

AN ARGUMENTATION ANALYSIS OF GALATIANS 3

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1) Argument from God's provision of Spirit and miracles (3:1-5)

God provides the Spirit (cf. 4:6) and works miracles among the Galatians who up until now have been living by faith, not by the works of the Law.¹

2) The example of Abraham² (3:6-9) cf. Rom. 4

Abraham was reckoned righteous by faith and the same passage indicates that in him all nations shall be blessed,³ i.e., by the way of faith. Those of faith are sons of Abraham.

3) Comparison: Works of the Law produce a curse⁴ (3:10-12) cf. Rom. 10:1-10

Paul contrasts certain statements of the law, which imply the necessity of obeying all the commands, with Habakkuk 2:4. The point is that the Mosaic Law itself suggests that the way of works to earn righteousness is impossible.

4) Solution to the problem of this curse: Christ bore the curse (3:13-14)

Paul goes on to argue that Christ has redeemed us from this curse so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.⁵ This blessing is also explained in terms of "the promise the Holy Spirit".⁶ Paul assumes here that the sacrificial system of the law was not able to deliver from this curse, a point dealt with specifically in Hebrews 9.

5) The problem of the seeming contradiction of the promise to Abraham and the Law (3:15-24)

The testament was ratified in Genesis 15, therefore, just as a human testament, it cannot be changed.⁷

The testament was made with Abraham and his seed (sing.), i.e. with Christ,⁸ and therefore remains valid until Christ comes (cf. Rom. 9).

Therefore the Law added 430 years later cannot invalidate this testament (cf. Rom. 5:20-21).⁹

Why the Law? It was added because of transgressions¹⁰ by a mediator¹¹ until the benefactor should finally come.

The law is not contrary to the promises, not being intended to be a way to earn righteousness. It shows by its demand for perfect obedience that all are under God's curse, pointing them instead to the promise by faith [Paul does not go into the fact that this is shown through the sacrificial system, once again something dealt with in Hebrews]. It is a tutor to lead us to Christ that we may be reckoned righteous by faith.¹²

6) Now that faith (in Christ) has come, the tutor (to keep us exercising faith in the promises of God) is no longer necessary (3:25-29)

Why is the tutor no longer necessary?

- we are sons of God through faith in His real Son Christ (therefore reconciled to Him)
- this is shown in the rite of baptism whereby our identification with Christ is demonstrated (cf. Rom. 6).
- racial and sexual distinctions are broken down when we are identified in one person, Christ (implication for abolition of Mosaic law which built the distinction between Jew and Gentile)
- this identification with Christ means that we are inheritors of the promise made to Abraham and his seed (sing.)
- Old Testament believers were inheritors in the sense of children who do not receive the payout of the testament until the set date. Until that time they are kept under guardians (the law as tutor) and are like slaves. At the appointed time they truly become sons, just as we when Christ came to redeem us from the law and grant us adoption as sons. Therefore God sent us His Spirit who cries Abba (cf. Rom. 8:15).

¹ We should recall that it was the practice of the apostles to lay their hands on baptised converts and pray that they receive special gifts of the Spirit (see Acts 8:14-19, 19:1-7). Paul therefore argues that the tangible evidence of the Spirit backed the preaching of his Gospel of salvation by faith. He speaks in a Lukan way about receiving the Spirit here, that is, he means by this phrase the (special) gifts of the Spirit.

² *The testament with Abraham*

In Genesis 15 God comes to Abram and (in the terms of the Greek translation) makes a “testament” for him, promising him many descendants to whom will be given the land of his sojourning. There is also the prediction of slavery in a foreign land before this takes place, and the judgement of this land.

Before actually making the testament, God announces the promise of many descendants to Abram. Abram believes this promise. The Lord reckons this faith for righteousness. Herewith we have the *basis* for making the testament, i.e. a restored relationship with God by virtue of accredited righteousness (which as Paul later argues on the basis of Ps. 32 means forgiveness of sins as well, see Rom. 4:6-8).

Years later, God comes again to Abram in order to announce the confirmation of this testament and the coming of a son in a year’s time. Abram’s name is changed to signify this and he receives the sign of circumcision to keep. He is charged to walk before God and be blameless, a condition for receiving the testamentary promises, as is clear from Genesis 18:17-19 which speaks of keeping the way of the Lord and doing righteousness and justice. This is what James would speak of in terms of faith proving itself by its deeds. This condition will have already been implicit in the testament as given in Genesis 15. We are reminded of Paul’s phrase “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5).

Romans 4 is an extended outworking of the argument of Galatians 3:6-9.

³ *The promise that in Abraham all nations / clans will be blessed*

This promise is first announced to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, after the death of his father in Haran, in the charge to go further to the land that God will show him. It is repeated in Genesis 18:18 in a musing of God himself, and again after the test to kill Isaac in Genesis 22:18, and yet again in Genesis 26:4 when the testamentary promises are confirmed to Isaac. It seems clear that this promise belongs together with the testamentary promises of land and descendants.

The form in which Paul quotes this promise in Galatians 3 does not correspond exactly to any of these references. It seems to come from Genesis 12 with “nations” substituted for “families.” Peter also uses this promise in the same messianic sense in Acts 3:25. It is clearly not a unique part of Pauline Scripture usage.

⁴ *The works of the law versus righteousness by faith*

In the letter to the Romans, Habakkuk 2:4 is used to buttress the fundamental starting point of Paul’s argument (Rom. 1:16-17), namely, that the righteousness of God’s Gospel comes by faith. Paul works this out in the sense that this righteousness of the Gospel has nothing to do with the works of men, but is a gift of God through Christ’s redemptive work (cf. Rom. 3:21-26). In Romans 10:1-10 he briefly contrasts the demands of the law citing Leviticus 18:5 (cf. Gal. 3:12) in v.5. The polemical context is no longer the doctrine of the Judaisers, but that of Jews who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. In both Galatians and Romans Paul sets this demand of the law in a Christological perspective. In Galatians he refers to Christ taking the curse of the law upon himself to redeem us. Only later in this letter does he address the question of the intended purpose of the law. In Romans 10 Paul refers to Christ as the “goal” (*telos*) of the law and illustrates this by having ‘righteousness-by-faith’ (personified) interpret the law of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 in a Christological way.

In Galatians 3:21 Paul relates this central concern (how one’s righteousness to God arises) to the concept of life. Having righteousness before God is connected to having life. The connection is simple. If one desires to escape the wrath of God against unrighteousness and “live” (cf. Hab. 2:4; Gal. 3:11) then one needs to procure a righteousness that will stand before the holiness of God.

We ought not to forget that Paul speaks of “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). Faith is not opposed to works, as James rightly states, but faith is confirmed by works of thankful obedience. The “works of the law” in Galatians refer specifically to the Mosaic law as a system of laws which go beyond moral obligations and may therefore be characterised as ritual in nature, that which Paul calls the “elemental things” (Gal. 4:3). Nevertheless, as said, faith implies obedience, and where this obedience is lacking, faith is dead. But this is not the obedience which earns righteousness, for that would need to be perfect (Gal. 3:10).

Rabbi Gamaliel II, a generation later, lamented the fact that God’s Word demanded obedience of *all* the laws (in reference to Ezek. 18:5-9), a conclusion which Rabbi Akiba circumvented with an inventive interpretation:

When R. Gamaliel read this verse he wept, saying, 'Only he who does all these things shall live, but not merely one of them!' Thereupon R. Akiba said to him, 'If so, "Defile not yourselves in all these things." (Lev.18:4) is the prohibition against all [combined] only, but not against one?' [Surely not!] But it means, in one of these things; so here too, for doing one of these things [shall he live]. (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 81a, transl. ed. I. Epstein)

כשהיה רבן גמליאל מגיע למקרא הזה היה בוכה ואמר מאן דעביד לכולהו הוא דחיי בחדא מינייהו לא א"ל ר"ע אלא מעתה (ויקרא יח) אל תטמאו בכל אלה הכי נמי בכולהו אין בחדא מינייהו לא אלא באחת מכל אלה הכי נמי באחת מכל אלה

(text: Vilna ed.)

⁵ *The curse of the law*

The assumption here is that all people, both Gentiles and Jews, are under the curse of the law (cf. Rom. 1-3). Paul presupposes that before the coming of Christ all mankind was under the curse of the (Mosaic) law. The only way for *anybody* at that time to enter into salvation was to follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham. Before Christ's coming, this meant becoming one of God's people and undergoing circumcision, which of course only had benefit when combined with faith in the promises. Paul's problem with the Judaisers is that they are requiring adherence to the Mosaic law *after* the death of Christ. It is love, the fruit of the Spirit, which is required after Christ's coming. For Paul this equates to the moral commandments of the Mosaic law.

⁶ *The promise of the Holy Spirit*

The two purpose phrases in this verse should probably be understood together. They explain each other. If "the promise of the Holy Spirit" refers to a promise that the Spirit would come, it would be the only reference to this in this letter. More likely (and this would fit generally with Paul's other letters) the phrase is a reference to the promise which the Holy Spirit gives us as the downpayment to complete redemption, to the inheritance, or in terms of Gal. 5:5 "the hope of righteousness".

⁷ *The analogy to a human testament*

It is clear that Paul regards the testament made with Abraham in Genesis 15 to have been formally ratified at that time. Just as with a human testament, you can't set it aside or add conditions to it. Theoretically the testator has the opportunity to change it before he dies, but that is not the point. God is not considered to be dead. The image is continued in Galatians 4:1 where Paul describes a father who has set a date at which the children can inherit what is promised in the testament. Paul is not thinking of a last will, but of a testament which a father prepares to distribute a quantity of his assets to his children while he still lives, cf. the parable of the lost son who requests his inheritance while his father is still living (Luke 15:12). The consideration of Hebrews 9:17 is too absolute and does not apply here.

⁸ *The testament to Abraham and to his seed*

It is not to be doubted that זרע ("seed") is a Hebrew word generally used to indicate a plurality of descendants. The expression is not unique to the Abrahamic testament, cf. Numbers 18:19 which concerns the testamentary promise to Aaron and his seed to give them the portions of the holy gifts.

Paul does not deny the plurality of the expression, but understands this plurality as the result of identification with the *one* seed to whom the promise is made. Descendants of Abraham are thus not physical descendants, but those identified with, or said to be "in" the one seed, Christ. This plainly does not exclude Old Testament believers as Galatians 4:1 ff. makes clear. But only those who place faith / trust in God and follow him are seed of Abraham in Christ, the true seed.

In Romans 9 a similar, but yet slightly different, approach is taken. The similarity consists in the fact that also here the seed of the promise is not the physical line of descendants. In Romans 9 Paul makes this clear by referring to Genesis 21:12 where God chooses the line of Isaac as seed, in opposition to Ishmael, and later, Jacob in opposition to Esau. In these chapters of Romans salvation by works is contrasted with salvation by God's gracious choice (11:5-6). Faith in the promises can, therefore, be equated with God's choice (cf. Eph. 1-2).

Romans 9 therefore elucidates aspects of Galatians 3-4 (how Old Testament believers are also seed of Abraham), although it does not mention the central point of the argument from Galatians that Christ is the one seed of the promise. Romans is not concerned with the question of why the law was added and later

abolished when Christ came, and this is the point Paul is making with this explanation in Galatians.

Whilst Paul appropriately justifies his line of reasoning in Romans 9 from the Old Testament, that of Galatians is not directly to be derived from the Old Testament text through historical critical exegesis. But Paul clearly takes the promise that all nations / Gentiles would be blessed in Abraham as a prediction of the justification of the Gentiles by faith. This promise was only fulfilled in the coming of Christ and the abolition of the Mosaic law which kept Israel apart as a nation.

There is also the question as to how Galatians 3 matches the testamentary place Christ is given in the letter to the Hebrews. For this relationship see my article *Old Covenant vs. New Testament: The Dynamics of Covenant Theology from תּוֹרָה to διαθήκη* to be found on my website.

⁹ Paul is opposing the idea that the Mosaic law is a condition by which the inheritance is granted. This is not the case, for the inheritance was granted before even the Mosaic law was given, and a ratified testament cannot be changed. Therefore the ritually characterised system of Mosaic law cannot be a means of earning righteousness.

¹⁰ *“Because of transgressions”*

Is Paul suggesting that the Abrahamic testament would otherwise have faltered for lack of faith? The purpose of the Mosaic system would then be to keep (believing) Israel separate from the (unbelieving) nations (cf. Eph. 2:11-16), enabling the line of the promised Messiah to be preserved and to keep Israel oriented towards God with a legal system not only outlining the impossibility of righteousness by works, but providing forgiveness through the ritual of sacrifice which, of course, looks forward to the cross of Christ.

In Romans 5:20-21 Paul similarly alludes to the place of “transgressions” as the reason for giving the law. Here it is said that the law came in that transgressions might increase and that the result of this is that grace therefore increased all the more.

We might argue that in Galatians Paul’s cryptic “for the sake of transgressions” is a reference to adding the law so that there may be a heightened awareness of transgressions before God, leading people to see God’s grace (*à la* Romans). Or, attempting to take the text of Galatians more directly, we might say that Israel’s transgressions were the reason for giving the law which itself heightened awareness of transgressions and so drove them to see God’s grace. Certainly this would also account for Paul’s description of the kinds of regulations of the law he most readily thought of, circumcision and dietary laws (Gal. 2:11-16), the observance of days, months, seasons and years (Gal. 4:10), rules of handling, touching, tasting, food and drink (Col. 2:16, 21). In particular the ritual cleanness laws were virtually impossible to keep perfectly resulting in constant ritual washings. See further my article *The Laws for Uncleanness in the Pentateuch and New Testament Baptism* to be found on my website.

¹¹ Why does Paul mention angels and a mediator (presumably Moses) at the giving of the law? He seems hereby to wish to stress the distance between God and his people created by the transgressions. It is the fact of the presence of a *mediator*, not the *person* of the mediator that Paul here stresses. For the phrase “by the hand of a mediator” compare Lev. 26:46 “by the hand of Moses”. Angels at Sinai are mentioned in the LXX translation of Deut. 33:2 (the Hebrew at the end of this verse is unclear and “angels” is a possible rendering instead of the more common “lightening”, see Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1999). *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.). The presence of angels at the lawgiving was part of Jewish tradition, cf. Acts 7:38.

¹² *The law as a tutor*

A problem presents itself here in that Paul does not directly explain in what way the law is a tutor. Many, going by the argument thus far, namely, that the Law shows the requirement of absolute obedience, propose that the tutoring aspect is to be found in the presumed extreme strictness and detail of the Mosaic law. This extreme moral requirement was then only a tutor and is no longer required by Christians. But this says far more than Paul. For Paul presumes that Christ needed to deliver us from God’s curse by paying the penalty, which thereby suggests that the required moral strictness was not exaggerated, but one which required legal atonement. The tutoring aspect is explained in chapter four by the presence of “elemental things,” illustrated in terms of ritual aspects of the law. Unexpected, is the way Paul argues the purpose of the ceremonial (“elemental”) aspects of the law. Christians are used to “reading” these laws as symbols of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ (e.g. the sacrificial lamb as Christ). Although Paul does this in 1 Cor. 5, it is not his point here, which appears to be that the detailed ceremonial legislation was, in all its detail and involvement of daily life, impossible to keep perfectly.