HALAKHAH
HALAKHAH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: 
A RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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The aim of the present paper is to survey the relatively new discipline of studying halakhah in the New Testament. Instead of “halakhah” we could simply say “Jewish law”; we shall presently discuss the various meanings of the term and its possible origins. The infant discipline has to deal with complicated obstacles which, although scholars are not equally susceptible to their influence, deserve to be kept in view from the start.

Christian attitudes to the Jewish law are characteristically ambivalent. On the one hand, the Jewish origins of Christianity and its loudly acclaimed Old Testament basis would suggest the law is a basic ingredient. On the other, a strong tension if not antagonism towards the law is visible at least from the second century onwards. One central question is to what extent this antagonism may justifiably be read into the NT. It has become an acceptable insight by now that Jesus conformed to the acceptance of the Mosaic law as the basis of Jewish life, even if he had his own views in particulars. To the extent that his teachings are preserved in the Gospels, one would therefore expect halakhah to be found in them. The question is then how the evangelists, the subsequent editors of the Gospels, related to this. Did they basically follow their master, or had they meanwhile evolved to more negative approaches to the law?

A negative view of the law is thought to be particularly prominent in Paul’s letters, although these are decidedly earlier than the Gospels. Especially in Protestant milieus, Paul’s “theology of the law” is considered a veritable “bulwark” against Judaism and its law-centeredness. Since the 1970’s, however, there has been a marked tendency to correct the negative view of Judaism this implies and to go for “a new perspective on Paul.” Indeed, from then on a rising interest in the halakhah contained in Paul’s letters can also be observed, though at a much smaller scale and not in the first place among advocates of the “new perspective.” This may be noted in all soberness. Things appear