

Galatians

Chapter Four

An “Allegory” of Hagar and Sarah

Galatians 4 continues with themes that we have seen in the first three chapters. Paul continues the narrative account of his apostolic authority by speaking directly of his role as teacher to the Galatians. He expands on his understanding of the law as a mark of the old age, the age of spiritual infancy, and he continues and elaborates his exposition of the story of Abraham as an example for the Galatian Christians and as a foreshadowing of the Gospel.

The Implications of Baptism (continued) 4:1-7

We have seen that for Paul baptism is the initiation of believers into a new age where old distinctions and old loyalties give way to the life of faith, a life foreshadowed by the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15.

One of the great themes of Galatians is the distinction between the present evil age of the cosmos (1:4) and the New Age in Jesus Christ, which is breaking into the old era and transforming history. Directly parallel to this is the claim that the Galatians have moved from their spiritual infancy to their spiritual maturity. They are no longer kept under bondage to old ways or subject to autocratic guardians. They are now mature, adult, and able at last to be full-fledged heirs of God’s promises.

What strikes us is that Paul draws a direct parallel between the “infancy” of the Galatian believers and the “infancy” of Israel. In the old age (in the age of their immaturity) both the Galatian Gentiles and the Jewish people have been subject to the rule of powers less than God and perhaps even inimical to God.

The Jewish people (as we have seen) were subject to the law, which was either their jailer or their guardian or their tutor, but which in any case kept them under its powerful thumb until they were old enough to break free, or more accurately to be set free in Jesus Christ. But now we notice that the Galatians, who were mostly Gentiles, were also “enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.” We ponder what it is in the history of these Gentiles that corresponds to the law in the history of the Jewish people. What were their elemental spirits? (see also 4:9 below) And why is it that when they threaten to turn to the law the Galatians threaten to re-turn to the elemental spirits? It would seem that the worship of elemental spirits includes attention to times and seasons—nature worship for Gentiles? A considerable amount of labor has gone into trying to determine more specifically what Paul means by this reference to the cosmic elements. What we can say is that Paul wants to hold that Jews and Gentiles alike have been held subject to something less than God while awaiting God’s revelation through the coming of His Son.

The capstone to the discussion of adoption through Jesus Christ is found in Galatians 4:6-7. Paul, who often argues by interpreting scripture, here makes his point by interpreting the experience of the Galatian churches. In their worship these Greek speaking Christians call out the Aramaic word, “Abba!”, Father. Perhaps this refers to a spirit filled aspect of worship when believers cry out in spontaneous prayer; perhaps it refers to the communal saying of the Lord’s Prayer, “Abba, Father, hallowed be your name.” In any case the prayer becomes the proof that these are God’s adopted children, no longer subject to the guardianship of the law or of pagan worship. More than that, because all Christians join in the same prayer, they are all adopted children of the same father. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female.

So act like God’s (mature) children 4:8-20

Galatians 4:8-12 revisit the subject of the elementary powers. While it is difficult to specify what these powers might be, it is clear that, like the law, they have held childish believers under bondage until they were visited and redeemed by the real God, the God of Jesus Christ. For Christians the earliest “liberation theology” is the claim that it is Christ who liberates believers from the bondage to false sovereigns (pagan gods? The Jewish law?) and sets them free precisely in their allegiance to the true God.

In 4:13-20 Paul returns to the narrative of chapters 1 and 2 and brings his story up to date. Now at issue is not his apostleship more generally but his apostleship to the Galatians. Paul makes two related points about his ministry among the Galatians—how deeply he was devoted to them, and how deeply they were devoted to him. He not only sounds exasperated; he announces that he is exasperated (v.20). It is clear enough what has happened to diminish the strong early bonds of affection: the opponents have come in and in urging the Galatians to take on the law they have denied the value of Paul’s Gospel. Furthermore, they have denied the value of the Galatians’ faith by insisting that the Galatians are lacking in one important way—they have not been sufficiently obedient to the law. “They want to exclude you so that you may make much of them.” (17)

The final image of this passage is powerfully gender bending. Paul has been insisting that the Galatians are adopted children of God; now they are his “little children” too. His love for them is at least as powerful as that of a father for his children because Paul is the mother who has given them birth. Those birth pangs should have ended when the Galatians came to faith; now because they are denying faith Paul suffers new pangs and prays for a new birth.

The allegory of Sara and Hagar 4:21-31

Paul has reversed gender expectations by comparing himself to a mother giving birth. Now he reverses ethnic expectations. Perhaps the teachers have made much of Abraham as a forerunner of the faith, noting the fact that in Genesis 17 Abraham receives circumcision as a sign of the covenant. It is at least as likely that Paul turns to Abraham (as he will again in Romans) because Abraham is the protagonist in the scriptural verse Paul loves above all others: “And Abraham had faith in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (our translation; Genesis 15:6 quoted in Gal. 3:6). Blessedly for Paul’s purposes, this decision of God to reckon Abraham as righteous takes place two chapters before Abraham submits to circumcision and is based, Paul would say, not on any work that Abraham performed but on his trust in God’s promise.

In any case, Jewish Christians (or Christians who wanted Gentiles to take on aspects of the Jewish Law) would not be surprised by Paul’s turn to Abraham, nor to his eagerness to reflect on the story of the two mothers of Abraham’s sons—Sara and Hagar. What would surely have shocked these Jews or Judaizers was the reversal of the usual claim. Sara is the mother of Isaac, child of the promise. Hagar, a slave woman, is the mother of the slave child Ishmael. Sara’s children are the Jewish people. Hagar’s children are the Arabs and other Semitic folk who surround them.

Sarah leads Hagar to Abraham, by the Dutch artist Mathias Stom (1638)



It is a little unclear how Paul pulls off this astonishing reversal (if he does) but it has something to do with the imaginative reframing of Hagar in connection to Sinai—which was not in Judea or Samaria but in the Arabian Peninsula. [One suggestion is that “G” is pronounced like “Y”, so Hagar sounds like HaHar, which would be “The Mountain” in Hebrew. What is “the” mountain? Sinai, of course.] If this is Paul’s claim, the argument is based on a bad pun. Once he has made this surprising move, Paul can go ahead to claim that the children of Sara are the Gentiles, because the Gentiles are the result of God’s promise to Abraham—“you will become the father of many nations” (Gen 17:5—which both in the Hebrew and the Greek can be translated as “the father of many Gentiles.”)

In any case for Paul Hagar is the mother of slavery and those who follow her (the Jews or Judaizers) are enslaved. Sara is the free woman and her children are free of the law and therefore free indeed.

The brief quotation from Genesis 21:10 in 4:30 surely includes a less than subtle suggestion for the Galatians in relationship to their Judaizing teachers: “But what does the scripture say, ‘Drive out the slave and her child...’”

Notice how many metaphors and themes come together here. Childhood is a kind of slavery and adulthood is the mature freedom of an heir. Bondage—imprisoning people both to the elemental spirits and to the Law—is that from which Christ has come to set people free. Abraham is the prototypical believer, trusting in the promises and not relying on the law.

Furthermore, the distinction between living according to the promise and living according to the flesh drives us back to the distinction between Flesh and Spirit expanded richly in Galatians 5.

The odd allegory becomes a way to weave together the images of the epistle and to reinforce the urgency of Paul’s exhortation. In 5:1 he will move from Sara and Hagar to the strongest claim of the epistle.

Questions for discussion:

1. In your own life and the life of your congregation what might the pilgrimage from spiritual childhood to Christian maturity look like?
2. Paul uses the Old Testament here in ways that would win the approval of no seminary or college professor of Scripture today. When he says that for freedom Christ has set us free, does he mean that we are free to interpret scripture to make the point we want

- to make? What are the limits and possibilities of Christian freedom when it comes to reading the Bible?
3. The same Greek word can be translated as “belief” or as “faith.” In what ways might each of these terms be fitting to the claims Paul wants to make, and to our own communities?

Further Reading

John Goodrich, “Guardians not Taskmasters: The Cultural Resonances of Paul’s Metaphor in Gal 4.1-2,” *JSNT* 32 (2010) 251-84.

Mark Gignilliat, “Paul, Allegory and the Plain Sense of Scripture: Galatians 4:21-31,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008) 135-46.