AN EXPLANATION OF GALATIANS 1-3

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Paul is not always easy to understand. That is not just my opinion; it was true even in Paul’s time. 2 Pet 3:15-16 says, “Paul wrote to you . . . 16 in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand . . .”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Among Paul’s letters, Galatians is especially cryptic. And within Galatians, chapters 1-3 are especially difficult. My hope in this overview is to make your journey through Galatians 1-3 easier.

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Paul’s letter to the Galatians begins as other ancient letters do, by stating sender and recipient and giving a greeting:

sender: Gal 1:1-2, “Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—2 and all the brothers and sisters with me, . . .”

recipient: Gal 1:2, “To the churches of Galatia: . . .”

greeting Gal 1:3-5, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Who are the recipients, “the churches of Galatia”? “Galatia” ultimately derives from *Gallus*, Latin for “a Gaul.” The Gauls were (like the Slavs, Germans, Greeks, Romans, and Persians) an Indo-European people; all of these groups migrated from north of the Black Sea (in southwest Russia) into Europe and the Middle East, beginning around 4000 bce. In 278 bce, some Gauls were hired as mercenaries to fight in north central Asia Minor (modern Turkey), but they decided to stay and conquer the area. (Be careful who you hire.) In 64 bce Galatia became a vassal kingdom to the Romans (paying tribute); and in 25 bce it became a Roman province. By then it had expanded to include all of the middle third of Asia Minor (except a small strip along the Mediterranean). Though some suggest that Paul wrote Galatians to churches in the Gauls’ original homestead (North Galatia), there is no evidence Paul was ever there. More likely he wrote the letter to the churches he founded in South Galatia: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13-14). Those churches contained both Jewish converts and gentile converts,[[2]](#footnote-2) like “the churches of Galatia” to whom Paul writes.

Two things are noteworthy about Paul’s opening (Gal 1:1-5). First, Paul slips into the sender section an argument that he will elaborate shortly: he was directly commissioned by Christ (1:1; see 1:11-24). Second, Paul slips into the recipient section an argument that he will elaborate later: Christ gave himself to set us free (1:4; see 2:4; 5:1, 13).

Right after the opening (sender, recipient, greeting), in all of his other letters Paul gives a thanksgiving (usually along the lines of Rom 1:8, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you”). But there is no thanksgiving here. Is Paul angry?

Oh, boy: is he ever. If you really want proof he’s mad, take a look at Gal 5:12: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” (Someday, when we sit around Paul in that great Sunday school in the sky and he explains Galatians to us, perhaps he’ll shrug and say, “Yeah, I sort of regret that line.”)

So Paul is mad because some people are “unsettling” his converts. Who are they? Answering that question requires a bit of background.

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Before there were Christians, there were Jews on the one hand and Greeks and Romans on the other.[[3]](#footnote-3) (There were also Greco-Romans who adopted Judaism, in whole or in part; they were called “Godfearers.”[[4]](#footnote-4)) When a person became a follower of Jesus, he was from one or the other background. You can see the two types of convert in Acts 6:1: “when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists [Greco-Roman converts] complained against the Hebrews [Jewish converts] because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”[[5]](#footnote-5) (Not very Christian of them.)

Having converts from both backgrounds created a problem.

Jewish converts had spent their lives abiding by the Mosaic law (the hundreds of laws that God gave to Israel through Moses).[[6]](#footnote-6) All those laws are now in the first five books of the Bible. (Though half of those books are narratives—Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, etc.—the other half are laws; so Jews call the five books *torah*, meaning “instruction” but more specifically “law”). Besides the 10 commandments, the laws say things like: don’t eat pork; don’t eat shellfish; don’t boil milk and meat together; only have one temple; construct it this way; perform a national sacrifice at the temple every morning; you can marry your first cousin but not your mother-in-law (aw, shucks); etc. There is even a law which says, “When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman’s husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. 23 If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exod 21:22-25). The laws get very specific!

Of all the laws, three especially were “cultural boundary markers” that immediately distinguished Jews from Greco-Romans: circumcision, the sabbath, and dietary laws.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Why was having converts from both backgrounds a problem? Because after joining the Jesus movement, many Jewish Christians continued to obey the Mosaic law. Should gentile converts also have to follow it?

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Christians who said all believers in Christ must abide by the Mosaic law are called “Judaizers.” That noun is not in the Bible,[[8]](#footnote-8) but the adverb “Jewishly” (*Ioudaïkos*) and the verb “Judaize” (*ioudaïzein*) occur in Gal 2:14 and refer to “living like a Jew.”

After Paul established the churches in Galatia (some time during 46-52 ce) and left to found churches elsewhere, Judaizers showed up, demanding that the Galatians not only believe in Jesus but also practice the Mosaic law. This included the three cultural boundary markers:

circumcision: Gal 6:12-13, they “try to compel you to be circumcised . . . 13 they want you to be circumcised . . .”

sabbath: Gal 4:10, “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years.”

dietary laws: Gal 2:12, Peter “used to eat with the gentiles. But after they [Judaizers] came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.”

Paul’s understanding of Christianity does not include practicing the Mosaic law.

Gal 2:16, “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ . . ., because no one will be justified by the works of the law.”

Gal 3:11, “. . . no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law . . .”

Gal 5:4, “You who want to be reckoned as righteous by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

Gal 5:18, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.”

In effect, two understandings of the Christian movement are in conflict. The Judaizers see the Christian movement as a sect within Judaism; hence, gentile converts must become Jews to be Christians:

gentile → Jew → Christian

Paul and those like him believe the old age has passed and a new age has dawned. (1 Cor 10:11, “the ends of the ages have come”; Gal 4:4, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son . . .”) The Christian movement is something new:

gentile → Christian

Paul does not personally know the Judaizers who have shown up in Galatia,[[9]](#footnote-9) but he is immensely upset that they are influencing his Galatians. So he writes the letter to the Galatians in order to turn the Galatians from the Judaizers’ understanding of the Christian movement to his own.

It is time, therefore, to consider the arguments that Paul advances to persuade the Galatians. But first we must consider Paul’s words immediately after the opening of the letter. Paul is so angry that he comes right to the point (and skipping a thanksgiving): “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal 1:6). In scripture, callings are from God: the Galatians are deserting God, by “turning to a different gospel.” Throughout Galatians “gospel,” the good news about Jesus, especially refers to an understanding of the Christian movement.[[10]](#footnote-10) The “different gospel,” of course, is the Judaizers’ gospel. Paul asserts that there is only one true gospel: his (1:7-9):

. . . not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

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Paul’s first argument in favor of his gospel is in Gal 1:11-24.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin, 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. 15 But when the one who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the gentiles, I did not confer with any human, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterward I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days, 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. 20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23 they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24 And they glorified God because of me.

Paul’s gospel—his understanding of the Jesus movement—is “not of human origin” (11). It is directly from God. Paul mentions his experience on the road to Damascus (also described in Acts 9, 22, and 26) and emphasizes that afterward he “did not confer with any human” (16). Only after 3 years did he visit Peter and James.

Also important to his first argument is the assertion that God “set me apart before I was born . . . 16 so that I might proclaim him among the gentiles” (1:15-16). Clearly God is on Paul’s side, not the Judaizers’. And if anyone is going to know which gospel to proclaim to gentiles, it’s Paul.

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Paul’s second argument is in 2:1-10.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 But because of false brothers and sisters secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us—5 we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. 6 And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the gentiles), 9 and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

In this paragraph he recounts his trip (with Barnabas and Titus) to Jerusalem to present his understanding of the Christian movement to the church leaders there. This meeting (also recounted in Acts 15) is known as the Council of Jerusalem or the Apostolic Council; it occurred c. 49 ce. (That Paul went to the leaders “to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain” [2:2] reveals uncharacteristic uncertainty: he wasn’t 100% sure his understanding was correct!)

At the Council, Paul was confronted by Judaizers (“false brothers and sisters”—notice that Judaizers are believers: they are Christians, not Jews). They came in “secretly,” they “slipped in,” to “spy,” to “enslave”—clearly the Judaizers are a dastardly bunch! To prove that his is the correct understanding, Paul makes three assertions in this paragraph (2 minor, 1 major). Paul “went up in response to a revelation” (2:2)—meaning God wanted the trip and supports Paul’s understanding. Also, Titus, though a gentile, was not forced to be circumcized—meaning the leaders agreed that a gentile could follow Jesus without following the law. But the major argument is that James, Peter, and John gave Paul “the right hand of fellowship” (2:9): they agreed with Paul’s understanding (“those leaders contributed nothing to me,” 2:6).

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Paul’s next argument is in 2:11-14.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood self-condemned, 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the gentiles to live like Jews?”

Here Paul recounts an incident that occurred in Antioch (the episode is called the “Antioch incident”). Paul used Antioch as the home base for his missionary trips; apparently it was his home church. Peter came to Antioch on a visit (Antioch [now called Antakya] was 450 miles north of Jerusalem). While there, Peter freely ate with gentiles. It made sense that he would. After all, Acts 10:11-16 tells how God had sent a vision to Peter of a sheet coming down from heaven with all sorts of animals on it. A voice told Peter to eat, but he refused (“I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean,” Acts 10:14). After reflection, however, he changed his mind. As he explained to a gentile household, “it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. . . . 34 God shows no partiality, 35 but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him” (10:28, 34-35).

So Peter freely mingled with gentile Christians at Antioch. Then, however, “certain people came from James [head of the church in Jerusalem] . . . [and Peter] drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction” (Gal 2:12). Perhaps he was eating non-kosher foods; at the very least he was violating the Pharisees’ interpretation of the dietary laws that said you could not eat with gentiles (Acts 10:28). Not only Peter, but Barnabas and “the other Jews”[[11]](#footnote-11) joined in the hypocrisy.

Paul’s reaction was uncompromising: “But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas[[12]](#footnote-12) before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the gentiles to live like Jews?”” (Gal 2:14). This is the second of the two times that Paul has referred to “the truth of the gospel” (see 2:5). He means by the phrase an understanding of the Jesus movement that affirms freedom from the law.

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At this moment—the transition between defending the gospel with personal history (chs. 1-2) and defending the gospel with scripture (chs. 3-4)—Paul pauses to explicitly contrast his and the Judaizers’ understandings (2:15-21).

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. 17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

(Note that by saying “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners,” Paul lets slip his prejudice. It’s ironic that, while arguing for equality between Jewish and gentile Christians, his Jewish upbringing still causes him to think of Jews as virtuous and Gentiles as sinners.)

Paul has not previously used the words “justified” or “justification”;[[13]](#footnote-13) now, in 7 verses, he uses them 5 times. The Greek words (*dikaios*, *dikaiosune*) refer to a judge in a law court declaring a defendant not guilty. So, with God metaphorically as judge, one can think of God acquitting us (eliminating our sins) and thus making us right with him (“justified”), putting us in a right relationship with him (“justification”). A relationship put “right” suggests peace, reconciliation, atonement (at-one-ment); but “right” also connotes “uprightness”: we are made “righteous,” resulting in a right relationship.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 2:16, Paul three times refers to the commandments in the Mosaic law as “the works of the law”; and he denies that doing them justifies (produces a right relationship with God). Paul also three times refers to the faith and affirms that the faith of Christ justifies. This verse is the heart of Galatians—its thesis statement, if you will.

The next sentence (2:17) is puzzling: “But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?” This verse refers to Jewish Christians, since “we ourselves” is used both here and in 2:15 (“*We ourselves* are Jews”). And probably the “effort to be justified in Christ” was striving for a right relationship with God and finding it in the true gospel, which merges Jews and gentiles and has them eating together. When Judaizers discovered fellow Jewish Christians eating with gentiles, the Judaizers discovered them to be sinners. Hence, according to the Judaizers, Paul’s law-free gospel makes Christ “a servant of sin.” (Primarily that phrase means Christ as an underling and aide to Sin personified. But in a context of table fellowship, “servant” also suggests the absurd image of Christ as a waiter! See how ridiculous the Judaizers are?) To the rhetorical question, “is Christ then a servant of sin?”—i.e., to the Judaizers’ question, “Aren’t you making Christ abet sin?”—Paul emphatically says “Certainly not!”

Then Paul contrasts what *is* a sin: to “build up again the very things that I once tore down” (2:18).[[15]](#footnote-15) What things? The laws, which “wall off” Jews from gentiles.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Eph 2:14-16, eliminating the law eliminates a wall of hostility between Jews and gentiles: Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, 15 abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both to God in one body . . .”

The next sentence (Gal 2:19a), “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God,” is perplexing. “Died to the law” seems clear: Christians are no longer obliged to follow the law. But how did that happen “through the law”? Perhaps Paul’s thinking is this:

The law played a part in Christ’s death. In Gal 3:13 Paul notes that in the law “it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”” (Gal 3:13). By crucifixion, Christ died to the law.

But Paul participates in Christ’s death. In Gal 2:19 Paul notes that “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:19).

So, just as Jesus died to the law, so Paul died to the law. And the “I” in Gal 2:19a is not just Paul, but all Christians.

As for “living to God” in 2:19a: Paul is no longer among “all who rely on the works of the law” (Gal 3:10) but among those who rely on faith; and faith makes him live to God.

Four more quick points about this crucial paragraph. (1) 2:20, “it is Christ who lives in me.” Usually Paul prefers to speak of the Spirit dwelling within.[[17]](#footnote-17) (2) 2:20, “the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me.” The past tense means Paul is not thinking of Jesus now loving him from heaven but of Jesus loving him when Jesus died on the cross. But the sentence is touching and tender nonetheless; it gives insight into Paul’s personal relationship with Christ. Paul is a loveable guy. (3) Christ is loving and self-giving (“loved me and gave himself for me”). Those in whom Christ lives—those empowered by Christ—will display the same characteristics. (4) 2:21, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” Everything else in this paragraph has been exposition (explaining); but this sentence is argumentation (persuading). In fact, it is a distinct argument by Paul! His gospel says that Christ’s death resulted in grace, making salvation available. If instead salvation is available through performing the laws, then Christ’s death changed nothing: Christ died to no purpose.

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Paul’s next argument is in Gal 3:1-5. Here he argues from the presence of the Spirit.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

The Spirit is accompanied by “miracles”; it causes “experiences.” Paul elsewhere[[18]](#footnote-18) describes the Spirit’s many “gifts.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Sometime the gifts are listed as offices or functions (apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, pastors, givers, the compassionate); sometime the gifts are listed as abilities (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues). Whichever gifts of the Spirit manifested in Galatia, they appeared before the Judaizers showed up. So the Galatians cannot deny that the Spirit’s gifts resulted from “faith,” not from doing the “works” of the law.

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Paul’s next argument is in Gal 3:6-9.

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.” 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

In 3:8, Paul cites a key passage in the Old Testament: the three promises that God made to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) at the beginning of the Abraham stories (Gen 12-25).

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

There are three promises here:

*land* (12:1): “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

*numerous progeny* (12:2-3a): “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

*blessing the nations* (12:3b): “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Paul refers to the third promise in Gal 3:8, “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.”” (Actually, it wasn’t scripture that foresaw or declared anything: it was God. But Paul personifies scripture, since scripture re-presents what God foresaw and said.) God promised that the nations would be blessed “in Abraham.” In the ancient world a person’s descendants could be thought to be present within the person. For example, the author of Hebrews says that when Melchizedek blessed Abraham (in Gen 14), Melchizedek also blessed Levi (Abraham’s great grandson, unborn at the time), since Levi “was still in the loins of his ancestor” (Heb 7:10). So nations blessed “in Abraham” may mean nations blessed by Abraham’s descendants or descendant. (In Gal 3:16 Paul insists that reference is to one descendant: “one person, who is Christ.”)

According to Paul, Gen 12:3b (the blessing-the-nations promise) proves that, all the way back in Abraham’s day (c. 1800s bce), God was planning to include the gentiles in salvation. The promise has now come to pass: God is justifying the gentiles by faith (3:8). Paul calls the fulfillment of the promise—the blessing—“the gospel” (3:8); as usual in Galatians, “gospel” especially means inclusion of the gentiles.

Although Gal 3:6 precedes 3:8, I have discussed 3:8 before 3:6 because that is the chronological order of events in Genesis. 3:8 quotes Gen 12:3, whereas 3:6 quotes Gen 15:6: “And he [Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” In Gen 15:5, God had repeated to Abraham the second promise (numerous progeny, Gen 12:2): “Look toward heaven and count the stars . . . So shall your descendants be.” Paul quotes Gen 15:6 in Gal 3:6 because Abraham *believed*, and the result was *righteousness*. This dovetails perfectly with Paul’s thesis statement in Gal 2:16: “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ.” *Faith* (not the law) results in *justification*. That happened in Abraham’s day; it’s happening now in Paul’s day. Paul emphasizes the connection between the believer then and believers now: Gal 3:7, “those who believe are the descendants of Abraham”; 3:9, “those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.”

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In Paul’s next argument, Gal 3:10-14, each of the first four verses quotes an Old Testament verse.

3:10, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.””

Deut 27:26, “Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them.”

3:11, “Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.””

Hab 2:4b, “the righteous live by their faithfulness.”

3:12, “But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.””

Lev 18:5, “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord.”

3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—”

Deut 21:23, “his [a capital offender’s] corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you must bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.”

3:14, “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

The statement that “all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse” (3:10a) could mean that everyone who tries to abide by the law is cursed. After all, if you fail to do any part of the law, you “do not uphold the words of this law” (Deut 27:26), so the curse applies to you.

Gal 3:10, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.””

Gal 5:3, “every man who lets himself be circumcised . . . is obliged to obey the entire law.”

James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”

This interpretation (that everyone who tries to abide by the law is cursed) assumes that, since no one can fulfill all 613 laws, anyone who submits to the law is cursed. But there is a problem with this interpretation: Paul says he himself was, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:6).

But there is another way to interpret Gal 3:10-14. Instead of talking about a curse that has taken place (or will inevitably take place), Paul may be talking about the *threat* of a curse. His reasoning concerns several events; and his reasoning is easier to understand if it is presented, not in canonical order (the order of 3:10-14) but in chronological order (the order in which the events happened).

(1) God promised that Abraham’s progeny would bring a blessing to the gentiles (Gen 12:3, alluded to in Gal 3:14a).

(2) The blessing of the gentiles will be faith as a means of righteousness (Hab 2:4, quoted in Gal 3:11b). How do we know that God’s blessing to the nations through Abraham will be faith, rather than the law? Because, unlike the law, faith is available to gentiles (Gal 3:14a).

(3) God repeated a promise to Abraham, and when Abraham believed him, God “reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, quoted in Gal 3:6). Thus began faith as a means of righteousness.

(4) Then came the law. Those who submit to it are under it (it applies to them) (Gal 3:10a). But part of the law is its curse for non-adherence to the law (Gal 3:10b, quoting Deut 27:26). So those under the law are in danger of (threatened by) the curse (Gal 3:12, quoting Lev 18:5).

(5) But the law is ineffectual as a means of salvation (Gal 3:11a).

(6) Christ’s crucifixion (Gal 3:13) released faith as a means of salvation, including to the gentiles (14). It thus redeemed everyone from the law, both Jewish and gentile Christians.[[23]](#footnote-23)

(7) If Christ redeemed us from the whole law, then he redeemed us from that part which is its curse (Deut 27:26, alluded to in Gal 3:13).

(8) Through faith we receive the promised Spirit (Gal 3:14b).

In short, Paul’s argument is: Christ died to give you Galatians access to God through faith instead of the law. Why put yourselves under the law?

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Paul’s next argument is also based on historical sequence. Here is Gal 3:15-18:

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person’s will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many, but it says, “And to your offspring,” that is, to one person, who is Christ. 17 My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise, but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

In the middle of this paragraph, Paul notes that the promises to Abraham were also given to his “offspring.”[[24]](#footnote-24) When God initially made the promises in Gen 12:1-3, he did not make them to Abraham’s offspring as well. But when in Genesis God later repeats the promises, he usually makes them to Abraham’s offspring as well,[[25]](#footnote-25) and “offspring” (Hebrew זרע, *zera*`) is always singular. This fact gives Paul a chance to tie the singular of “offspring” to the singular appearance of Christ: the only inheritor of the third promise was Christ. It is Christ (and not the law) that makes the third promise available to the gentiles. (By their incorporation into him: 3:27, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”; 3:29, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”) The grammatical number of “offspring” is a small point for Paul to latch on to. Paul’s use of it is an example of midrash, the ways of interpreting common in Paul’s day.[[26]](#footnote-26) The grammatical number is a small point, but his meaning is large: it is through Christ, not the law, that the Galatians receive God’s blessing.

Temporal order is important in human wills; it is also important in God’s will. Gal 3:17-18 state the historical order of righteousness through faith and through the law. The former occurred with Abraham (Gen 15:6), c. 1800s bce; the latter occurred with Moses (Exod 21-Deut 28), c. 1240 bce.[[27]](#footnote-27) So God established in Abraham’s day that righteousness would be by faith; his giving the law half a millennium later did not “annul a covenant previously ratified” (3:17). For it’s one or the other: “if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise” (3:18). The promised blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3) is righteousness by faith given to Abraham (Gen 15:6); but the promise is not fulfilled until Christ’s crucifixion makes righteousness by faith available to the gentiles (Gal 3:13-14). So don’t be “foolish Galatians” (3:1) and opt for the law: righteousness by faith, promised centuries ago, is now available to you!

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The next section is Gal 3:19-29. But the first two verses deserves a section by themselves. Gal 3:19-20 read,

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made, and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party, but God is one.

Up to now, Paul has said nothing positive about the law; in fact, it threatens a curse. So the obvious question is: Why did God even give the law? Paul’s answer is, “It was added because of transgressions . . .” But what does that mean? Here are three possibilities.

(1) Perhaps God added laws to make us sin more. That seems to have some support in Romans. Rom 5:13 says, “sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.” That suggests that God added the law so that we would be accountable for sins. Rom 5:20 says, “But law came in, so that the trespass might increase . . .” But this verse could merely be stating a fact, rather than a purpose. Rom 7:13, however, goes further: “It was sin that was working death in me through what is good [the law], in order that it might be shown to be sin, so that through the commandment sin might become sinful beyond measure.” “In order that/so that” (both are the Greek word ἵνα, *hina*) indicates purpose, and it governs two clauses: so that sin “might be shown to be sin,” and so that sin “might become sinful beyond measure.” Paul is personifying sin, so maybe these are Sin’s purposes. While Sin might be delighted at a drastic increase in sins (the second purpose), why would it want people to notice that sin is sin (the first purpose)? Or maybe these are God’s purposes. But then there is the opposite problem: God might like us to see sin for what it is, but he could hardly want sins to increase drastically. Could the first purpose be Sin’s and the second purpose be God’s? If so, Paul’s writing here is awfully obscure.

(2) Perhaps God added laws to restrain sins. Gal 3:23-25 says, “we were imprisoned and guarded under the law . . . 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian . . .” This interpretation has the advantage of support from verses in the same chapter.

(3) Perhaps God added laws to make us more aware of our sinfulness. That hypothesis, it seems to me, has the best support:

Gal 3:22a, “But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin . . .”

Rom 3:19-20, “Now we know that, whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

Rom 4:15, “For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.”

Rom 7:7-13, “if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” . . . 13 [Sin worked] death in me through what is good, in order that it might be shown to be sin . . .”

A second topic in Gal 3:19-20 is the statement that the law “was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party, but God is one.” A few passages in the Bible refer to angels at Sinai.

Deut 33:2, “The Lord came from Sinai . . . With him were myriads of holy ones, at his right, a host of his own.”

Ps 68:17, “With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.”

Acts 7:53, (Stephen says to the Jewish mob) “You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

“Ordained” (Greek *diataxis*) means to arrange something upon someone else’s order, so “*through* angels” (Gal 3:19) implies that the angels act for God, initiating the law for him.[[28]](#footnote-28) The angels, consequently, were between God and the law. Not only that, but Moses was also a mediator. Paul’s point seems to be that, if God gave the law through angels and through Moses, then he did not give it directly. Intermediaries distance the law from God; it has diminished authority. Compare that to God directly giving the promises to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3, and to God directly giving the gospel to Paul in Gal 1:11-21. (Gal 1:12, “I did not receive it [the gospel] from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”)

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Gal 3:19-29 continues in the subsection 21-22:

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through the faith of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The promises—including the crucial third promise, a blessing to gentiles—are superior to the law. The promises can save; the law cannot. The promises are permanent; the law was temporary. Being on a different level, the law is not opposed to the promises. It was given for a different purpose (to increase sins, restrain sins, or make us more aware of sins—see the discussion of 3:19-20 above).

Verse 22 personifies scripture: it “has imprisoned” under sin.[[29]](#footnote-29) How does it do that? He could have in mind passages in scripture that affirm universal sinfulness; Rom 3:10-18 quotes six such passages, one right after the other. But probably “scripture” here means the law,[[30]](#footnote-30) since the next verse says, “we were imprisoned . . . under the law” (3:23). How does the law imprison us under sin? Again, Paul could mean specific passages in the torah that assert our sinfulness (Rom 3:19, “whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God”). Or Paul could mean that sin uses the law as an instrument to imprison us (Rom 7:13, “sin [worked] death in me through what is good” [the law]).

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In the next subsection, Gal 3:23-25, Paul uses a metaphor from Greco-Roman life to clarify God’s purpose in giving the law.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian . . .

In 3:23 Paul could be comparing the law to a jailer. But in the next verse he refers to a *paidagogos* (“disciplinarian”), an educated adult male slave or servant in a wealthy gentile household who took children to and from school, saw to their lessons, and disciplined them. (“Tutor” is another possible translation, though “disciplinarian” is probably better, since Paul is emphasizing that aspect of the job.) If “imprisoned” in verse 23 is literal, then 23 refers to a jailer, and Paul switches metaphors in 24. If “imprisoned” in 23 is metaphoric, then the guard of 23 could be the guardian of 24.

The purpose of the law, then, was to oversee our development *in our childhood*. It was not meant to oversee us forever; it was a temporary overseer. Paul’s argument here is based on salvation history (the historical process by which God saved us). In Rom 5:12-21 he outlines three periods of salvation history.

*first stage*: *pre-law period* (5:12-14), “sin came into the world through one man [Adam] . . . 13 sin was indeed in the world before the law . . . 14 death reigned from Adam to Moses . . .”

*second stage*: *law period* (5:20), “But law came in, so that the trespass might increase . . .”

*third stage*: *grace period* (5:17), “those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

In the period from Adam to Moses, God established faith as the means of salvation (Gen 15:6).

In the period from Moses to Christ, the law tutored us.

In the period after Christ (Paul’s present and our present), we are saved by faith.

So why, you foolish Galatians (3:1), do you stay under a tutor when you are now adults? Why stay in a period of salvation history that God intended to be temporary?

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In Gal 3:26-29, Paul triumphantly concludes the first three chapters of Galatians.

. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Gal 3:15-18 established that the promise to Abraham’s offspring was to the one offspring, Christ. (3:16, “the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring . . . that is, to one person, who is Christ.”) Now, in 3:26-29, “children” in verse 26 connects to “offspring” in 29: because they are incorporated into Christ (are “clothed” with him, 27), the Galatians are also now the offspring who inherit the promise.

And what is the result? The law divided Jew from Greek, but “There is no longer Jew or Greek . . .” God’s grace—his graciously fulfilling the promise by saving the gentiles through faith—has made the two into one.

So, foolish Galatians: don’t listen to the Judaizers, don’t go under the law, don’t divide Jew and Greek again, don’t spurn God’s great gift:

“For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1).

Enjoy “the freedom we have in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:4).

1. Scripture quotations throughout are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition (nrsvue). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jewish converts: Acts 13:14, 26. Gentile converts: Acts 13:16, 46-48; 14:1, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Hellenists” is from *Hellas*, the Greeks’ name for their country. Greco-Roman civilization from the death of Alexander the Great (323 bce) to the Roman conquest of Egypt (31 bce) is called “Hellenistic.” By contrast, the Old Testament refers to non-Jews as “nations” (*mishpahot*, Gen 12:3 etc., or *goyim*, Lev 18:24 etc.). English New Testaments refer to “gentiles” (Greek *ethne*, “nation,” was translated by the Latin for “nation,” *gentilis*; see Matt 18:17 etc.). Christians later spoke of “pagans” (*paganoi*, “villagers,” “rustics”); and “heathens” live on heaths (scrublands). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Acts 13:16, Paul addresses the synagogue members of Pisidian Antioch as “Fellow Israelites and others *who fear God*, listen.” Act 13:43 says that “When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and *devout converts to Judaism* followed Paul and Barnabas . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The twelve apostles’ solution was to have seven men chosen “to wait on [*diakonein*] tables” (Acts 6:2). That is the origin of deacons (from *diakonein*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. At Mount Sinai, God first gave Moses the 10 commandments (Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21). But over the next 40 days or so, Moses made 11 more trips up Mt Sinai (Exod 19-Lev 27) to receive a total of 613 laws. (613 is the traditional Jewish numbering, first proposed in the 200s ce.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The sabbath and circumcision did not begin with the laws given to Moses at Mt Sinai but were earlier: the sabbath began with creation (Gen 2:3), and circumcision began with Abraham (Gen 17:10). But they’re in the 5 books of *torah* and so included in the Mosaic law. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In fact, “Judaism” itself (*Ioudaïsmos*) only appears twice in the Bible, in Gal 1:13-14: “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism.. . . 14 I advanced in Judaism . . .” Compare Acts 11:26, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”” Mention of “Judaism” and “Christianity” together does not occur until Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 ce). (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 10, “It is outrageous to utter the name of Jesus Christ and live in Judaism. For Christianity believed not in Judaism . . .” [*The Epistles of St*. *Ignatius*. Trans. J.H. Srawley. London: SPCK, 1900. 60.]) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gal 3:1b, “Who has bewitched you?” Gal 5:7b, “who prevented you from obeying the truth?” Gal 5:10, “whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Gal 1:6-9, 11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; 3:8; 4:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Paul still thinks of Jewish Christians as “Jews,” despite his arguing for a mixed humanity in Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cephas is Peter. At birth his parents named him “Simon,” but Jesus gave him the nickname “Rock” (Matt 16:18—or “Rocky,” as we might say). “Rock” in Greek is *Petros* but in Aramaic is *Kephas*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paul uses the terms in Romans, so in canonical order he has used them previously. But in chronological order, Gal 2:16 is his first use. (Most scholars think that the only letter Paul wrote prior to Galatians [54-55 ce] was 1 Thessalonians [50-51 ce], where the terms are not found.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. English has two word groups to translate *dikaios* and *dikaiosune*: “justify,” “just,” “justification” are from Latin; “rectify,” “righteous,” “righteousness” are from Anglo-Saxon. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Paul switches from first person plural to first person singular (“if *I* build up again”). But he’s still thinking of Peter and the other Jewish Christians who tore down the wall dividing them from gentiles but have built it up again by separating from gentile Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The law as a wall was already a metaphor in the Judaism of Paul’s day. The *Letter of Aristeas* 139 (c. 100 bce) says that Moses “surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter, being thus kept pure . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Rom 8:9: “the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Paul lists and describes the Spirit’s endowments in Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; 14:1-40; Eph 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Paul calls the Spirit’s endowments “gifts” in Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30; Eph 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The promise of land is repeated in Gen 12:7; 13:14-15, 17; 15:7; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The promise of numerous progeny is repeated in Gen 13:16; 15:5; 16:10; 17:2-6; 17:16b; 18:18a; 22:17; 26:4a. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The promise of blessing the nations is repeated in Gen 18:18b; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14c. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. That the crucifixion redeemed Jewish Christians from the law, as well as gentile Christians, can be seen in Paul’s use of “we” and “us” in 3:13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Greek word translated “offspring” is *sperma*, “seed.” It is grammatically singular but is a collective noun (its reference is plural). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. As mentioned above, the three promises to Abraham are repeated: of land (12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:3-4); of progeny (13:16; 15:5; 16:10; 17:2-6; 17:16; 18:18; 22:17; 26:4a); of a blessing to the nations (18:18b; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14c). The only repetitions that lack “offspring” are 15:7 (land); 17:2-6, 16; 18:18 (progeny); and 18:18 (blessing to nations). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Midrash is “an early Jewish interpretation of or commentary on a Biblical text, clarifying or expounding a point of law or developing or illustrating a moral principle.” (*Random House Dictionary*) There are two types of midrash: commentary on laws (halachic midrash); commentary on narratives or other nonlegal material (haggadic midrash). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The dates given are based on historical and archaeological data. Concerning 1240: Pharaohs Seti I (c. 1294/90-1279) and Ramesses II (1279-1213) “set up a new capital city on the border of the Sinai desert in the Delta area . . . Most scholars identify this move as the background to Exodus 1, in which Israel is reduced to slavery and forced to labor on the building of this new Delta fortress. Thus it has become widely accepted that Seti I was the pharaoh who enslaved Israel, and Ramesses II was the pharaoh during the actual exodus.” (Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament*: *An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Rev. Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist, 2012. 24.)

    Seti I and Ramesses II are both within the 1200s bce. Yet Gal 3:17 says that the period from God giving the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3) to God giving the law to Moses (Exodus-Deuteronomy) was 430 years. That’s a problem. And there’s another problem: the chronological data within the Bible is contradictory.

    (a) The period from the promises to Abraham to the entry into Egypt is 215 years.

    From the promises to Isaac’s birth (Gen 21:5) is 25 years.

    From Isaac’s birth to Jacob’s birth (Gen 25:26) is 60 years.

    From Jacob’s birth to Jacob’s entry into Egypt (Gen 47:9) is 130 years.

    (b) Israel’s sojourn in Egypt is either 400 years (Gen 15:13; Acts 7:6) or 430 years (Exod 12:40-41).

    (c) If we add 215 to 400, we get 615. If we add 215 to 430, we get 645. Either way, we don’t get Paul’s 430 years from the promises to Abraham to the giving of the law at Sinai.

    Some solve the problem by saying that the 430 years are not from the initial giving of the promises (Gen 12:1-3) up to Sinai but from the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17:4-10, when the promises of land and progeny were repeated) up to Sinai. Others solve the problem by suggesting that 430 was recently in Paul’s head (it’s in Exod 12:40-41), and he inadvertently used that number for the whole period. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Diataxis*, incidentally, is the same root as the verb used four verses earlier, to “add” a provision to a will (3:15, *endiatassomai*). Perhaps the angels added the law to the promise to Abraham. Paul may be hinting that the angels had a nefarious motive in bringing about the law. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. We saw Paul personify scripture earlier: in Gal 3:8, “the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel . . .” There scripture stood for God. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. If so, this would be a synecdoche, a figure of speech where a part stands for the whole (“all hands on deck”: hands for men) or the whole stands for a part (“society pages”: but only high society is covered). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)