presupposed in the internalization of the Law was that this transformation would enable God’s chosen ones to wholly keep it. Due to the inward renewal, “the law of liberty” frees a person to be an obedient child of God by having his or her entire being directed and guided by God’s will.²¹ Though Jeremiah does not reference the indwelling of the Holy Spirit here, the new covenant promise elsewhere in Scripture alludes to his sanctifying work (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26-27).²² Thus, included in having the Law inscribed upon the heart also brings with it the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit to cause God’s people to “to walk in [his] statutes and be careful to obey [his] rules (Ezek 36:27b).” In addition, Moses also looks to the future in Deuteronomy 30:6 when God will give his people a new heart that is not only able to obey his commandments, but also capable of fulfilling Deut 6:4, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”²³ As observed in

²¹F. B. Jr Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 16 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 285.

²²Ezek 36:27 speaks of the promise of the indwelling Spirit of God, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” The creation of a new heart and the placement of the Spirit inside the believer is implied in Jer 31:31-34; and in connection to the fuller statement in Ezek 36:27, one can clearly see that with the new covenant rebirth also comes the freedom and ability to successfully keep God’s law.

²³Deut 30:6 prophecies, “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of

Jesus' teaching on the essence of the Law, the fulfillment of the second greatest commandment presupposes the first. Therefore, in James' letter, "the law of liberty" signifies the new covenant coming to fruition in Jesus Christ, thus empowering God's people to love him and their neighbor just as the Law demanded.

James' use of partiality and the love command in Jas 2:1-12 also points towards the fulfillment of Jer 31:34.²⁴ The Lord discloses that one of the results of v 33 will be the universal dynamic in which all mankind will be capable of partaking in a personal relationship with God without the need of a human intermediary. Thus, the new covenant promise leaves no room for hierarchies or favoritism. The phrase "from the least of them to the greatest" in the book of Jeremiah includes all ages and all classes (Jer 6:11-13).²⁵ Moreover, in Jer 5:1-5, the same concept of "knowing the Lord" arises. Jeremiahs seeks out the poor and the rich hoping to discover Israelites that truly know God. However, to the prophet's dismay, neither the poor nor the rich have a personal relationship with God and keep his law. Therefore, Jeremiah concludes that ultimately a person's wealth or status has nothing to do with his or her "knowing God".²⁶ Likewise, James teaches that those who live according to "the law of liberty" will not prejudice against the poor or show favoritism to the rich since under the precepts of "the royal law"

your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." See also Matt 22:37-38, "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.'"

²⁴Jer 31:34 says, "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

²⁵Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Glenn W. Barker, vol. 27 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 135.

²⁶Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 88.

the “last will be first, and the first last (Matt 20:16).” In the letter of James, “the law of liberty” is the standard and instruction of what type of works a true believer should perform; in addition, because the Law is now written on the hearts of God’s people, they are free not only to be obedient to God, but also to lovingly and intimately know him.

The Law of Liberty and the Final Judgment

James connects the Christian’s final judgment to “the law of liberty” in Jas 2:12 when he commands, “So speak and so act as those who are to be *judged under the law of liberty* (emphasis added).” Since James does not distinguish between “the royal law” and “the law of liberty” as two separate moral codes, when he attaches the phrase “the law of liberty” in v 12 to the theme of judgment, he is clearly showing that the law of the kingdom of God in Christ is now the standard by which men’s deeds will be weighed. Earlier in the previous sections, the conclusion that “the law of liberty” in James’ letter is much more than merely the 613 commands and prohibitions in the Pentateuch has already been established. Therefore, when James says that Christians will be judged by “the law of liberty,” he is speaking of the Law of the new covenant which has been implemented by the messianic work of Jesus. However, the inclusion of the quote from Lev 19:18 in Jas 2:8 points to the fact that James views “the law of liberty” as containing specific elements of the Mosaic Law, but only insofar as it is retrieved and filtered through the Jesus Tradition.²⁷

²⁷Felder remarks, “We suggest that James employs the motif of law not just to foster general attitudes of love or ‘concrete deeds’ but to call his readers’ attention to specific legal precepts which are validated in Old Testament moral law as well as in the Jesus Tradition.” He disagrees with Martin Diberlius who posits that “the law of liberty” refers more so to the attitude of Christian piety than to specific legality. Felder responds, “Nevertheless, if νόμος represents the moral law for James, it necessarily involves criteria for Christian social behavior. . . . we have shown that the use of νόμος in 1:25 differs from that in vv 8-11 only in the sense that the latter verses provide a rationale for observing law; v 12 continues this rationale,

So, if “the law of liberty” is more than a checklist of commandments and stipulations that must be kept and met, then how exactly will the believer be held accountable before God, the only judge and lawgiver (Jas 4:12)? James goes on to explain the judgment scene in Jas 2:13 within the context of mercy.²⁸ He teaches that a Christian will only receive mercy at the final judgment based upon whether or not he or she has shown mercy to others. The Greek word that the ESV translates “shown” is the verb ποιέω commonly rendered “to do or to make”. Still, though the translation “shown” is a valid expression of the Greek, one must not miss the direct semantic link here between the one who does mercy (ποιήσαντι ἔλεος), the one who is a doer of the word (ποιητὰ λόγου), and the one who is a doer of the law (ποιητῆς νόμου) (Jas 1:22; 2:12-13; 4:11). If “the law of liberty” is the imperatival side of the word of the gospel, then when one acts in obedience to it he or she will be doing works of mercy.

This point is further substantiated by the context of Jas 1:26-2:12. Fulfilling “the royal law” and speaking and acting as one who has looked into “the law of liberty” knowing that he will be judged by it, ought to produce deeds in a Christian that guards him from false religiosity and unwarranted favoritism or partiality. Loving one’s neighbor will keep the Christian from transgressing the whole point of the Law and instead will cause his actions to be characterized by the mercy that is a direct reflection of the mercy which God will ultimately show all believers at the final judgment (2:8-13;

but νόμος in v 12 refers to the same moral law.” Felder, “Partiality and God’s Law,” 66-67.

²⁸In Jas 2:13, James declares, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

4:11-12).²⁹ For James, mercy is the one word that summarizes how God relates to his people in light of their imperfection and sin, thus, this attribute is also the one word that ought to be indicative of the works that are produced in a person that has meekly received “the implanted word” (1:21).

Furthermore, the role of “the law of liberty” in the Christian’s final judgment is supported by the new covenant promise as presented in Jer 31:31-34 in three main ways. First, in Jer 31:33, the law that God writes on the hearts of his people in the new covenant is now the standard and authoritative law of God’s kingdom which merits the title that James appropriately gives it in Jas 2:8 as “the royal law”.³⁰ Second, “the law of liberty” also points to Jer 31:34a in terms of the judgment as it functions as the great equalizer of mankind, thus preventing anyone under its rule to claim superiority or show partiality thereby stipulating what is lawful and unlawful for as Christian to do. And third, when James portrays the final judgment in Jas 2:13 as the event where God pours out his mercy upon all who have lived according to “the law of liberty,” he reflects the type of forgiveness that God promises to those who know and love him in the new covenant in Jer 31:34b (Jas 1:12; 2:5).³¹

The fact that James describes the final judgment in terms of mercy shows that he does not promote a works-based salvation. Even after he exhorts his audience to fulfill “the royal law” and abide by “the law of liberty,” he still recognizes that all men are equally transgressors of the Law by warning that everyone’s ultimate hope of salvation

²⁹Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 207.

³⁰Moo, *The Letter of James*, 111-12.

³¹God promises his people in Jer 31:34b, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember

rests upon the mercy and pardon of God. In the same way, mercy in the form of the forgiveness and the forgetting of sins is what characterizes the hope of salvation in the new covenant as expressed in Jer 31:34b. Therefore, those who have God's law written upon their hearts by their practices and works ought to emulate the same type of mercy and forgiveness which they have been shown in salvation and will receive finally at the judgment.³² Mercy necessarily implies forgiveness. Thus, there is an immediate connection between James' concept of mercy and God's promise of forgiveness at the judgment which finds proper representation in a construct such as "the law of liberty".³³

The "law of liberty's" relationship to the final judgment stands upon the premise that those whom God "birthed" by "the word of truth" will manifest that they have received "the implanted word" and have become "doers of the word, not hearers only," by producing works that correspond to the love command and the mercy that has and will be shown to them from God. Thus, James warns those who have transgressed the Law by acting in direct opposition to all that it stands for in terms of favoritism, prejudice, and partiality that judgment is without mercy for them unless they speak and act as those will "be judged under the law of liberty (Jas 2:12-13)."³⁴ The new covenant law has liberated God's people to imitate his great mercy by enabling them to love their neighbors as themselves which will confirm their eternal freedom on the Last Day (Jn

their sin no more."

³²Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 286.

³³Dauids, *Commentary on James*, 119.

³⁴Martin underscores this truth stating, "For this moral theologian, works, even acts of charity (2:14-16), provide the evidence that Christian faith is genuine. On the other hand, failure to live out the message in its social ramification implies (for James) a dead faith that is useless for salvation (2:14). The severity of this verse must not then be diminished." Martin, *James*, 71-72.

12:48; Jas 2:8).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine and discuss the meaning of James' phrase "the law of liberty" in order to determine that his understanding of the Law was informed by the fulfillment of Jer 31:31-34 and the new covenant promise in the life and work of Jesus Christ. James' designation of the Law as one of freedom was influenced by the Jesus Tradition insofar as the teachings and ministry of Jesus corresponded to the new covenant expectations of Jer 31:31-34. However, James is not alone in the NT canon with respect to presenting a unified theology in terms of how the messianic expectations of passages such as Deut 30:6, Ezek 36:26-27, and Jer 31:31-34 are now in effect. Other NT writers are in agreement with James concerning the threefold function of "the law of liberty" in the Christian's life.

First, with respect to "the law of liberty's" role in regeneration in light of the new covenant promise, the author of Hebrews quotes Jer 31:33-34 in Hebrews 10:16-17 underscoring the fact that because of Christ's messianic work, a person may be set free from the restraints of the exterior law and receive full forgiveness of sins. The Apostle Paul continues this theme in Rom 8:1-2 when he exclaims that everyone in Christ has a "new law" that they are under, namely "the law of the Spirit of life". He expressly states in Rom 8:1-2 that "the law of the Spirit" sets a person free in Christ Jesus, and therefore, he or she is no longer under the condemning effects of "the law of sin and death". These two texts are prime examples of how James' perception of "the law of liberty" in his epistle corresponds to how other NT writers viewed the effects and fulfillment of the new covenant promise as administered through Jesus' life and ministry.

Second, in Galatians 6:2, Paul speaks of “the law of Christ” in much the same way as James interprets “the law of liberty” in terms of the Christian’s works. Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill *the law of Christ* (emphasis added).” Here, he teaches that doing works of mercy and love towards one’s neighbors is in obedience to “the law of Christ”. This point is further supported if one looks back at Ga 5:14, when Paul, like James, declares that keeping Lev 19:18 fulfills “the whole law” (Rom 13:10; Jas 2:8-12).³⁵ In addition, the Apostle Paul tells the saints at Philippi that their salvation, if it is genuine, will produce works (Phil 2:12). However, he assures them that “God will complete his saving work in them” (Phil 1:6) in a way that alludes to the internalization of God’s law in the heart when he says, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:13).” Moreover, in texts such as Rom 8:9-17 and Gal 5:16-26, Paul attributes this promise of the new covenant to the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit which designates the fulfillment of the coming Spirit in Ezek 36:26-27, who would be responsible for ensuring that God’s people would be free to keep his law.

And last, the relationship of “the law of liberty” to the final judgment and the connection to its fulfillment of Jer 31:34b gains further support in other NT writings. For example, in the passages mentioned earlier, Paul teaches in Rom 8:1-2 and Gal 6:2 that those who are in Christ are liberated from the condemnation of the Mosaic Law and are now free to live in the Spirit according to “the law of Christ”.³⁶ Just as James teaches in

³⁵Femi Adeyemi, “The New Covenant Law and the Law of Christ,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 163, no. 652 (Oct-Dec 2006): 447.

³⁶In Gal 5:6, Paul’s message is very similar to that of James’ interpretation of “the law of liberty,” when he clarifies, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for

Jas 2:12-13 that speaking and acting in light of being judged by “the law of liberty” will be characterized by doing deeds of mercy to one’s neighbor, so also Paul teaches that the Law which all men will be held accountable to will be the one that is rooted in the Jesus Tradition. Furthermore, Jesus himself teaches in the parable of the unforgiving servant the concept that those who do not show mercy on others will not receive mercy nor forgiveness from the Father (Matt 18:21-35). And again, in Matt 25:31-46, Jesus places himself as the judge of all nations, and describes the judgment scene as one where keeping the love command and doing deeds of mercy to others will reveal the righteous ones who will inherit the kingdom that God has promised and prepared for them (Matt 25:34, 37; Jas 2:5). Thus, the themes of forgiveness and mercy characterize the final judgment of God upon believers as revealed in the NT as it was foretold in Jer 31:31-34.

In conclusion, “the law of liberty” in the letter of James is the signifier that the work of Christ has liberated God’s people to know and love him as well as love their neighbors as themselves which complies with Jesus’ statement, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:40).” Moreover, the great Reformer, John Calvin, agrees with the freedom of the new law that is grounded upon Jesus Christ, as prophesied in Jer 31:31-34, when he comments on Jas 1:25:

Moreover, since it is a blessing of the Old Testament that the law of God should reform us, as it appears from Jer 31:[34], and other passages, it follows that it cannot be obtained until we come to Christ. And, doubtless, he alone is the end and perfection of the law; and James adds *liberty*, as an inseparable associate, because the Spirit of Christ never regenerates, but that he becomes also a witness and an earnest of our divine adoption, so as to free our hearts from fear and trembling.³⁷

anything, *but only faith working through love* (emphasis added).”

³⁷John Calvin, *Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, James, 2 Peter, Jude*, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 2005), 298.

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