

Without (the) Law

Doctrine and Covenants 76:72 and 137:7 become clearer with an understanding of two New Testament Greek expressions that differentiate between “not having the covenant law” and “lawless.”

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Most LDS commentaries on “Behold, these are they who died without law” (D&C 76:72) assume the verse refers to those who died without having the chance to hear the law. Understood thus, this verse in the context of Doctrine and Covenants 76:71–80 would seem to say that the people who never had the chance in mortality to hear the gospel will inherit the terrestrial kingdom. This reading would seem to contradict Doctrine and Covenants 137:7, which explicitly states that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God.”¹ Doctrine and Covenants commentaries must then explain why 76:72 cannot be understood to mean that those who die “without law” receive the terrestrial kingdom.² Perhaps a different understanding of “without law” in that verse would remove the seeming inconsistency between Doctrine and Covenants 76:72 and 137:7. The following brief study will demonstrate this point.

In addition to Doctrine and Covenants 76:72, “law” is the object of “without” in six other passages in Latter-day Saint scriptures. Four of these passages occur in the New Testament. (These four will prove pivotal in the discussion.) The fifth passage, Moroni 8:22, will prove to conform to New Testament usage. The sixth passage, 2 Chronicles 15:3, will not factor into the discussion because the content and the unusual construction in Hebrew do not contribute to the present investigation.

The four passages that occur in the New Testament can be

divided into two categories, according to whether the phrase in the King James Version is “without law” (Romans 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 9:21), or “without *the* law” (Romans 7:8-9 and 3:21, italics added).³ In English the difference between “without law” and “without the law” is not readily apparent, which is one reason why Doctrine and Covenants 76:72 can easily be misunderstood. On the other hand, these two phrases in the King James Version are translations from the Greek text; and in the Greek text these two phrases cannot be confused. “Without law” in Romans 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 9:21 is translated from a single Greek word, ἄνομος, and means “without law, lawless, impious,”⁴ that is, “outside law.” “Without the law” in Romans 7:8-9 (and the similar phrase in Romans 3:21) is translated from the Greek words, χωρὶς νόμου, χωρὶς meaning “separately, asunder, apart by oneself,”⁵ and νόμος meaning (among other things) “law, ordinance,”⁶ “especially of the Mosaic law,” and “can almost come to mean (*Jewish*) religion.”⁷ Together, χωρὶς νόμου means not having received or been subject to the law or rule of religion, including principles and ordinances.

When these Greek distinctions are read into the English text, it becomes readily apparent that the phrases express different theological concepts. For example, Romans 2:12 would read, “For as many as have sinned without law [ἄνόμως, that is, having placed themselves outside of law] shall also perish without law [outside of law]: and as many as have sinned [with]in the law shall be judged by the law.” In like manner, 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 would state,

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law [outside of law], as without law [outside of law], (being not without law [not outside of law] to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law [outside of law].⁸

On the other hand, Romans 7:7-9 would read, “I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law [χωρὶς νόμου, in other words, because I did

not have the law], sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once [For I was alive before the law was given to me]: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” Similarly, Romans 3:21 would read, “But now the righteousness of God without the law [i.e., when the law had not yet been given] is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.”⁹

These four New Testament examples strongly suggest that the very similar King James Version phrases “without law” and “without the law” express very different theological concepts. “[Those] without law” seems to denote those who have chosen to reject law and live outside of it. The phrase “without the law” would appear to refer to those who do not have a law or ordinance given to them.

The only passage in the Book of Mormon where “law” is the object of “without,” Moroni 8:22, also seems to conform to the usage just demonstrated for the King James Version. There the phrase “they that are without the law” is defined within the verse itself as meaning those “that have no law.” Thus, while this verse was not translated from a Greek original, it clearly appears to be consistent in both meaning and form with the English usage established in the King James Version of the New Testament.

With this understanding of the difference between “without law” and “without the law,” a fresh look at Doctrine and Covenants 76:72 is in order. “Behold, these are they who died without law,” then, would not appear to refer to those who died not knowing the law. Rather, the verse probably refers to those who died outside law, that is, died having rejected the law of the gospel with its various rules and covenants. This reading, contrary to the understanding most commentaries give to the passage, does not create a conflict with Doctrine and Covenants 137:7. Within the context of Doctrine and Covenants 76:71–80, verse 72 would then refer to the good and honorable people of this earth who live lives free of gross sin, but who in this life reject the gospel of Jesus Christ and choose to live outside the laws and ordinances thereof.¹⁰

NOTES

¹See Mosiah 3:11 for this same doctrine. John W. Welch of the BYU Law School was kind enough to draw my attention to this Book of Mormon reference.

²For example, "It seems clear that these categories are not absolutely definitive. For instance, *all* those who die without law will not end up in the terrestrial kingdom—those who would have received the gospel had they heard it are heirs of the celestial kingdom." Larry E. Dahl, "The Vision of the Glories (D&C 76)," in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 1, *Studies in Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1984), 290. See also Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, eds., *The Doctrine and Covenants*, revised edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 461; Roy W. Doxey, selector and arranger, *The Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 488; and Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 351–52.

³In addition to verse 21, the concept of "without the law" is discussed throughout Romans 3:19–31. See particularly verse 28.

⁴*A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 65. Romans 2:12 uses the adverbial form ἄνόμως, while 1 Corinthians 9:21 uses the adjectival form ἄνομος.

⁵*A Lexicon Abridged*, 794.

⁶*A Lexicon Abridged*, 467.

⁷William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 544. Italics in the original. See also Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. W. Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), vol. 4, 1038.

⁸The New English Bible with considerable liberty translates, "To Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; as they are subject to the Law of Moses, I put myself under that law to win them, although I am not myself subject to it. To win Gentiles, who are outside the Law, I made myself like one of them, although I am not in truth outside God's law, being under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:20–21). The New English Bible (Oxford and Cambridge: Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1970), 217.

⁹In verse 28 the same concept is expressed, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without [separately from] the deeds of the law."

¹⁰In the context of Doctrine and Covenants 76:72, the word "law" does not mean any law. Just as the Greek for law, νόμος, can mean the Mosaic law and "can almost come to mean (*Jewish*) religion" (see footnote 8), so likewise law in this verse means the law of the gospel, or more simply, the gospel.