Do we uphold the Law? - Rom 3:31

(Iver Larsen, Revised October 2026)

Romans 3:31 is difficult to translate as well as ambiguous and theologically disputed. I am not satisfied with the traditional treatment of this verse in the commentaries nor the traditional translations, although the translations vary quite a bit.

KJV: we establish the law
RSV, ESV, NIV, GNB: we uphold the law
NLT: we truly fulfill the law
God's Word: we are supporting Moses' Teachings

The Greek text is: νόμον οὖν καταργοῦμεν διὰ τῆς πίστεως; μὴ γένοιτο· ἀλλὰ νόμον ἱστάνομεν.

A literal version may be: Do we then discard "law" through/by way of the faith? Not at all! Rather, we make "law" stand.

If this verse is read out of context in a fairly literal translation, as most people do, it is difficult to understand the meaning. Part of the context is that Paul is writing to Jews in Rome. Another part of the context is the way the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. A third part is what Paul is writing elsewhere on this topic.

1. What is NOMOS (law)? The Hebrew scriptures (Tanakh) were and are commonly divided into three parts: The Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The Torah consists of the "Five Books of Moses". The word basically means "teaching" and it refers to God's teaching where Moses was a key person in receiving this information and giving it to the Israelites. In the LXX, Torah is normally translated by NOMOS, and this gives rise to the first ambiguity: Does NOMOS refer to the Torah or more specifically to the 10 commandments and the other laws, rules and regulations or maybe to secular law in general? To answer that question, I believe it is helpful to refer to the introduction of this section, namely v. 21. It is common in Jewish/Hebrew thoughts and writing to have an inclusio, i.e. the first and last part of a section overlap lexically and semantically (in both words and meaning). In v. 21 we read that now (after Christ has come and having accepted Christ as Saviour/Messiah) there is a new kind of righteousness from God (cf. Rom 10:3) which has been revealed, but it was already testified to (prophesied about) in the "Law and the Prophets". Because of the coordination between "Law" and "Prophets", I am suggesting that "Law" (NOMOS) both in verse 21 and 31 is intended to refer to the Torah. It so happens that the Torah also contains a number of prophecies about the coming Messiah. One of the most famous ones is found in Deut 18:15-18. It is quoted several times by various NT writers. Paul quotes two times in chapter 4 from the Torah. Genesis contains several important prophetic promises to the Patriarchs. So, the "law" contains both regulations/commandments and prophecies.

2. What is meant by "through the faith"? I suggest that it refers to this new way of becoming accepted by God (righteousness), namely through faith in Jesus as the Messiah (and through faith in his "blood" (v. 25), that is, his atoning death.)

3. Does this new way to righteousness mean that we should just throw the Torah away? The Jews in Rome would be very upset if that was the case. The Greek verb is translated variously: make void (KJV), overthrow (RSV), nullify (NIV), do away with (GNB), destroy (CEV), forget about (NLT). But is Paul contradicting himself? He used the exact same Greek word in Eph 2:15: "by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances" (RSV). In Ephesians his main audience are the Gentiles, and here he is talking not about the Torah as a whole but the laws and commandments it contains. He is specifically thinking about how to become accepted by God and join the new people of God, so that believing Jews and Gentiles become one people. This is not a result of trying to keep the commandments and ordinances in the Jewish laws. It is by grace through faith you are saved (Eph 2:8).

4. What does it mean to make the Torah stand? The Greek verb used is very common, 155 times in the NT. However, this is the only place in the NT where it is used in the present tense. Present tense forms of the verb do occur occasionally in the Septuagint, but most of the time it is in the literal sense of placing a person or thing at a particular location. I have only been able to find one place where the present tense form is used and the context is similar to here, and that is in Isa 44:26. Here God is described as the one "who confirms the word of his servant" (RSV). NET says: "who fulfills the oracles of his prophetic servants". My suggestion is that the word has a similar sense in Rom 3:31, to fulfill or make come true or confirm the truth of it. It does not mean to establish or uphold the law as a set of laws. In prophetic language, if a prophecy or a promise "falls to the ground" it has failed to come true. If it stands, it has been fulfilled. So, my proposal is that Paul is here saying that "we" as Jews who have come to believe in Jesus the Messiah are not abolishing or throwing away the Torah. Rather we are fulfilling its intentions, we are in a new and better way doing what God wants us to do (See Matthew chapters 5-7, and especially 5:17-20), and that is the basic meaning of "righteousness". Paul comes back to that thought many times, including in Rom 8:4 and 13:8-10.

As far as translations go, I think NLT is the most accurate in terms of conveying the intended meaning. Paul is not telling the Jews or Jewish Christians to throw away the Torah just because a new way of being accepted by God has come with Jesus. When Paul preached to Jews he always referred to prophecies in the Torah and other parts of the Jewish Bible. The Torah as a means of justification is obsolete, since faith in Jesus has now become the means. But the Torah as a historical document with many prophecies is still an important resource. He is also suggesting that through Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a believer is able to fulfill the intention of God's teaching and commands, to do what pleases God. (More about that in Romans 8). It is a better and more efficient way than trying to follow the letter of the Law, the way the Pharisees tried to do.