

THE MEANING OF ΤΕΛΟΣ IN ROMANS 10:4

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This study attempts to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of τέλος in Rom 10:4 and to provide philological criteria for the understanding of this term.

Chap. 1 indicates clearly that a considerable shift has occurred in the history of the interpretation of τέλος in Rom 10:4. The early church and the Reformers understood this verse in a teleological/completive sense: as a statement of the fulfillment of the law in Christ in a prophetic as well as purposive signification. However, since the post-Reformation era and particularly since the nineteenth century, the terminal/temporal/antinomian interpretations have prevailed. Rom 10:4 has been generally approached from the perspective of the law-gospel debate. The thrust of the passage and the meaning of τέλος have not received due attention. Τέλος has been translated by "termination," "fulfillment," or "goal," without semantic substantiation.

Chap. 2 provides the needed philological study on the word τέλος and the phrase τέλος νόμου in biblical and cognate literature. This study shows that the semantic import of τέλος is primarily teleological, not temporal. Τέλος with a genitive is generally used to indicate purpose or outcome, not termination. The phrase τέλος νόμου designates the object or fulfillment of law, never its abrogation. Therefore, on philological grounds, the interpretation of Rom 10:4 as "Christ has superseded or abrogated the law" would be awkward, if not incorrect or unintelligible to the audience of Romans, even if it were so intended by Paul.

Chap. 3 consists of an exegesis of Rom 10:4 and its immediate context (9:30-10:21) within the larger context of Rom 9-11. It shows that νόμος is consistently used in this section in the broad sense of Torah, while τέλος is used probably as the culminating point in a series of athletic terms. It appears, therefore, that the relationship between Christ and the law is explained by Paul in teleological categories. One main concern of Paul in this passage is to prove that the Torah leads to the gospel (10:5-21) and that the Christ-event is the climactic manifestation of the righteousness of God promised in Scripture (10:4-8). The way Paul deals with the OT in this passage reveals one of the lesser-known features of his thought, namely, his teleological view of Scripture.