

“AN OLD TESTAMENT ALLEGORY”

As we have noted numerous times in this study of Galatians, the letter breaks down into three main sections: the first is largely biographical in nature, the second is doctrinal, and the third is ethical. The passage that we are looking at tonight is the final part of the doctrinal section of the letter. Paul is continuing to try to persuade the Galatians that they must not listen to the Judaizers, the false teachers who were telling them that they needed to submit to the Mosaic law in order to be accepted by God. We know from the tone and content of Paul's letter that the Galatians were starting to give in to these false teachers. We saw back in verse 10 of this chapter that they were starting to practice Old Testament rituals and ceremonies. This is why Paul says in verse 21 that they were acting as those who desired to be under the law. When Paul speaks about “the law” here he is referring to the law of Moses, the law that was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. And when Paul speaks of being “under the law” he is talking about being bound to keep the requirements of the law. In the words of one commentator, the Galatians “were trying to add the law of Moses on top of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” [Ryken, 181] In this passage, as he tries to show the Galatians the utter folly of going back to the law, Paul uses an example from the Old Testament itself, interpreting the story of Hagar and Ishmael allegorically in order to further establish that “the law is not of faith.”

The passage begins with Paul pointing out the differences between Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born first, but he was born of a slave woman: Sarah's maidservant Hagar. Because his mother was a slave, Ishmael was born a slave.

Furthermore, Ishmael was born “according to the flesh.” We need to stop and consider what Paul means by this. Like many words, the term “flesh” can carry different nuances of meaning. In general, Paul uses the term to refer to man’s corrupt state after the fall. Because of the fall, all human flesh is sinful flesh. This is the general sense of the term “flesh” in Paul’s letters. But Paul sometimes uses the term to refer to human efforts at obtaining righteousness. We saw this earlier in the letter, when Paul asked the Galatians in 3:3, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” In that passage, Paul was equating the “works of the law” with efforts done in the flesh. And he is saying the same thing here when he says that Ishmael was born according to the flesh. Ishmael was born as a result of Abraham’s intervention and effort. You remember the story from the book of Genesis. Years passed by, and God’s promise of a son had not come to fulfillment. So Sarah said to her husband Abraham, “Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” [Gen. 16:2] Abraham followed Sarah’s instructions, and Ishmael was born. This is why, as theologian Herman Ridderbos observes,

“The birth from Hagar represents the principle of the law, because it rested on the flesh... In this way Hagar represents the covenant of the law, Sinai, which is dependent on the power of man and therefore does not produce free men, but slaves.” [*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 217]

This is what Paul is talking about when he says that Ishmael was born according to the flesh. He was born as a result of human effort. And for this reason, as Paul is going to show, Hagar stands as a type of the works-principle. Abraham used her to try to obtain the blessing by his own strength rather than by trusting in the promise.

In contrast to Ishmael stands Abraham's other son, Isaac. Isaac was not born of a slave woman but of a free woman: Abraham's wife Sarah. Moreover, Isaac was not born according to the flesh but according to the promise. Unlike his half-brother Ishmael, Isaac was not born as a result of Abraham's attempts to bring about the fulfillment of the promise by his own efforts. Rather, he was born because Abraham trusted in the Lord to bring the promise to fulfillment.

After contrasting Abraham's two sons in verses 22-23, Paul then turns, in verses 24-27, to give an allegorical interpretation of the women who bore Abraham's two sons. An allegory is a story in which the characters and events stand for something else. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is undoubtedly the most famous allegory in the English language. Another less well-known, but equally powerful, allegory is Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queen*. And C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has some allegorical elements in it as well, such as the sacrifice of Aslan upon the Stone Table, which functions as an allegory of Christ bearing the curse of the law for us on the cross. In those examples, a fictional story is used to allegorically depict something that is true. But when Paul says that the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah may be interpreted allegorically, he is not saying that it is a fictional story. He is not denying the historicity

of these characters and events. He is only saying that God's dealings with them demonstrate general truths about his plan of salvation.

Paul says that the two women are two covenants. A covenant is simply some kind of binding agreement between two parties. Hagar represents the Sinai covenant, the covenant that was governed by the stipulations set forth in the law of Moses. She corresponds to the present, earthly Jerusalem. Sarah, on the other hand, represents another covenant and corresponds to the Jerusalem above, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Now, in Reformed covenant theology, we typically think of God's plan of redemption in terms of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works, which God set up with Adam in the Garden, essentially says, "Do and live." It is a works-based covenant. The covenant of grace, on the other hand, says "Live and do." It is a promise-based covenant. What I want to call your attention to is how the two covenants that Paul is talking about in our passage relate to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. As we have already seen, Hagar stands for human effort, while Sarah stands for trust in God's promises. Clearly, Hagar corresponds to the covenant of works and Sarah corresponds to the covenant of grace.

But remember, Paul has identified Hagar with the Sinai covenant. Isn't the Sinai covenant an earlier administration of the covenant of grace? Surely we do not believe that the Israelites who lived under the Mosaic law were obligated to seek their salvation on the basis of their works, do we? Of course not. Elect Israelites of the Old Testament

era were saved in the same way, the only way, that anyone is saved in any era: by grace alone through faith alone.

But why, then, does Paul speak so negatively about the Sinai covenant in this passage? He actually says that it is enslaving. Is he only talking about those who legalistically abuse the law, like the Judaizers? Though some have tried to argue along those lines, such an interpretation does not square very well with the text itself. Back in chapter 3, Paul quoted Moses himself as saying “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” and “The one who does them shall live by them.” There is really no getting around the fact that Paul is saying that the Sinai covenant had a works-principle in it. Those who were under it were required to obey its stipulations in order to receive the blessings that it promised. This is stated explicitly in Deuteronomy 28, where God promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Listen to what it says there:

“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.” [Deut. 28:1-2]

And then,

“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” [28:15]

What are we to make of this? Does this mean that the Israelites under the Mosaic law had to try to earn their salvation? Certainly not. If that were the case, then none of them, not even Moses himself, could have been saved. Instead, it shows us that Israel’s tenure in the Promised Land was set up by God to be a demonstration of the futility of trying to obtain his blessings through the covenant of works. In this sense, while still ultimately proclaiming the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, the Sinai covenant was what some have called a “republication” of the covenant of works. This is why Peter, in Acts 15, described the law of Moses as “a yoke...that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.” [Acts 15:10] The law holds us captive, exposing our inability to meet its requirements, so that we might come to see our need for Christ.

Herein lies the fundamental difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was a covenant of promise, while the Sinai covenant was a covenant of law. The Abrahamic covenant called for trust in God to keep his promise, while the Sinai covenant required doing on the part of those who were under it. The Sinai covenant, with its works-principle, was given in order to prepare the way for Christ. This is the point that Paul is making to the Galatians, and to us. Now that Christ has come, it is utterly unthinkable for us to place ourselves back under the law. Paul is

warning us, saying, ‘Do not do what Abraham did with Hagar. Do not try to obtain God’s blessing by taking matters into your own hands. Do not rely on your own ability to live up to God’s standards. That can only result in slavery. The law will crush you and toss you into its prison cell.’

As Christians, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. As Paul says in verse 26, the Jerusalem above is our mother. There are two important things that we can learn from this verse. First, here is another reminder that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. We are a pilgrim people, looking for the city with lasting foundations, the city whose designer and builder is God himself. We desire a better country, a heavenly one, the city that God has prepared for us. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the Jerusalem above.

Second, the fact that Paul refers to the Jerusalem above as our mother points us to the fact that the church is, at least in a sense, the mother of believers. The Jerusalem above has invaded this present world, and the church is the instrument that God is using to spread its presence. John Calvin was fond of speaking about the church as the mother of believers, and his comments on this passage are worth noting. He writes,

“To the church, under God, we owe it that we are ‘born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible,’ (1 Pet. 1:23) and from her we obtain the milk and food by which we are afterwards nourished.

Such are the reasons why the Church is called the mother of believers. And certainly he who refuses to be a son of the Church in vain desires to have God as his Father; for it is only through the instrumentality of the Church that we are ‘born of God,’ (1 Jn. 3:9) and brought up through the various stages of childhood and youth, till we reach at manhood.”

Today’s Christians need to recover this way of thinking about the church. We are far too prone to think individualistically about our faith. We need to see the church as a vital component to the life of faith. We need to learn to think of the church as our nurturing mother.

Paul’s point in this passage is that in Christ we have been set free from the slavery of the law. We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. This is why Paul was so troubled that the Galatians wanted to put themselves back under the law. The law enslaves us because it does not give us the ability to keep what it demands of us. All of those who are under the law remain under the curse of the law. Thanks be to God that we are no longer under the law. Here again is Herman Ridderbos:

“[W]hat the law was powerless to do (‘to make alive’; 3:21) because it is dependent on the strength of the flesh, that the promise is able to do, because it is realized by the quickening Spirit of God. This is the other, the new covenant, and in it lies the secret of the new life of believers, because they, as Isaac, are children

of the promise, brought forth by the Spirit of God.” [*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 217]

Let us beware of the temptation to place ourselves back under the law, to think that we can somehow obtain God’s blessing by our performance. And let us instead live as those who have been set free from the law and its curse, as those who live in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.