

## THE PLOT OF GAL 3:1–18

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The noun “plot” may be defined along two different trajectories. The first trajectory, that normally associated with literature, involves the linear organization of events in narrative time. The second trajectory also involves organization, but not linear. In this vein one might speak of a “plot” of ground, where “plot” represents the space inside a two-dimensional matrix of points on a grid. Both definitions of “plot” follow the basic idea of points arranged in a particular, meaningful way. They differ in that the first, the narrative plot, lays out points on a line that represents time, while the second lays out points on a grid that defines space.

Galatians 3:1–18 is generally read as the first type of plot mentioned above: the linear narrative. This approach presupposes that Paul’s rhetoric is undergirded by a discontinuous salvation history, where “discontinuous” means that the Jewish law has no positive place in God’s salvific plan. Whether this is an accurate assessment of Paul’s view of the law will not be considered here. Instead it will be noted that the linear approach, by projecting this theological discontinuity onto the surface level of Paul’s argument, tends to leave Gal 3:1–18 logically and/or rhetorically incoherent. A new approach to the logical and rhetorical coherence of 3:1–18 will then be sought by approaching the passage as the second type of plot mentioned earlier: a plot of space. While Paul perhaps conceived of salvation in terms of a divine story, the surface rhetoric of 3:1–18 is not undergirded by a linear narrative. The passage plots an area, not a line, and forms not a salvation story but a sacred space.

### I. THE GALATIAN SITUATION

Two issues in the background of Galatians are particularly important to Paul’s arguments in chap. 3: (1) the teaching of his opponents and (2) the potential impact of that teaching on the Galatian churches. The concern in each case is Paul’s perception of the situation, actual conditions notwithstanding.

Paul gives little direct information about his opponents in Galatia, perhaps because he was not fully aware of their doctrine or identity (3:1; 5:7, 10, 12). The letter opens with treason language, accusing the Galatians of “deserting” him to follow “a different gospel,” actually not a gospel at all but a distortion of Paul’s own “gospel of Christ” (1:6–7). Paul’s gospel is characterized by the crucifixion of Jesus (3:1), “hearing from faith” (3:5; 5:5), life in

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the Spirit (3:2; 4:29; 5:5, 16, 25), knowledge of God (4:9), the ethic of love (5:6, 14), and freedom (5:1, 13). The components of the “other gospel” are never precisely stated, and Paul seems interested in the alternate position only where it differs from his own. The opponents’ gospel emphasizes “works from law” (3:1–5; 4:21), which subject people to “a yoke of slavery” (5:1). Such teaching distracts the Galatians from true knowledge of God by focusing their attention on “weak and worthless elemental things” that “are not gods.” These include “days and months and seasons and years” (festival observances; 4:8–10). The most specific description of the opponents’ position is offered at 6:11–14, where Paul states that they seek to compel the Gentile believers to receive circumcision because they “desire to make good show in flesh” and avoid persecution for the cross, the kind of persecution that naturally follows Paul’s proclamation (cf. also 5:11). The opponents are motivated by personal gain rather than genuine concern for the law, as evidenced by the fact that they do not keep the law themselves (6:13). Paul’s polemic suggests that his opponents were, in his opinion, preaching a version of the gospel that required Gentiles to receive circumcision and observe certain aspects of Torah (5:3) in order to “complete” their Christian lives.<sup>1</sup>

This teaching had apparently created an identity crisis for some of the Galatian Christians. Therefore, in the words of J. C. Beker, “the issue in Galatians is: Who are the true sons of Abraham?”<sup>2</sup> Paul had taught that Gentiles need not accept Jewish customs to attain this status. The opponents have now presented the possibility that their position may not be so secure because, in E. P. Sanders’ terms, one can “enter the people of God” only by accepting circumcision and Torah.<sup>3</sup> With their status called into question, the Gentile believers have apparently “changed their minds . . . about themselves.”<sup>4</sup> This requires Paul to reenforce the status of the Gentile believers as full members of the covenant community without the trappings of Judaism.

## II. GALATIANS 3 AS REDEMPTION HISTORY

Most contemporary readings of Gal 3:1–18 utilize, explicitly or implicitly, some type of redemptive-historical framework. This hermeneutical mechanism functions to hold together Paul’s views on Abraham, the law, and Christ in terms of a developing narrative of divine interaction with humanity to effect salvation. Paul’s argument at 3:1–18 is read as an attempt to situate Gentile Christians at a point on the plot of salvation history. Almost as a rule

<sup>1</sup> The polemical nature of Paul’s response makes any further inferences about the opponents’ position too tentative to be helpful. I will therefore avoid the common assumption that Paul’s opponents used readings of Abraham in their own teaching, forcing Paul to “reclaim” the patriarch. See here R. Longenecker: “Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant loomed large in the Judaizers’ teaching” (*Galatians* [WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990] xcvi); J. C. Beker: “Abraham played a central role in the theology of the opponents” (*Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 47). Whether such was the case remains uncertain. This issue will not, however, impact my reading here.

<sup>2</sup> Beker, *Paul* 48.

<sup>3</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) 18.

<sup>4</sup> H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 8.

this salvation history is seen as discontinuous at the narrative/theological level because law does not fit the Abraham-Christ-faith narrative plot. This tension, as noted earlier, may be a primary component of Paul's theology.

Beker and Sanders are among those who have popularized the discontinuous approach to 3:6–18 in recent years. They also amply demonstrate that this theological presupposition creates logical incoherence in Paul's argument.

Beker believes that Paul's enemies in Galatia have merged Christ and Torah, forcing Paul to radically separate the two.<sup>5</sup> Paul creates two polarities in 3:10–18: Abraham/Torah and Christ/Torah. Faith in Christ thus connects the Gentiles to Abraham's blessing by common antithesis to Torah, and Christ's victory over Torah allows Abraham's promise to flow to the Gentiles. Not surprisingly, Beker concludes that "in Galatians 3 the elements of discontinuity dominate the Abraham story."<sup>6</sup> Elements of discontinuity also dominate Paul's rhetoric. At 3:10–14 Paul acknowledges the validity of Torah by placing Christ under its curse, but in 3:15–29 the law is merely a temporary "interloper that inserted itself illegitimately between the promise to Abraham and its exclusive fulfillment in Christ."<sup>7</sup> At 3:6–9 everyone who believes is an heir of Abraham; at 3:10–14 the law has placed an impenetrable barrier between Abraham and believers, which Christ must break to allow the blessing to flow to Gentiles; by 3:16–29, however, Christ is both the sole heir of Abraham and the content of the blessings themselves.<sup>8</sup> This historical and rhetorical discontinuity furthers Beker's portrayal of Paul as a "contextual theologian," whose "logic is cryptic, intuitive, and often inconsistent, because it is dictated by the crisis at hand."<sup>9</sup> Ironically, Beker leaves Galatians 3 so inconsistent that he cannot find his "coherent center" of Pauline apocalyptic symbols in that chapter.<sup>10</sup>

Sanders' analysis of Galatians 3 as "God's plan of salvation"<sup>11</sup> begins with narrative discontinuity between Christ and the law. Sanders feels that Paul began at the end of the theological story ("righteousness is by faith and includes the Gentiles") and built his case backwards through "a sometimes bewildering series of arguments."<sup>12</sup> Paul provides no real reasons for his theological assertions but simply moves through a series of prooftexts that are chosen spontaneously by similarity to his own theological vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> Galatians 3:13, rather than expressing the apostle's creative thought, "came to Paul ready-made as a reply to the charge that the crucified one cannot be the messiah."<sup>14</sup> This reckless compositional process has left Paul's argument logically incoherent:

<sup>5</sup> Beker, *Paul* 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 51, 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 50–51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 57–58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>11</sup> Sanders, *Paul* 27, 47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 23–24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

It seems that in Gal. 3:10–12—indeed, in 3:6–18—we do not have an explicit statement of the reason for which Paul held that no one is righteous by the law. We see, rather, Paul’s skill in Jewish exegetical argument.<sup>15</sup>

Since Sanders forwards “no one is righteous by the law” as Paul’s primary thesis here, his comment portrays 3:6–18 as a series of random assertions pasted together in service of a foregone conclusion.

More recently N. T. Wright has attempted to analyze Galatians 3 in terms of “covenant theology.”<sup>16</sup> Wright’s reading is notable for the rhetorical coherence it creates in Paul’s developing argument.<sup>17</sup> This coherence reflects Wright’s more positive description of Paul’s salvation story. The law did produce curse/exile and cannot effect restoration/blessing. But

this is not, then, to say that the Torah is bad; merely that, in the face of divine covenantal judgement on Israel, one cannot say that the Torah, and the attempt to keep it, provide the way to life.

Paul does not degrade the law but suggests only that Torah “cannot be as it stands the boundary-marker of the covenant family promised to Abraham and spoken of by Habakkuk.”<sup>18</sup>

Building on this understanding of Paul’s redemptive history, Wright presents an ingenious reading of Galatians 3 that is remarkably coherent. Against Sanders, Wright believes that the Scriptures cited at 3:6–13 are not merely “prooftexts” chosen on the basis of verbal similarity to Paul’s argument. Rather, “the Abraham story is fundamental to his [Paul’s] theology.”<sup>19</sup> Wright suggests that Paul’s argument in Galatians 3 is undergirded by Deuteronomy 27–30. These chapters are “all about the exile and restoration, *understood as* covenant judgement and covenant renewal.”<sup>20</sup> Galatians 3:13 situates the Galatians on this covenant time line:

In the cross of Jesus . . . the curse of exile itself reached its height, and was dealt with once and for all, so that the blessing of covenant renewal might flow out the other side, as God always intended.<sup>21</sup>

The curses of Deuteronomy 27–28 have led to Israel’s continuing exile, presently manifested as Roman domination. Christ, as the corporate representative of Israel, bears the climactic brunt of this exile by dying on a Roman cross.<sup>22</sup> His death inaugurated the new age of restoration (Deuteronomy

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Wright does suggest that Christ’s role in the salvation story shifts between 3:6–14 and 3:15–18. In the former, Jesus is the corporate representative of Israel, bearing the burden of exile on the cross. In the latter, Jesus as “seed” is the corporate representative of the “one nation” of Jews and Gentiles joined by faith in the age of restoration (ibid. 151, 165). But this dual role is a logical implication of the two sides of the cross—exile and restoration—with Christ as a corporate figure of God’s people on both sides.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 140; cf. Sanders, *Paul* 22.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Climax* 140.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 151–152.

29–30) in which the covenant community, via Hab 2:4, is defined in terms of faith rather than law.<sup>23</sup> In this age of restoration the blessing of Abraham can truly flow to all nations that accept Christ in faith.<sup>24</sup>

But despite Wright's careful wording, Torah still has a negative role in his salvation plot of Galatians 3. It remains unclear how the statement that "the Torah [cannot] provide the way to life" "is not, then, to say that the Torah is bad," especially since in Wright's reading the only "boundary-marker" Torah established was the boundary of national Israel in the state of curse and exile. Consequently the rhetorical coherence Wright seeks in Galatians 3 must be borrowed, generated by reading Paul's words parallel to a coherent passage from the OT.

Despite Wright's more positive tone, readings that approach the surface rhetoric of 3:1–18 in terms of redemption history seem compelled to conclude that the text is in some way defective: either incoherent (Beker), or a series of ill-connected prooftexts for a presupposed conclusion (Sanders), or intelligible only when read parallel to other texts, such as Deuteronomy 27–30 (Wright) or, most commonly, Romans.

This brief survey does not intend to displace *Heilsgeschichte* from Paul's thought but rather to highlight the issue of coherence in Paul's rhetoric. The readings of Galatians 3 noted above seemingly do not distinguish between (theo)logical coherence and rhetorical coherence. By its very nature as text Galatians 3 will evidence some sort of rhetorical coherence, but this surface coherence may or may not correspond to the patterns of coherence evident in its underlying logic. It will be suggested here that in the case of Galatians 3 the rhetorical coherence of Paul's argument differs from the logical, linear coherence of his underlying salvation history.

### III. GALATIANS 3 AS SACRED SPACE

James D. G. Dunn popularized an alternative to redemptive-historical readings of Gal 3:6–14 by seeking to balance the treatments of Sanders and H. Räisänen, which portrayed "Paul's treatment of the law as inconsistent and self-contradictory."<sup>25</sup> Dunn argued that this inconsistency was actually an illusion resulting from a methodological flaw: "They have still failed to grasp the full significance of *the social function of the law* at the time of Paul."<sup>26</sup> Dunn sought to correct this deficiency with a reading that was explicitly sociological. In the first century AD, food laws and circumcision were seen as the primary markers of Judaism, "fundamental to the devout Jew's identity as a Jew."<sup>27</sup> Paul's gospel, which allowed Gentiles to enter the covenant community without these marks of Jewish identity, had created an

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>25</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, "Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.10–14)," *NTS* 31 (1985) 523.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 524.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 525.

identity crisis for his opponents. In response they sought to reenforce their self-image as covenant people by requiring Gentile believers to live within the symbolic boundary of Judaism.

Paul's rebuttal in Galatians is therefore not an attack on "law" as such but on observances of Torah "which mark out the practitioner as a member of the covenant people."<sup>28</sup> The "curse of the law" at 3:10–14 thus becomes "the curse which falls on all who restrict the grace and promise of God in nationalistic terms, who treat the law as a boundary mark."<sup>29</sup> Christ bore this curse by placing himself outside the law boundary and dying in the realm of the Gentile. Consequently if believers draw the line of covenant at the law they automatically exclude Christ himself from the covenant community, an obvious absurdity.<sup>30</sup>

Dunn's redefinition of the problem of 3:6–18 is perhaps more significant than his conclusions. Whereas the studies discussed above read this passage in terms of linear time in the plot of a salvation narrative, Dunn's analysis uses the language of salvific space with boundary markers plotted around a covenant group. Dunn's approach seems more consistent with the immediate question in Galatians: What is the status of Gentile believers? "Status" is best defined in spatial terms such as social scale and social position, which specify where rather than when. Certainly Paul may have conceptualized the relationship between law and Christ within a temporal narrative framework, but the rhetorical structure of 3:1–18 is not undergirded by a narrative paradigm. Consequently it collapses under those readings that assume that Paul is expounding a salvation history. Dunn's paradigm shift paves the way for a new approach to the question of coherence in 3:1–18.

#### IV. REFERENCE POINTS AND COVENANT STATUS

Following Dunn's example, the following reading will assume that Gal 3:1–18 is in fact completely coherent when read in terms of space rather than time as part of an attempt to situate Gentile believers at a point on a status grid.

As Dunn's article illustrates, spatial readings require special tools. The reference group, a sociological model introduced to Biblical scholarship by Wayne Meeks,<sup>31</sup> will be helpful in the case of 3:1–18. The "reference group" and the "reference individual" were first described by Herbert H. Hyman in a study on the frames of reference individuals utilize to evaluate their personal status.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent research refined reference group to mean "those

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 527.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 536.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 537.

<sup>31</sup> W. A. Meeks, "The Circle of Reference in Pauline Morality," *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. A. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 305–307.

<sup>32</sup> H. H. Hyman, "The Psychology of Status," *Archives of Psychology* 269 (1942), reprinted in *Readings in Reference Group Theory and Research* (ed. H. H. Hyman and E. Singer; New York: Macmillan, 1968) 149.

groups to which the individual relates himself [or herself] as a part or to which he [or she] aspires to relate himself [or herself].” Once chosen, the reference group provides an individual with “the major anchorages in relation to which his [or her] experience of self-identity is organized.”<sup>33</sup> The reference group is thus those persons, real or imagined, to whom the individual will look in self-evaluation.

Reference groups can function in two ways:

A group functions as a *normative* reference group for a person to the extent that its evaluations of him [or her] are based upon the degree of his [or her] conformity to certain standards of behavior or attitude and to the extent that the delivery of rewards or punishments is conditional upon those evaluations.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the desire to receive certain rewards from a group may influence an individual to follow the norms the group would expect from her. The reward in question may entail the privilege of group membership, and punishment the threat of exclusion. For example, in a professional setting a female executive may feel pressured to follow those stereotypical patterns that male executives in the company expect from women in order to obtain access to executive privileges in the group. The normative reference group may not have actual power over the individual’s behavior. Its power comes from the individual’s desire to be evaluated by the group in a particular way, whether or not the group chooses to make any evaluation or is even aware of the aspiring individual.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand,

a group functions as a *comparison* reference group for an individual to the extent that the behavior, attitudes, circumstances, or other characteristics of its members represent standards or comparison points which he [or she] uses in making judgements and evaluations.<sup>36</sup>

In the comparative mode the reference group provides the individual with reference points for establishing her own social position and behavior. She understands who she is and is not in reference to other persons whom she thinks she can clearly define and situate. This function is illustrated in clichés like “keeping up with the Joneses” and “What would she do in this situation?” The reference group provides social reference points that help the individual define her status and guide her behavior.

It should be stressed that in many individual cases the same group will perform both the normative and comparative functions, with comparative self-analysis accompanying pressure to conform to norms. It should also be noted that reference groups, or significant reference individuals, need not actually exist. Consequently an individual’s total frame of reference may include

<sup>33</sup> Both quotes from M. Sherif, “The Concept of Reference Groups in Human Relations,” *Readings* (ed. Hyman and Singer) 87.

<sup>34</sup> H. H. Kelly, “Two Functions of Reference Groups,” *Readings* (ed. Hyman and Singer) 80 (italics mine).

<sup>35</sup> “Of course, when referent power is joined to real power, that is an unbeatable combination.” H. H. Hyman and E. Singer, “Introduction,” *Readings* (ed. Hyman and Singer) 10.

<sup>36</sup> Kelly, “Two Functions” 81 (italics mine).

groups out of the dead past or not yet born. Some reference individuals may also be long departed. They are living structures only in the mind of the perceiver.<sup>37</sup>

If we use the theoretical matrix of reference-group theory, the setting of the Galatian letter can be restated in the following terms. Paul's opponents have appeared on the scene and have become, perhaps unintentionally, a reference group for the Gentile believers. As such the opponents perform both the comparative and normative functions. In contrast with the Gentiles the opponents appear to carry a full résumé of Jewish covenant symbols. If, however, the Galatians will conform to the opponents' norms, the opponents will reward them by recognizing their status as full members of the covenant community like themselves. Hence Paul's remark at Gal 4:17: "They desire to shut you out so that you would pursue them." But conformity to the opponents' value system requires the Galatians to abandon Paul's gospel.

Paul counters this challenge by presenting an alternate reference group at 3:1–18, consisting of the Spirit, Abraham, the opponents themselves (redefined in Pauline terms), Christ, and the legal customs of society at large. Paul invites the Galatians to evaluate their own status by comparing themselves to these individuals—none of whom, it will be seen, value the Jewish customs advocated by Paul's opponents. These individuals become points on a salvific status grid, and when the dots are connected they plot a boundary line around those who exhibit faith in Christ. Those inside the boundary, which will include the Gentile believers, have the status of full membership in the covenant community. Paul thereby creates a reference group that re-sets the salvific boundary line.<sup>38</sup>

Paul's first point on the reference grid is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, as "bestowal/provision" (3:4), directly links God to the Galatians as gift given and received. Galatians 3:1–5 is a series of rhetorical questions that point out that the opponents

have not realized the implications of the [Gentiles'] experience of the Spirit (Gal 3:2–5). Their past (Gal 3:2,3) and present (Gal 3:5) experience of the Spirit is indisputable evidence that they are already experiencing the full blessing of God.<sup>39</sup>

The question at 3:5—"Is the one supplying you with the Spirit and working powers among you from works of law or from hearing of faith?"—can only be answered "from hearing of faith" because the Galatians received the

<sup>37</sup> Hyman and Singer, "Introduction" 17.

<sup>38</sup> Reference-group theory highlights a primary feature of Greco-Roman moral rhetoric at this point. Moral exhortation frequently presented concrete examples of virtue for self-comparison. "What was important was not abstract information [about virtue] but living models of character who embodied philosophical doctrines" (S. K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986] 38). Audiences were frequently challenged to examine themselves against models chosen from "members of one's own family, one's father in particular . . . and to ancient worthies" (A. J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986] 136).

<sup>39</sup> G. W. Hansen, "Letter to the Galatians," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 331.

Spirit as Gentiles. Paul points out here that “works of law” are obviously not prerequisite to receipt of the Spirit, a mark of true childhood at 4:6.<sup>40</sup>

Paul’s second point on the status grid is Abraham (3:6–9). The *καθώς* that opens 3:6 indicates that Abraham’s example parallels the point Paul has just made about God and the Galatians’ receipt of the Spirit. Citing Gen 15:6, Paul demonstrates that Abraham was counted righteous because he had faith in God. This may be directly compared with the situation of the Galatians, who have also been declared righteous by faith, again as evidenced by the operation of the Spirit in their community. Paul goes a step further at 3:8 by citing another *γραφή* that predicts that all nations will be “blessed” in Abraham. This prediction has been fulfilled in the case of the Galatians, who have now been blessed because they too have faith in God. Again, the Galatians find themselves inside the boundary line as even Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, received God’s blessing and promise on the basis of faith alone.

Paul now situates the Galatians in reference to his opponents (3:10–12). Because the opponents already function as reference point for the Galatians, Paul must redefine them as a “vice model,” an example of what not to do in reference to Torah. Agreeing that the opponents are *ἐξ ἔργωνόμου*, Paul denies that this connects them with Abraham. In fact Torah is what separates the opponents from the Jewish patriarch. The Galatians, on the other hand, actually confirm their status as members of the community by not doing works of Torah. Paul thus reverses the status claim of the opponents, placing them outside the covenant boundary and the Gentiles inside.

Two arguments are offered in support of this bold claim, both based on Scripture. The first argument (3:10a), citing Deut 27:26, affirms the negative potential of the law: Those who pursue salvation by its works inevitably end up cursed because they cannot fulfill it. The second argument (3:11a), based on a contrast between Hab 2:4 and Lev 18:5, complements the first by denying the positive potential of the law. Since law concerns doing, it cannot even justify those who fulfill it because justification is achieved only by faith. Galatians 3:10–12 thus demonstrates that the Galatians “have absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose from pursuing the way of Torah.”<sup>41</sup> Paul’s opponents are incorrect when they claim that those inside the law are inside the covenant community. Being inside the law means to be outside of Christ. The opponents’ example of following law confirms the Gentiles’ status by the fact that the Gentiles do not observe it.

This bold redefinition of the opponents is confirmed by the next model in Paul’s reference group: Christ (3:13–14). Whether the law is able to curse those who do or do not follow it is in any case irrelevant to those who believe in Christ, because Christ has borne the curse of the law by dying in a way

<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Troy Martin for his help in clarifying the connection here between God, Spirit, and the Galatians.

<sup>41</sup> This paragraph is indebted to C. D. Stanley, “‘Under A Curse’: A Fresh Reading of Galatians 3.10–14,” *NTS* 36 (1990) 496–505. The quote is from p. 505.

the law condemns (Deut 21:23). This point leads Paul to summarize his arguments thus far at Gal 3:14: Christ has shown that the law does not save or condemn anyone. His death allows all people, regardless of race, to receive the blessing of Abraham through faith. The specific form this blessing has taken in the lives of the Gentiles is the gift of the Spirit, which is received only by faith. Paul's opponents pale against the comparative group he has created. True, the Gentile believers do not have law or circumcision; but God, Abraham and Christ judge such things to be worthless. Furthermore the law actually only harms those who try to follow it. The Gentiles do, however, have faith, the one thing that God, Christ and Abraham all find significant. What then do the Galatians stand to gain by accepting the norms of Paul's opponents?

Paul will establish one last reference point at 3:15–18: the legal customs of society at large. Διαθήκη probably refers to a “testament” or “will,” in this context Abraham's testament concerning the heirs to his promises.<sup>42</sup> Abraham's promise legally transfers to his σπέρματι, which, by a hyperliteral reading of the collective singular in the covenant statements of Genesis, becomes Christ. Therefore any promises Abraham received rightfully belong only to Christ. Were God to grant these promises to anyone else on the basis of law he would violate the terms of Abraham's will. Furthermore law and promise are antithetical in the first place, because one does not earn something that is willed as a gift from the testator (3:18). Testament law thus confirms the status of the Galatians as true recipients of God's favor because they have aligned themselves by faith with Abraham's true heir: Christ, not the law.

When the Galatians evaluate themselves by the standards of Paul's opponents they find themselves outside the covenant community. When, however, they compare themselves to the higher authorities on the subject, and when the opponents are seen for what they truly are, the Galatians find that they are situated squarely in the center of God's realm. It seems, then, that Gal 3:1–18, rhetorically incoherent as a salvation narrative, plots a continuous and coherent salvific circle around the Gentile believers. Outside the circle are those who follow law and are under a curse. Inside are those who live by faith in the Spirit.

<sup>42</sup> On the potential legal difficulties in Paul's example see Longenecker, who concludes that “on the basis of our present knowledge of inheritance laws in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, it seems, therefore, that Paul's use of *diathēkē* in 3:15 is not exactly in accord with the legal situation of the day” (*Galatians* 128–130). It should be noted that Longenecker seems to have in mind the right of the testator, here Abraham, to change the will (pp. 128, 130). Paul's point, however, seems to be that no one except the testator—in this case only Abraham and not God—can change Abraham's will, and since Abraham was dead when the law was given 430 years later he could scarcely have been involved in extending his will to those under the law.