The Children of the Barren Woman: 
Galatians 4:27 and the Hermeneutics of Justification

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In Gal 4:27, Paul offers a citation from Isa 54:1 as proof for his assertion in v. 26 that it is “the Jerusalem above” that is “our mother.” The citation poses an obvious hermeneutical riddle: on what basis does Paul include uncircumcised Gentiles in Galatia among the children born to the restored Jerusalem? This article proposes a solution to that riddle, based on a reading of the salvation-historical hermeneutical framework constructed in the preceding chapters of the letter and suggests some implications for how we are to understand the relationship between Gentile inclusion and salvation by grace within the grand narrative that informs Paul’s theology of justification.

Key Words: Galatians, Gentiles, hermeneutics, justification, grace

A RIDDLE: ISAIAH 54:1 IN GALATIANS 4:27

In Gal 4:27, in the context of an argument from Scripture addressed to readers seeking justification in the law, Paul offers a citation from Isa 54:1 as support for his assertion in v. 26 that it is “the Jerusalem above” that is “our mother”: “For it is written, ‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married.’”

Author’s note: An earlier and somewhat more expansive version of this article can be found in my Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics (BZNW; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011) 23–60. It is republished here in a revised and shortened form with the kind permission of the original publishers.
Paul’s aim in this section of the letter (4:21–5:1) is to win his readers’ obedience to the imperative with which the section closes: “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1b). The method by which he hopes to achieve that aim is an argument from Scripture: “Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?” (4:21). Paul’s assertion is that his listeners, if they will only “listen to the law,” will hear in Scripture itself a voice that confirms Paul’s own urgent warnings against their attempt to be “justified by the law” (5:4).

The primary text to which Paul is seeking to teach the Galatians to “listen” in this section is the story from Gen 16–21 about the original sons of Abraham. If the agitators in Galatia are telling Paul’s (male) Gentile converts that circumcision in their flesh will make them sons of Abraham, Paul reminds his readers that there are two ways of being a “son of Abraham”—one of which leads to freedom (5:1) and inheritance (4:30) and the other of which leads to slavery (4:24–25) and expulsion (4:30)—and the Galatians need to make a choice between them.¹

If the Galatians are to hear the implications of this story for them, Paul goes on to argue in vv. 24–26, they need to read it as an allegory,² in which Hagar represents Mount Sinai and the present Jerusalem, bearing children for slavery, and Sarah represents “the Jerusalem above” who is free and is “our mother.” In order to justify the way in which he has assigned the

¹ The assumption in most commentaries (influenced by C. K. Barrett, “The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians” in Rechtfertigung: Festschrift E. Käsemann [ed. J. Friedrich et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1976] 1–16) is that Paul is forced to deal with the story of Isaac and Ishmael because it has been used by his opponents. I consider it more likely that it is Paul who has introduced the Isaac/Ishmael story into the conversation. The story is not particularly helpful for the advocates of Gentile circumcision, because Ishmael was circumcised just as Isaac was; for Paul, on the other hand, the story works as a way of introducing the series of binary contrasts that begins with the “two sons” of v. 22, forcing a decision between Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar, Jerusalem above and the present Jerusalem, in order to incite the Galatians to make the decision required by 5:1; cf. Charles H. Cosgrove, “The Law Has Given Sarah No Children (Gal. 4:21–30),” NovT 29 (1987): 219–35, esp. p. 223; and Steven Di Mattei, “Paul’s Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21–31) in Light of First-Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics,” NTS 52 (2006): 102–22, esp. p. 119.

² Di Mattei is correct in pointing out that the majority of uses of ἀλληγορέω in the extant Greek literature use the word to mean “to speak allegorically” rather than “to interpret allegorically” but acknowledges that the latter meaning can be found on a number of occasions in Philo and, possibly, in Plutarch (“Paul’s Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21–31) in Light of First-Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics,” 108–9). In the present context, regardless of whether Paul is asserting that the writer of Genesis was consciously employing the rhetorical device of ἀλληγορία, his focus is not as much on how the text was written as it is on how it is to be “listen[ed] to” (v. 21).
characters and correspondences in his allegory, and in particular to justify the inference drawn in v. 26 that “the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother,” Paul turns in v. 27 to the quotation from Isa 54:1.

It is this move that constitutes the riddle I intend to address in this article. At one level, the relevance of the Isaiah citation is not hard to determine. A quick perusal of the original Isaianic context makes it clear that the childless woman being addressed is Jerusalem, bereft of her children in the wake of the Babylonian exile (cf. Isa 52:1–12), and that the restoration of Jerusalem is linked by Isaiah with the miraculous fertility of the nation’s original mother, Sarah (cf. Isa 51:1–3). To be a true child of Abraham and Sarah is to be among the offspring miraculously given to the Jerusalem that has become, like barren Sarah, the “childless one”; it is to be, like Isaac, a “child of the promise” (Gal 4:28).

What is not so immediately obvious is the hermeneutic by which Paul has come to include uncircumcised Gentiles in Galatia among these children of promise born to the restored Jerusalem. It is one thing to see an ingathering of Gentiles to Jerusalem as one of the consequences of the restoration of Israel and the reversal of Israel’s exile. It is another thing altogether to say that the Gentiles who come to faith in Christ (and remain uncircumcised and living in the diaspora) are the returning exiles, the children given to the restored Jerusalem. In this regard, Paul’s reading of Isa 54:1 and its fulfilment is without precedent or parallel among Second Temple Jewish interpretations of Isa 54.4

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

How then has Paul come to this reading of the verse, so different from the other readings to be found in the extant Jewish literature? Where the question has been addressed in recent scholarship, the solutions that have been proposed have tended to to fall into one of two broad categories: (1) proposed solutions that emphasize the interpretive precommitments that Paul brought with him to the text of Isaiah and (2) proposed solutions that emphasize elements of context and theme that Paul found in the surrounding scriptural context of the verse from Isaiah.

3. Paul is seeking to justify not only the fact that he has allegorized the Genesis story but also the manner in which he has done so—the way he has assigned their contemporary equivalents to the characters of the story; cf. the similar argument in Joel Willitts, “Isa 54,1 in Gal 4,24b–27: Reading Genesis in Light of Isaiah,” ZNW 96 (2005) 188–210.
4. For a survey of Second Temple Jewish interpretations of Isa 54:1, see my Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics, 30–35.
Paul’s Interpretation Is Determined by His Christological and Apocalyptic Precommitments

An example of the first category is Martinus de Boer’s 2004 article, “Paul’s Quotation of Isaiah 54.1 in Galatians 4.27.” 5 De Boer’s starting point is the question: “How and why does Paul make use of Isa 54.1 to articulate his own eschatology which, unlike that of Second Isaiah, is both profoundly christological and apocalyptic?” 6 For him, the hermeneutical transformation by which the traditional Jewish interpretation of Isa 54:1 is turned on its head so spectacularly is brought about entirely by the Christological and apocalyptic presuppositions that Paul has brought to the text. 7

The reading of Gal 4:27 proposed by de Boer is one in which Paul takes a verse that was originally an encouragement to Israel, favorably comparing Israel’s glorious future with the present prosperity of the Gentiles, and uses it to encourage the sectarian communities of the Pauline mission by comparing their status of freedom and inheritance with the law-slavery of the children of “the present Jerusalem” (a reference to the law-observant Jewish-Christian community of that city). 8 According to this reading, the

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6. De Boer, “Paul’s Quotation of Isaiah 54.1 in Galatians 4.27,” 372, emphasis de Boer’s.

7. See ibid., 378.

8. De Boer argues (ibid., 381) that the “present Jerusalem” in 4:25 represents for Paul not the Jerusalem of non-Christian Judaism but the Jerusalem of law-observant Christianity, and (ibid., 371) that the married woman in Isa 54:1d refers in the original Isaianic context not to preexilic Jerusalem but to Babylon. The former point is, in my judgment, rendered unlikely by the reference in 4:29 to persecution, which is associated elsewhere in Galatians not with the actions of the Judaizing Christians but with hostility emanating from within non-Christian Judaism (1:13; 6:12); cf. E. Baasland, “Persecution: A Neglected Factor in the Letter to the Galatians,” ST 38 (1984) 135–50. The latter point is undermined by the description of the woman in Isa 54:1c as “desolate,” and elsewhere in the chapter as “forsaken,” “cast off” and “abandoned” (vv. 7–8)—descriptions that imply that her present situation is to be understood in contrast with a former time when she was living with a husband; see the arguments in Willett, “Isa 54,1 in Gal 4,24b–27: Reading Genesis in Light of Isaiah,” 194–97 for identifying the “married woman” in the original Isaianic context as preexilic Jerusalem. Whereas de Boer’s reading is consistent with the interpretation implied by the Isaiah Targum (which understands the married woman in 54:1d as representing Babylon/Rome), elsewhere in the Second Temple Jewish interpretive tradition (e.g., Pss. Sol. 1:3ff., and Philo, Rewards and Punishments 27.158–63) the assumption is that the same woman is being spoken of throughout the verse and is depicted in different, successive stages of her life.
text from Isaiah that Paul uses to justify his allegorization of the Genesis story has itself been thoroughly allegorized by Paul.9

The obvious question to ask is whether, on this reading, Paul could reasonably have had any expectation that his readers would have found the argument persuasive. An allegory may powerfully illustrate and dramatize ideas that a writer and reader already have in common, but it is not itself a powerful persuasive technique if the presuppositions that underlie the assignment of correspondences are not shared.10 If, as the syntax suggests, the citation from Isa in 4:27 is an argument from Scripture supporting the assignment of allegorical correspondences in 4:24–26, then the argument is hardly successful if the original meaning of the Isaiah text has been left behind in favor of a further level of allegorization. We are left with a reading of 4:21–31 in which the “arguments” from Scripture are little more than rhetorical garments to cover what would otherwise have been simply a naked assertion of Paul’s own authority over the Galatians, based (presumably) on the Christophany Paul claims in 1:15–16 to have experienced, and the “Christological and apocalyptic” implications of that encounter.

When we take into consideration the rhetorical function served by the citation as part of an argument from Scripture that Paul employs in a context in which his apostolic authority and the compliance of his readers can hardly be taken for granted, interpretations such as de Boer’s (in which the text from Isaiah is as heavily allegorized as the story from Genesis) fail to convince.

**Paul’s Interpretation Can Be Explained by Intertextual Echoes from Isaiah**

If the article by de Boer represents the first category into which proposed solutions of the riddle of Gal 4:27 tend to fall, Karen Jobes’s article, “Jerusalem Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Galatians 4:21–31”11 is a good representative of the second category. For Jobes, the starting point

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9. De Boer himself does not speak of Paul “allegorizing” Isaiah, but his reading (“Paul’s Quotation,” 381–83) of how Paul uses the Isaiah verse (in which the free woman stands for “the church God has called into being through the gospel,” the married woman stands for “the law-observant church in Jerusalem” and the husband of the married woman stands for James the brother of Jesus) is clearly one in which Paul has interpreted and applied the Isaiah prophecy allegorically.


is Richard Hays’s explanation of the concept of metalepsis and his application of the concept to Paul’s use of Isaiah in Galatians. From this starting point, Jobes goes on to argue that, by quoting from Isa 54:1, Paul evokes a whole series of themes and patterns from that book, including:

- the contrast between two Jerusalems (one present, barren, cursed; the other future and miraculously prolific)
- the association between the emergence of the offspring of eschatological Jerusalem and the miraculous birth of Isaac (e.g. Isa 51:1–3)
- the law-free definition of the seed of the eschatological Jerusalem (e.g. Isa 51:1)
- the contrast between two seeds (the righteous, Spirit-drenched seed of 44:1–5 and the “seed of evildoers” of 1:4 [e.g. Isa 30:1])
- the association between childbirth, resurrection and the Spirit of God in Isa 26:17–19, which Jobes sees as standing behind the idea that the resurrection of Jesus is the eschatological birth of the seed of Sarah

Jobes’s work is impressive, and it is difficult to argue against the idea that some at least of the ideas derived from the original Isaianic context are carried across with Isa 54:1 when it is transported to its new home in Gal 4:27. Even at the most elementary level, for the citation to function as it appears to be intended requires the reader to be aware of the fact that the woman addressed in the verse is Jerusalem, an insight that becomes obvious only when the verse is read in the light of its original Isaianic context.

But the sheer size of the Isaianic camel that Jobes manages to draw through the needle’s eye of Gal 4:27 entitles the reader to enquire with de Boer “whether and to what extent [Paul’s original Gentile-Christian readers in Galatia] would have recognized the intertextual echoes laid bare in [Jobes’s] analysis.” If Paul’s explicit intention within this section of Galatians is that the voice of Scripture be heard and understood by others, then there is reason to be skeptical of solutions such as Jobes’s, which rely so heavily on subtle intertextual echoes detected only by the most keenly adjusted ears. It may be that some or all of the echoes Jobes detects are present in Paul’s mind, and her work may well illuminate the thought world.

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out of which Paul himself writes, but it does not convincingly explain the meaning-effect that Paul intends for his readers.

A more plausible (and somewhat less ambitious) version of this second approach is adopted by Joel Willitts, who pays closer attention than Jobes to the immediate context of Isa 54:1 within Isa 54 and suggests that Paul is more interested in directing his readers’ thoughts toward the larger “story of Israel” implied by the book of Isaiah as a whole than in evoking metaleptic echoes of particular Isaianic texts concerning childbirth and “seed.”

Willitts’s focus on the redemptive-historical story of Israel not only makes good sense of the way in which Paul’s Isaiah citation functions within the immediate context of Gal 4:21–5:1 but also coheres well with the larger hermeneutical framework that Paul establishes in the rest of the letter. But there is still room for asking whether Willitts assumes too much about the extent to which Paul expected his readers in Galatia to bring that larger movement within Isaiah to bear on the interpretation of Isa 54:1. Isaiah’s Gentile pilgrimage texts and the expanding reference of “Jerusalem” and “Zion” across the book may well have informed Paul’s own reading of Isaiah (and there is good reason from Paul’s other letters to suggest that he was a careful and serious reader of Isaiah who read the book as a unity and with an eye to the unfolding story of Israel within it), but Paul does little if anything within Galatians to direct his readers’ attention to these phenomena. Within the hermeneutical framework that Paul offers his readers in the rest of the letter, the redemptive-historical context in which the Isa 54:1 citation is placed is not so much the story of Israel (and of Zion) that Isaiah presents but the story of Israel as it is painted across the wider canvas of “Scripture” in its entirety.

15. Cf. Willitts, “Isa 54,1 in Gal 4,24b–27: Reading Genesis in Light of Isaiah,” 191–92. There is support for Willitts’s argument in the universalizing tendency of Isa 40–66 (e.g., 65:17–18; 66:10, 20–21), which seems at times to expand the scope of terms such as Zion and Jerusalem beyond their national, historical reference.

16. Cf. the arguments in Starling, Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics, 40–46, in favor of the view that there is a redemptive-historical story of sorts implied by the argument of Galatians.

GALATIANS 4:27 AND THE STORY OF ISRAEL IN GALATIANS

If we are to place Paul’s citation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27 within that larger redemptive-historical hermeneutical framework, it will be necessary to look at what has already been said and implied about the story of Israel within the letter. For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the arguments from Scripture in 3:1–4:11 and the interpretation Paul offers of his own experience in 2:15–21.\textsuperscript{18}

The Story of Israel in Galatians 3:1–4:11

This section of the letter is framed at the beginning and end with shame-inducing rebukes (3:1–5 and 4:8–11) containing caustic rhetorical questions that express Paul’s bewilderment at the way in which the Galatians seem to be embracing the message of the agitators. Between these twin rebukes is a section of argumentation from Scripture in which Paul seeks to justify the understanding of the relationship between works/law and faith/promise that he fears the Galatians are at risk of abandoning.\textsuperscript{19}

The core assertion implied by the rhetorical questions in 3:1–5 is that the Galatians received the Spirit not “by works of the law” but “by believing what you heard” (vv. 2, 5). This is not a theological proposition hanging in the air and waiting for a scriptural proof to undergird it; Paul is reminding them of empirical realities that they themselves experienced and that serve in themselves as a kind of proof that Paul’s Gentile converts were participants in the outpoured eschatological blessings of God and included “in Christ.” Nevertheless, Paul is keen to buttress that reminder with arguments from Scripture to show that these conclusions drawn from the Galatians’ experience of the Spirit were in accordance with the testimony of Scripture.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} For a broader discussion of the shape of the story of Israel as it is constructed in Galatians, see the contrasting perspectives offered by Bruce Longenecker and Morna Hooker in Bruce W. Longenecker, ed., Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

\textsuperscript{19} In speaking about “the story of Israel in Gal 3:1–4:11,” I am not suggesting that the genre of this section of the letter is narrative or that it is functioning rhetorically as a narratio. What we are reading in these paragraphs is not a story but an argument; nevertheless, it is an argument that is (at least in part) about a story—the story of how the promises given to Abraham came to be fulfilled and the part played by the history of Israel under the law between the giving and the fulfilment of the promises.

\textsuperscript{20} Thus, Paul proceeds immediately in the following paragraph (3.6–9) to offer scriptural justification for the second half of the implied assertion of vv. 1–5 (that the Galatians received the Spirit “by believing what you heard”), arguing on the basis of Gen 15:6 and 12:3 that “those who are ἐκ πίστεως are blessed with faithful Abraham” (v. 9). The next paragraph
Within these paragraphs, as Paul offers an account of the overarching narrative of Scripture to serve as an interpretation and confirmation of his argument in 3:1–5 from the Galatians’ experience of receiving the Spirit, he pointedly correlates the restoration eschatology of the prophets with the divine promises to Abraham (3:8, 14) and argues that in both cases (3:6–9, 11b) the “life” and “righteousness” promised is given not to those who are ἐξ ἔργων νόμου but to “those who believe” (3:6–9, 11b). Furthermore, because the inheritance of the promise belongs to “one person . . . Christ” (3:16), it is those “in Christ” who receive the blessing of Abraham (3:14)—and in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek” (3:28).

Within that larger story of the promises to Abraham and their inheritance by those who belong to Christ, three paragraphs in particular (3:10–18, 3:19–24 and 4:1–7) shed light on the story of Israel under the law and the place that it occupies between the promise and its inheritance.

Crucial for our purposes is the assertion Paul makes in 3:10 that “as many as are ἐξ ἔργων νόμου are under a curse,” a claim that he substantiates with a citation from the LXX of Deut 27:26 (which he combines with a phrase from Deut 29:19b). While the primary reference of Paul’s words in Gal 3:10 is to individuals who rely on works of the law for justification, (3:10–18) is occupied mainly with the first half of the implied assertion: that the inheritance promised to the offspring of Abraham is not “by works of the law.” The γάρ connecting vv. 10–14 with vv. 6–9 expresses the fact that the first half of the assertion (“not by the works of the law”) is the converse of the second (“but by the hearing of faith”). Hence, an argument supporting the first half of the assertion provides further support for the first half; cf. Joachim Rohde, Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater (vol. 9; THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989) 140. This in turn necessitates an explanation in 3:19–24 of the purpose of the law, which is followed in 3:25–29 by a climactic statement of the consequences of the coming of “faith.” (The parallel between εἰς τὴν μέλλουσαν πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι [v. 23] and εἰς Χριστόν [v. 24] suggests “faith” is being used here as a shorthand for the eschatological phenomenon of faith in Jesus as Messiah.) Finally, in 4:1–7, Paul recapitulates (Λέγω δέ) the main arguments of 3:6–29 in the form of an extended metaphor of slavery, minority, and sonship, leading into the rebuke of 4:8–11.

21. In speaking of “the story of Israel under the law,” I am taking Paul’s expression ὑπὸ νόμου to refer to a covenantal situation of being bound by and subject to the stipulations of the law of Moses. While Paul regards the failure of Israel as a nation to keep the law as having rendered them subject to its curses, the condition of being under the curses of the law is an entailment of that covenantal situation (given Israel’s failure to keep covenant) and not the meaning of the expression ὑπὸ νόμου (contra Todd A. Wilson, “‘Under Law’ in Galatians: A Pauline Theological Abbreviation,” JTS 56 [2006]: 362–92).

22. The best clues we have to the meaning of the phrase are in the ways in which Paul uses it elsewhere in the letter (most notably in its threefold use in 2:16, where in each instance it is used to describe the basis or criterion of justification, and its use in 3:2, 5, to describe the circumstances under which the Galatians received and experienced the Spirit—an experience that 3:8, 14 ties closely to their justification) and the way it is placed in an implied contrast...
Paul's confidence that the curse for not keeping the law applies to all who rely on keeping it is informed, at least in part, by the history of the whole nation of Israel under the law and his belief that the nation continued to his day to be under the ongoing effect of the curses imposed by the law as a consequence of national apostasy.  

At a number of points in the paragraphs that follow, Paul further develops his account of the role played by the law of Moses in the interval between the giving of the promises to Abraham and their inheritance in Christ by those who are ἐκ πίστεως. The picture that emerges is one in which the law's immediate function was, at least partly, negative, “imprisoning” under sin (3:22–23), standing over Israel as a παιδαγωγός (3:24–25; 4:2) and rendering Israel subject to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (4:3). Nevertheless, this

with οἱ ἐκ πίστεως (v. 9). The latter phrase derives from the depiction in v. 11 (quoting Hab 2:4) of the righteous one who will live (ζήσεται) ἐκ πίστεως. On the basis of these considerations, the most likely reading is to identify the people described in 3:10 as ὁσοὶ . . . εἰσίν with those depicted in 5:4 as “want[ing] to be justified by the law” (οἴτινες ἐν νόμω δικαιοῦσθε), language that implies not only communal self-definition but also an element of soteriological reliance.

23. Cf. Frank Thielman, From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul’s View of the Law in Galatians and Romans (NovTSup; Leiden: Brill, 1989): 68, and N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 140–41. Further support for this reading of 3:10 may also be found if we accept the argument of Thielman and Wright that 3:11 (ὅτι δὲ ἐν νόμῳ οὐδεὶς δικαιοῦται παρὰ θεῶ δῆλον, ὅτι ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται) should be repunctuated and translated “Because no one is justified before God by the law, it is obvious that ‘the just shall live by faith,’” with the implication that the truth of the first clause is established not scripturally but empirically, the failure of Israel under the law pointing forward toward the necessity of justification by faith as “obvious.” In favor of this translation (which takes the δῆλον of v. 11 not with the ὅτι at the start of the clause but with the ὅτι that immediately follows it) is the fact that it is in keeping with the syntax that is employed when the idiom is used elsewhere in the NT and the LXX (cf. Andrew Hollis Wakefield, Where to Live: The Hermeneutical Significance of Paul’s Citations from Scripture in Galatians 3:1–14 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003] 207–14). The main counterargument is that Paul is more likely to be arguing from the truth of the Habakkuk citation than for it. Wakefield (ibid., 166–67) points out, citing 1 Cor 1:31 and 2 Cor 10:17, that this counterargument is not conclusive.

24. This may also be what is meant in 3:19, when the law is said to have been added “because of transgressions” (τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν). For arguments in favor of the view that Paul has in mind not merely the restraint or exposure of transgressions but their incitement, see Hans Dieter Betz, Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 164–67; and Martyn, Galatians, 354–55.

25. Betz’s emphasis on the negative aspects of the “ugly type” of the παιδαγωγός in the Hellenistic literature may be somewhat one-sided, but he is nevertheless correct in rejecting the idea that ἐξ Χριστοῦ (3:24) implies “a positive educational development from Judaism to Christianity,” and in pointing to the predominantly negative way in which the image is employed in Galatians. Cf. Betz, Galatians, 178.
negative function of the law is described as having been an effect intended by God, operating not only until the time of the promise’s inheritance (3:19, 23–25; 4:2,3–5) but also so that its inheritance might be by faith (3:22, 24).

These various aspects of Paul’s depiction of the law and its function in the story of Israel, between the promise and its inheritance, are expressed succinctly in the summary statement of 3:22: “But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Whereas the subject of the sentence is ἡ γραφή, not ὁ νόμος, the parallel with v. 23 (where it is ὑπὸ νόμον that “we were imprisoned and guarded”) suggests that it is by means of the law that this imprisoning work of Scripture took place. The point seems to be that the law functioned so as to preserve Israel in the same sinful condition as the Gentile nations, effecting if anything an intensification of that plight, with the result that “all things” (τὰ πάντα—Jew and Gentile without distinction) were together, in the same plight.26

The purpose of this imprisonment, according to the second half of 3:22, was “so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”27 Whatever decision we take about whether ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is to be read as an objective or a subjective genitive, the purpose expressed is that the eventual fulfilment of the promise would be in Christ (either through faith in him, or through his faithfulness), and by faith (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν—“to those who believe”).

The parallel statement in 3:24 (in which the purpose clause becomes simply ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν) suggests that the second aspect of this purpose (by faith) should not be simply rolled up into the first (in Christ).28 Paul is arguing not simply that the imprisonment of Israel under sin and the law delayed the time of Israel’s inheritance of the Abrahamic promise until the coming of the Messiah but also that it determined the means by which

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26. The fact that this plight can be described in 4:3 as one of enslavement to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, the same language that is used in 4:8–9 to depict the pre-Christian situation of Paul’s Gentile readers, underlines the commonality of the predicament of Jew and Gentile under sin.


28. Hays’s suggestion (ibid., 131–32) that the instances of πίστις in 3:23–26 should be read as referring to “not the faith of an individual but the historical phenomenon of ‘the faith’ (= Christianity)” is somewhat less plausible in relation to the instances where πίστις is used in vv. 24, 26 than it is in relation to the instances where it is used in vv. 23, 25.
that inheritance took place—not by the “doing” (ποῆσαι . . . ποιήσας) of the works of the law spoken of in 3:10, 12, but by the “faith” spoken of in 3:11.

This “faith” is contrasted with the “doing” required by the law (3:10–12), its necessity is brought about by Israel’s imprisonment under sin (3:22, 24), and its revelation is described as an eschatological event that comes at the end of Israel’s history under the law (3:23, 25). These facts combine to support the inference that the “faith” spoken of here shares something of the self-despairing dependence on God’s mercy that characterises many of the exilic and postexilic penitential prayers (e.g. Dan 9:18; Ezra 9, Neh 9, Bar 1:15–3:8, and The Prayer of Manasseh).

In summary, therefore, the story of Israel under the law that emerges in Gal 3:1–4:11 is one in which the law has performed a negative but intended function in the period between the giving of the promise to Abraham and its fulfilment in Christ; the intended effect of its negative function in “imprisoning” Israel under sin (and possibly even inciting Israel to transgression) is that Israel’s inheritance of the Abrahamic promises comes only in Christ, only together with the Gentiles, and only by faith.30

Paul’s Story in Galatians 2:15–21

A similar story-shape can be seen in the way in which Paul tells his own story, in the second half of ch. 2, as a microcosm of the larger story of Israel.31 Paul begins in 2:15–17 in the first-person plural, making it clear that the “I” story that he tells in 2:18–21 is told in solidarity with the larger story of all (Peter and Paul included) who are “Jews by birth and not Gentile sin-

29. Francis Watson’s reminder (Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 128–29) that “everyone in Galatia was in favor of ‘doing’” is important (cf. Paul’s ἐνεργομένη in 5:6) but—as Watson goes on to acknowledge—there is still a contrast implied between the different construals of the relationship between divine and human agency implied by the ποῆσαι . . . ἐκ πίστεως . . . ὁ ποιήσας language in vv. 10–12 (cf. Preston M. Sprinkle, Law and Life: The Interpretation of Leviticus 18:5 in Early Judaism and in Paul [WUNT 2/241; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007] 133–64). Watson’s emphasis of the Leviticus text that Paul quotes in v. 12 (“the one who does them shall live by them”) helpfully underlines his own point, but is unlikely to reflect Paul’s emphasis, given the way that Paul rewords the citation, omitting πάντα τὰ προστάγματά μου καὶ πάντα τὰ κρίματά μου from the original and leaving ὁ ποιήσας to chime with the ποῆσαι of v. 10.

30. In arguing that in this passage depicts the law as having performed “a negative but intended function in the period between the giving of the promise to Abraham and its fulfillment in Christ,” I am not of course suggesting that this was the only function Paul saw the law as having fulfilled (or continuing to fulfill).

ners” and have come to know that “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Having begun by emphatically distinguishing these “Jews by birth” from “Gentile sinners,” he goes on immediately to ask the question, “If in our effort to be justified in Christ we ourselves have been found to be sinners (ἁμαρτωλοί), is Christ then a servant of sin?” (v. 17).

Importantly, the scene Paul depicts is one of Jews like him “seeking” (ζητοῦντες) to be justified in Christ and in that very act being found to be “sinners” like the Gentiles; what he has in mind (primarily at least) is not the Torah-free pattern of life that he followed because he was confident that he had been (or would be) justified by God, but the stance from which he sought justification. Whereas there would undoubtedly have been a concrete, socially enacted pattern of life that went with that “seeking” (and enabled such seekers to be “found” by their critics to be “sinners”), the bottom line of Paul’s argument appears to be the soteriology that informs the sociology (cf. v. 21). For Jews living in disobedience under the curse of the law, to “seek to be justified by faith in Christ” is to approach God as though they themselves were “sinners of the Gentiles,” appealing to God not on the basis of the law of Moses but on the basis of his grace and his promises to Abraham.

A partial explanation of how this could be is provided by the vivid image that Paul employs in v. 19, when he asserts that “through the law I died to the law.” If, as we have suggested, Paul is telling his own story in solidarity with the larger story of Israel, the obvious interpretive background to this statement is to be found in the “death” that is synonymous with the

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32. “Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners”: Reading the participial phrase in v. 16a as a continuation of the definition of the subject of the main clause commenced in v. 15, rather than as the beginning of an attribution of a predicate to them; cf. rsv. “A person is not justified by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ”: Ian Scott argues persuasively that, whereas the proposition in 2:16 is presented at the “Antiochian” level of the paragraph as a proposition that was (or ought to have been) common ground between himself and Peter, at the “Galatian” level it is one that he expected to be controversial for his readers and for the agitators who were influencing them. Ian W. Scott, “Common Ground? The Role of Galatians 2.16 in Paul’s Argument,” NTS 53 (2007): 425–35, esp. p. 426–33.

33. The addition of the phrase καὶ αυτοὶ (“even [we] ourselves”) underlines the intended connection between the ἁμαρτωλοί in this verse and the ἁμαρτωλοί in v. 15.

34. Though not (at least according to 1 Cor 9:19–23) as inflexibly antinomistic a pattern of life as one might otherwise assume from the evidence of Galatians alone.

35. This is probably the sense intended by the second half of Paul’s cryptic appeal in 4:12: “Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are”; cf. Rohde, Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater, 183; and Richard N. Longenecker, Galatians (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990) 189.
curses of Deut 27–32, an image that is frequently echoed in the exilic and postexilic literature to depict the plight of Israel under the curse of the law (e.g. Ezek 37:1–14; Bar 3:10–11). The fact that Paul says not only “through the Law I died,” but “through the Law I died to the Law” suggests that he understands the “death” effected by the deuteronomic curses as bringing about an end to the era in which his identity (and that of the nation) could be defined by reliance on and observance of the Law of Moses.

If this is the case, then Gal 2:21, the proof-text of Ed Sanders’s argument that Paul’s soteriological thinking works backwards, “from solution to plight,” needs to be balanced by the story of disobedience, exile, and redemption that lies behind vv. 15–20. The fact that “justification is [not] through the law” can be proved both retrospectively (as it is in v. 21, on the basis of the redemptive death of Christ) and empirically (through Paul’s own experience and Israel’s collective history of disobedience and curse under the law, echoed in v. 19).

“She Is Our Mother”: Exiles and Gentiles in Galatians 4:27

What implications can we draw from this examination of the shape of the story of Israel under the Law as Paul describes it in Gal 2:15–4:11 for the question with which we started, concerning Paul’s use of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27?

The fact that in 4:27 Paul is still arguing his way toward the exhortation of 5:1 suggests he intends his use of the Isaiah text to provide some probative force in justifying the allegory of 4:21–31, and requires some transparency in the hermeneutical rationale by which the promise is applied to his readers; the fact that he has already been arguing toward this end for the majority of the last three chapters diminishes the need for that hermeneutical rationale to be self-evident and self-contained within 4:27. It would be unreasonable for us to require Paul’s Isaiah citation in 4:27 to do all of its own hermeneutical work, without any reliance on the framework that has been established in the preceding chapters to guide the readers of the letter in their understanding of Scripture and the shape of the story of Israel.

The way in which Paul reads Isa 54:1 and applies it to the salvation of Gentiles in Christ is to be understood in the light of his larger arguments in the preceding chapters about the shape of the story of Israel and its climax in the mission of Christ. The surprising way in which uncircumcised

36. Paul’s conclusion to the verse (“I have been crucified with Christ”) makes it more, not less, likely that he has in mind the deuteronomic curses, given the way in which he explains the significance of the crucifixion in 3:13; f. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant, 151–53.
Gentiles come to be participants in the culmination of the story of Israel is, according to Paul’s argument in Galatians, an outworking of the shape of Israel’s own story, as he reads it in the Scriptures.

The version of the story of Israel that Paul presents in 3:1–4:7 has two main elements that contribute to the implied hermeneutical justification for Paul’s application of Isa 54:1 to his readers:

1. The first is an appeal to the Gentiles’ incorporation into Christ, evidenced by their reception of the Spirit, as a sign that they are participants in the fulfilment of the restoration promises of the prophets (cf. 3:1–5, 14). The outpoured Spirit spoken of by the prophets is interpreted in turn as a fulfilment of the “blessing” promised in Abraham to the nations (3:8, 14).

Because, in the case of both the righteousness credited to Abraham and the promise given through Habbakuk (3:6–9, 11b), “righteousness” and “life” are not said to be given to those who are ἐξ ἔργων νόμου but to those who believe (3:6–9, 11b), and because the inheritance of the promise belongs to “one person . . . Christ” (3:16), it is those “in Christ,” joined to him by faith, who receive the blessing of Abraham (3:14). In Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek” (3:28). The Isaiah citation in 4:27 reinforces this fusion of the Abrahamic and exilic horizons, suggesting that the true children of Sarah are to be understood as the children of desolate Zion, and the hope for desolate Zion is to be found in the story of the miraculous fertility of barren Sarah.

2. Whereas Paul gives particular prominence to the Abrahamic promises and the restoration eschatology of the prophets in the reading of Scripture that he proposes to his readers within the arguments of Galatians, the hermeneutic that he advocates does not simply vault over the giving of the law and Israel’s history under it, as though they are an irrelevance best forgotten. According to a second, complementary line of argument that Paul makes in chs. 3–4, the equality of Jew and Gentile is presented not only as having been accomplished positively “in Christ” but also anticipated and prepared for negatively in the history of Israel’s apostasy and exile under the law of Moses. This line of argument is also reflected in the way Israel’s history under the law is echoed in the shape of Paul’s own individual Jewish experience as he recounts it in 2:15–21. Paul describes this experience of “curse” and “death” under the law in the strongest possible terms (e.g. 2:19; 3:10, 13, 22; 4:3). His suggestion in 3:22 is that the law has functioned in the period between the giving of the promise to Abraham and its fulfilment in Christ to “imprison” Israel under sin, in order that Israel’s inheritance of the Abrahamic promises might come only in Christ, only together with the Gentiles, and only by faith.
If the reading of Gal 2:15–21 and 3:1–4:11 proposed above is correct, then it makes sense to assume that Paul expects his readers to be conscious that in quoting from Isa in 4:27 he is quoting from a text that speaks to an Israel already in a continuing or typological exile, experiencing the fulfillment of the curses of the law that formed such a prominent part of his argument in 2:15–4:11. The promise in Isa 54:1 is given not to an obedient, Torah-observant Israel but to disobedient Israel, cast out of the land and living among the Gentiles; for Paul, the correct way to “listen to” the story of Sarah and Hagar in the light of that promise and its salvation-historical context is to hear it as a solemn warning that those who are joined to Abraham by means of the law and place their reliance on the covenant in which it is embedded are “children of the slave,” living under the shadow of the words of curse and banishment quoted by Paul from the Genesis story in 4:30.37

When Paul uses this return-of-exiles text to speak about the inclusion of Gentiles, in support of an urgent appeal to Gentile believers in Christ not to submit to any requirement that they be circumcised, what he is signaling is that Gentiles come to be included in the people of God not simply by stepping into Jewish shoes through circumcision and law keeping but by stepping into exiled Jewish shoes by seeking to be justified “by faith . . . and not by the works of the law” (2:16). To suggest otherwise, Paul argues, would be to “nullify the grace of God” and imply that “Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

The appropriation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27, with its implied equation between believing Gentiles and returning exiles, is thus a kind of corollary of the complementary equation in Gal 2:15–4:11 between the plight of Paul and his fellow Israelites under the curses of the law and the enslavement and death of the Gentiles. Paul depicts himself and his fellow-Israelites as having inherited not the blessings of the law but its curses, standing in Gentile shoes and (either literally or metaphorically) on Gentile soil. They are therefore compelled to seek justification by appealing to God as though they were Gentiles, looking back past the Sinai covenant and the law of

37. This seems to me a more plausible reading of how Paul’s citation of Gen 21:10 functions rhetorically in 4:30 than the alternative proposal argued for by Ben Witherington, in which Paul is the Sarah-figure, “exhorting himself, as the barren woman, to rejoice over what God has already done among the Galatians, and building on that by urging them to act on the advice of Sarah to drive out the slave woman and her child”; cf. Ben Witherington, Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 336.
Moses to the original Gentile-inclusive promises made to Abraham and placing their hope in the grace of God.

To quote from John Barclay:

A focal point of Paul’s theology is the calling of Gentiles, for which he is himself graced and equipped as an apostle (Gal 1.6; 2.9; Rom. 15.15–16). But this is not just, as one might expect, an *extension* of grace, to widen the circle of those already gifted by inclusion of some who were hitherto ungraced. The radical edge of Paul’s gospel is that all are found to be under the power of sin, and all in the category of “enemy” or “unrighteous” to whom [t]his grace is displayed. (Rom. 3.8–20; 5.6–10) 38

According to Paul, the gates of grace that are opened to the Gentiles are not the gates of entry into the old Torah-defined Israel but the same gates through which Israel itself must pass from death to life.

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