

Galatians

Chapter Three

Arguments about the Law

The first two chapters of Galatians told the story of the origins of his work as an apostle and how that work related to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. The account concluded with Paul's dramatic declaration of what now defined his life; Christ, who died for him and now lives in him (2:20-21). The next chapters draw out the implications of that fundamental principle for the Galatians and the issue that now confronts them: whether, in order to be heirs of the promises that Paul proclaimed, they needed to become members of the covenant community of Israel and be circumcised.

An Opening Gambit 3:1-5

One common rhetorical technique was to begin an address with a “*captatio benevolentiae*,” a bit of flattery that would win the favor or good will of the audience. Paul begins his argument instead with an arresting challenge, calling his addressees “foolish” and “bewitched” and asks whether they have forgotten what they should have learned from him: gospel of Christ crucified (v. 1). He continues in this vein for several verses (2-4), recalling things that the Galatians had experienced through his missionary activity. Central to this experience is the gift of the Spirit (vv. 2-3). What Paul has in mind includes what the Galatians experienced as “miracles” (v. 5), but it also probably included the kind of ecstatic worship that Paul treats in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In any case, at the heart of Paul’s argument with the Galatians will come an appeal to their experience of baptism (3:27-29) and prayer (4:6) that will

be the most persuasive arguments that he advances in his efforts to dissuade them from pursuing circumcision. Before he reaches that climactic appeal, he offers a series of arguments based on interpretation of scripture, sometimes fanciful to our sensibilities, to make his case.

The Story of Abraham 3:6-9

Paul begins by offering a reading of the story of Abraham (vv. 6-9). He will use the same basic construal of Genesis when he takes up the issue of faith and the Law in Romans, 4. Paul's reading attends closely to the wording of certain key verses in Genesis, but also assumes an important point about the sequence of the story. Paul begins (v. 6) by citing Gen 15:6, that Abraham (still then called Abram in Genesis) "believed" or "trusted" and that belief/trust was "reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul draws the inference from that wording that the descendants and heirs of Abraham are people who believe, which is what the Galatians did when they heard him proclaim the gospel. According to the account in Genesis, Abram was not yet circumcised when his "belief" was "reckoned as righteousness." His circumcision only takes place in Genesis 18, when he also receives the new name of Abraham. Therefore, the Galatians should conclude, circumcision is not necessary to be "reckoned righteous" with God.

The inference that believers are the descendants of Abraham counters any claim that either physical offspring or adherents of the covenant of circumcision are the true descendants of Abraham. Paul reinforces this construal of the heirs of God's promises by appeal to the beginning of the story of Abram when he was called from Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 12:1-3). At that time God promised Abram that he would become the father of a great nation and that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3) through him. Paul now (v. 8) cites that verse. Its vision of God's universal beneficence is not simply an argumentative move but is a core

conviction of the apostle, perhaps based on such prophetic visions of universal salvation as are found in Isa 55:3-5; 56:2-8; 66:18-23.

Blessing and Curse 3:10-14

Paul now shifts gears and engages in another scriptural text, taking a form of argument that he might have learned in education as a Pharisee and giving it a Christological twist. He begins by citing Deut 27:26, the last of twelve curses that conclude Moses' delivery of the Torah to the Israelites. Paul cites the text with its plain meaning: anyone who does not obey the commands of the Torah will be cursed. Paul then immediately finds another verse, from Hab 2:4, that stands in tension with the verse from Deuteronomy. In its original context, the prophet draws a contrast between "the proud," about whom he says, "Their spirit is not right in them," with "the righteous [who] live by their faith." Paul takes the last phrase out of context and cites it as a general principle, which could also be translated "The righteous by faith will live." However, the verse is construed, it confirms the principle that Paul had already highlighted in his retelling of the story of Abraham: "life," with all that entails, and "faith" are intimately connected. To make quite certain that the contrast of two principles is clear, Paul cites another verse Lev 18:5, which associates "life" and "doing": "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them."

Paul has established what seem to be two contradictory principles in scripture, a move paralleled in rabbinic interpretation. The usual next step was to cite a verse that would somehow overcome the contradiction and Paul makes precisely that move. He cites Deut 21:23, a comment that concludes the rule that someone punished for a capital offense should be removed from the tree on which he has been hung on the day of the execution and not left hanging

overnight. The concluding comment of that passage simply states that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”

Paul’s creative move is to apply this verse from Deuteronomy to Christ, who was hung on the tree of the cross. If he was so hung, he was, by definition, “under God’s curse.” What remains implicit is how this verse solves the dilemma of the contradictory verses. Various theories about Christ’s death as an act of atonement have attempted to fill in the gap. Paul’s understanding is probably reflected in a comment he makes in 2 Cor 5:21, that God make “him to be “sin” who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words God treated Jesus as an offering for sin, to lift from his brothers and sisters the burden of sin. Paul does not need to spell out how he understands that transaction to have taken place, whether God was punishing sinners vicariously, satisfying some abstract need for retribution for evil, or doing something else. Paul assumes that his Galatians readers will immediately see that the resurrected, and hence vindicated Christ cannot be under a curse. Therefore the curse imposed by the Law for not abiding by it has been eliminated by God’s act in Christ. Thereby, “we,” Abraham’s heirs in faith from all the nations, might have “the promise of the Spirit” (v. 14).

The argument in this section of Galatians strikes moderns as difficult both in its logic and perhaps in the theories of atonement to which it might be appealing. Paul apparently decided that the argument did not work as well as he thought it might. When he came to treat the same issues in Romans 4, he abandons the complex argument made here and uses instead a simpler and more straightforward appeal to God’s forgiveness of sin (Rom 4:6–8), citing a single scriptural text (Ps 32:1-2).

An Argument from History 3:15-18

Paul styles his next move as “an example from daily life,” although this simple example involves two word plays and an appeal to the history of Israel. He begins by citing the example of will or “testament” (Greek, *diatheke*) and makes the point that once a will has been ratified, i.e., certified by a legal authority as binding, no one adds to it or annuls it. Paul may oversimplify here, ignoring the possibility that someone might change a will, and an ancient lawyer might object that what he meant to say was that no one can change a ratified will on his own, without obtaining further legal authorization. Yet the basic point is clear. What makes the general point applicable to the situation of the Galatians is that the word for “will/testament” is also the word used for the “covenant” between God and his people. That “covenant” for Paul is a *diatheke* that cannot change, because it has been ratified by God himself. But where, in what part of scripture is the intent of that *diatheke* to be found?

Before Paul responds to that question he engages in a bit of wordplay that will point to the answer. He appeals to another text of Genesis where God makes a promise to Abram and his descendants of an inheritance, the kind of thing that would be in a testamentary document. In the passage in question (Gen 13:15), God promises to give what would become the land of Israel to Abram and his offspring. The word used for “offspring” is a collective noun, literally “seed,” which is grammatically singular in number, both in Hebrew and in the Greek that Paul cites. Paul exploits that grammatical point to claim that the promise was made not to many people, but to one person, i.e. Christ (v. 16). The argument seems artificial, even playful, but such arguments find many parallels in rabbinic interpretations of scripture. A serious point is made with a playful literary device.

Paul goes on (vv. 17-18) to explain what the serious point is. Here he appeals to the facts of history. The Torah, the Law, which contains the commandments and its promise of blessing and curse, was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. That event was some “four hundred years” after the covenant (or will/testament) that God gave to Abram. That covenant/testament contained as its “inheritance” the “promise” (v. 18) of blessings to all nations. That promise of universal blessing not only remains valid but has been realized in Christ.

Some Loose Ends regarding the Law 3:19-22

Paul’s argument raises further questions, which he now tries to answer. The first is what the Torah or Law was for, if it came so late after the establishment of the testament/covenant. It was, Paul claims, part of a holding pattern, put in place “because of transgressions,” until the recipient of the promise, the singular “offspring” came (v. 19). As often in this chapter, Paul’s argument is elliptical. What he no doubt intends, and will soon specify, is that the Law was put in place to restrain sin, although later in Romans he will suggest that it could be used as an instrument of sin (Rom 7:7–13). Paul adds, almost as an afterthought, a consideration that denigrates the status of the Law. It was, as Jewish tradition about the events at Mount Sinai suggested, given through the mediation of angels. It therefore had a chain of transmission (v. 20) implying that it does not offer the immediacy of access to God available in the life of the Spirit.

Paul then makes clear (vv. 21-23), in response to a rhetorical question, in what way the giving of the Law was “because of transgressions.” Does his position imply some sort opposition between the Law and the promises of God? “Certainly not,” he says. The law simply does not provide the life that the gift of the Spirit does. What it does is to offer a restraint, “imprisoning” or “locking things up” under sin, until the coming of Christ.

Paul uses another metaphor to make the same point, that the law functioned as a “disciplinarian,” (Greek, *paidagogos*, a slave in charge of children), no longer needed since the maturation of its wards produced by Christ’s coming (v. 24).

Become Children of God and Heirs of the Promise 3:23-29

The chapter ends with the first of two balanced appeals to the experience of the Galatians. They have, in Christ, become “children of God through faith” (v.v. 25-26). The incorporation into the reality that is Christ took place through the rite of baptism. Paul alludes to what probably took place as part of the baptismal ritual, when initiates were given a new clean garment after being dipped in the water, symbolizing their being “clothed … with Christ” (v. 27). Paul then cites what may have been a formula used in the baptismal ritual, indicating that all old oppositions and distinctions had been eliminated. “In Christ,” in the community formed by faith, there is no distinction of nationality, social status, or gender. All are one, a marvelous vision that Christians have been ever since trying to understand and to live.

Paul concludes this section of his argument (v. 29), by picking up the themes that have run through the chapter. Belonging to Christ guarantees that the Galatians, though uncircumcised, are indeed Abraham’s offspring and heirs of the promise God made in Gen 12:3 to bless all nations through him.

Questions

1. Do you find Paul’s appeal to scripture convincing? Do you find yourself arguing about scripture with contemporaries? If so, how important is it to make clear what your presuppositions about scripture are?

2. Paul's other appeal to the Galatians is based on their experience. How persuasive do you find such arguments today? Can such arguments have any force when people debating a point do not share the same experience?
3. What is your understanding of the Old Testament in your own life? Would you read the Abraham story the same way as Paul?
4. If Paul is correct that the experience of life "in Christ" is important for understanding Christian belief, how would you describe experiences of that life that you have had.

Further Reading:

Debbie Hunn, "Why therefore the Law: The Role of the Law in Galatians 3:19-20," *NovT* 47 (2013) 355-72.

Stefan Nordgaard, "Paul and the Provenance of the Law: The Case of Galatians 3:19-20," *ZNW* 105 (2014) 64-79.