

Paul's Hermeneutics of the Faith of Abraham (Gal 3:1-9, 15-18) and its Relevance to the Crisis of Faith Today

Bernard Onyebuchi Ukwuegbu

Introduction

Some half a century ago, Samuel Sandmel wrote: "To see what the writer makes of Abraham is often to see most clearly what the writer is trying to say."¹ This statement is true not just of Jewish authors, but also of those of the New Testament as well.² The reason for this is obvious. In the long evolution of human history, Abraham's answer to God had been – at least from the viewpoint of Judeo-Christian tradition – the first expression of a personal religion according to the heart of God. Moreover, issues central to both early Jewish and early Christian identity converged around the figure of Abraham: God's covenant promises, what it means to be heirs of these promises, the eschatological realisation of the promises, circumcision, the law, God's relation to non-Jewish peoples, and most important, the character of faith and righteousness.

The special position of Abraham reached its highest expression in Late Second Temple Judaism. Not only was Abraham regarded as the model proselyte who turned from paganism to the worship of the one God of the covenant (cf. Jub 11:15-17; Apoc. Abr. 1-8), it was also commonly held that he himself observed the Law even before it was given to Moses (cf. Sir 44:20-21; 2 Bar 57:2).³ His obedience was expressed as *faithfulness* to God in times of trials, especially in the test to sacrifice Isaac (cf. Sir 44:20; Jub 18:1-16; 1 Macc 2:52). Salvation, tied to "father Abraham" as a Jewish belief, is not lacking in the writings of the New Testament. Since Abraham was the ancestor of Israel, the descent of Jesus from Abraham became of great importance for the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. It underlined the continuity in God's saving activity for both his people and the world (cf. the genealogy in Matt 1:1-17). Even Luke who traced Jesus back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38) deemed it also necessary to place his descent from Abraham at a strategic place in v.34.⁴

Given the context of the Galatian correspondence,⁵ it is clear why the ability to give a persuasive account of the relevance of Abraham to the Galatians' faith and practice would be such an important issue to Paul and his opponents. At the root of the Galatian controversy is the question of how the Galatian Christians are to live in continuity with those who look to the God of Abraham as their God. On this, there is little or no disagreement between Paul and his opponents, as they seem to share a great number of views about the followers of Jesus being the continuation of Israel and about the inclusion of the Gentiles in this renewed people of God.⁶ At

¹ Sandmel, S., *Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature* (Cincinnati, 1956) 29.

² Dahl, N., "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts* (eds. Martyn, J. L. and Keck, L. E.; Nashville, 1966) 139-158, here 140.

³ Philo, *Abraham*, 5-6, 275. See for further references, Siker, J. S., "From Gentile Inclusion to Jewish Exclusion: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy with Jews," in *BThB* 19 (1, '89): 30-36, esp. 31.

⁴ Cf. Seebaas, "Abraham," 16.

⁵ I have had cause elsewhere to discuss in detail the circumstances surrounding the Paul's Galatian correspondence. See Ukwuegbu, B. O., *The Emergence of Christian Identity in Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Arbeiten zur Interkulturalität 4; Bonn: Borengässer Verlag, 2003) 95-174; *idem*, "Towards an Alternative Hermeneutical Impulse for Interpreting Paul and his Galatian Correspondence," in *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 8, 1 (2006): 3-23.

⁶ Cf. Martyn, J. L., "Events in Galatia: Modified Covenantal Nomism Versus God's Invasion of the Cosmos in the Singular Gospel: A Response to J.D.G. Dunn and B.R. Gaventa," in *Pauline Theology* (ed. Bassler, J.; Minneapolis,

stake here is not whether Gentiles can be children of Abraham, but how? Exploring how Paul answered these questions in his hermeneutics of the faith of Abraham is the focus of this paper. Who knows, maybe this will also lead to the necessary discussion on how we – Christians of the 21st Century – can live the faith of Abraham in our own circumstances and by so doing enlist ourselves – or better allow ourselves to be enlisted – into the band of Abraham’s sons and daughters.

Opponents Recurs to Abraham

In their insistence that Gentile believers, in addition to faith in Christ, must be circumcised (cf. Gen 17:9-14) and observe a range of Jewish rituals and take on a general attitude of obedience and service to Torah,⁷ Paul’s opponents, no doubt, may have appealed to the figure of Abraham. For this, they have a whole array of scriptural backings. It is generally accepted that it is by virtue of his obedience that Abraham received the promise of numerous descendants (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 17:4-5 etc.), the promise of land (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8) as well as the promise of an everlasting covenant (Gen 17:17). To participate in God’s covenant with Abraham, Abraham’s rightful offspring were required to be circumcised, a rite that symbolised the “sign of the covenant.” Without it, any male would be cut off from God’s covenant blessings, as Gen 17:10-14 makes as plain as possible.⁸ With regard to the promise of numerous offspring, scriptures restrict true Abrahamic lineage to the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac rather than his son Ishmael (Gen 17:19-21; 21:12; cf. Jub 16:16-18). This makes it necessary that in order to share in the Abrahamic inheritance, it is of decisive importance that one belongs directly (through Isaac) to the descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:16).

It is very likely that Paul’s opponent may have understood the Sinai covenant as the fulfilment and/or ratification of the Abrahamic covenant. Just as God had promised to Abraham to establish an everlasting covenant with him and his descendants (Gen 17:17), so also he had made a covenant with Israel at Sinai and revealed their covenantal obligations in the law. While the Abrahamic covenant commands one obligation, viz., circumcision (Gen 17:10), the Sinai covenant requires a great number of obligations. These obligations are required for living in the covenant relationship with God and obtaining covenant blessing and life (e.g., Lev 18:5 = Gal 3:12) and failure to observe them incurs a curse (Deut 27:26 = Gal 3:10). In this way, God’s covenant blessing of Abraham was understood to fall upon those who obey the law, just as the curse against the enemies of Abraham falls upon those who disobey the law (cf. Gen 12:2-3).

The link between the Sinai covenant and the present Jerusalem in Galatians 4:25 suggests that the opponents also located Jerusalem in the Sarah-Isaac line.⁹ For them, therefore, the Sarah-Isaac-Sinai covenant-Jerusalem line alone represents the true sons and daughters of Abraham. Only these offspring of Abraham are counted as the real people of God, who are heirs according to the promises given to Abraham (cf. Gal 3:29). Within this conventional reading of Abraham, there is an opening for the Gentiles to enter the people of God, since God promised to Abraham that in him and his descendants all the nations would be blessed (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; cf. Gal

1991) 166-74; Fowl, S., “Who Can Read Abraham’s Story? Allegory and Interpretive Power in Galatians,” in *JSNT* 55 (1994), 77-95.

⁷ Martyn, *Theological Issues*, 166.

⁸ Cf. Dunn, J. D. G., “What was the Issue between Paul and “Those of the Circumcision?” in *Paulus und das antike Judentum*, WUNT 58 (1991): 295-318, here 303-305.

⁹ Hong, I., “Does Paul Misrepresent the Jewish Law? Law and Covenant in Gal 3:1-14,” in *NovT* 36 (2, ’94), 164-82 (167).

3:8). However, if the Gentiles want to use this opening and to become the real descendants of Abraham and heirs of the promises, they must, like Jews, be circumcised and keep the whole law.¹⁰ From the tone of Paul's letter, it sounds like the Galatians were already buying into this argument because of its deep-rootedness in the beginnings of the history of salvation.¹¹ The implication of this Abraham hermeneutics for the truth of the Gospel is enormous, and it was not surprising that Paul had to confront it with all he has and all it takes.

“Children of Abraham” in the Baptist’s Tradition: A Bridge?

Paul was not the first to raise the issue of the conditions for belongingness to Abraham outside the conventional reading. We find this issue in the tradition attributed to John the Baptist in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 3:7-10/Luke 3:7-9). The majority of scholars take these passages as a genuine Q¹² saying that goes back to John the Baptist.¹³ The relevant passage, according to the Matthean account, reads: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matt 3:9).

The phrase “children of Abraham” occurs only in Matt 3:9 and Luke 3:8, and in both cases, in the narrow context of John's call for repentance and his demand for the fruit(s) of repentance.¹⁴ The expression is problematic because it lacks parallels. From the point of identity, such formulation is lacking in contemporary Jewish writings like Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Where such “children of” expressions are encountered – like “children (sons) of Israel” (Jub 2:33; 6:19, 20; 15:29, 33; 34:18) – it is with reference to identifying the Israelites as Jacob's descendants, hence making a different claim to Abrahamic descent. Similarly, when such phrases like “children of righteousness,” or “children of light” appear in the Qumran Scrolls (1QS 3:13-4:26), it is in opposition to “children of falseness” and “children of darkness” and has nothing to do with Abrahamic descent.¹⁵

How then does one make sense of this expression associated with the preaching of John? Does it imply that John accepts a covenant identity, that he replaces national, ethnic belonging with a different identity, or does he redefine ethnic belonging? In other words, does John assume covenantal identity, simply by referring to Abraham, or does he disregard it?

No doubt, like every believing Jew, John takes ancestral lineage from Abraham in a positive sense. However, by his time the blessing of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) has come to become an object of Israel's pride and boasting. In Isa 51:2-3, God's blessing of Abraham and Sarah was regarded as the basis for the consolidation of Zion. By the time of Rabbinic Judaism, the impression was fostered that because of Abraham's election, all who confess themselves as his children have a place in the coming kingdom of God, even though their sins may have been

¹⁰ Cf. Hübner, *Das Gesetz bei Paulus*, 17; Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 130.

¹¹ Hong, I, “Law and Covenant in Gal 3:1-14,” 168.

¹² Cf. Q 3:8, in Robinson, J. M., Hoffmann, P., and Kloppenborg, J. S., (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q* (The International Q Project (Minneapolis/Leuven, 2000).

¹³ For the different discussions on the authenticity of the passage, see Linnemann, E., “Jesus und der Täufer,” in *Festschrift für Ernst Fuchs* (Tübingen, 1973): 219-36; Bultmann, R., *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (English edition, trans. John Marsh; Oxford, 1972), 117; Carl Kazmierski, “The Stones of Abraham: John the Baptist and the End of Torah (Matthew 3:7-10 par. Luke 3:7-9),” in *Biblica* 68 (1987), 22-39.

¹⁴ Grundmann, W., *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, ThHK 111 (9th ed. Berlin, 1981), 104.

¹⁵ Cf. Christiansen, *Covenant in Judaism and Paul*, 188

many.¹⁶ This reliance on an ethnic privilege, this claim that mere ancestral lineage is enough to justify a *claim for preference* is precisely what the Baptist here repudiates. In relation to God and God's judgment, John insists that right behaviour typified in Abraham is more important than mere recurs to descent from him.¹⁷ By so doing, John defines belongingness neither in genealogical nor in social terms but in ethical categories. Because John defines identity in terms of status before God, Gentiles, in principle, could qualify as much as Jews for an escape from judgment, or indeed, for participating in salvation. This is actually the way John's message is received in the early Church, where salvation is for Gentiles. In the Baptist's own message, however, there is no mention of Gentiles,¹⁸ and it is doubtful whether the Baptist looked beyond Israel or intended to question the traditional boundary between Israel and Gentiles. From all indications, a mission to the Gentiles and an attempt to integrate them into the circle of the "heirs of Abraham" (with its implications as regard salvation and blessings) remain the special prerogative of Paul.¹⁹

Paul's Response to the Abraham Argument

Paul responds to his opponents' Abraham argument by appealing to the figure of Abraham in two ways. First, he appeals to the Baptismal experience of the Galatians, their reception of the Spirit at the moment he preached his gospel to them, and compares this to the experience of Abraham who received his blessings on account of his faith. Then he offers an alternative reading of the entire Abraham's tradition to prove that it was faith that won Abraham the promises, and that it is faith that determines those who are heirs to these promises.

Appeal to the Galatians' Experience (Gal 3:2-3)

Paul begins by reminding the Galatians that the gift of the Spirit,²⁰ - an undeniable proof that one stands in the proper covenant relationship to God – which they received resulted from the public proclamation of Christ crucified, in which the Galatians believed.²¹ The manner of receiving the Spirit is described as *ex akoēs pisteōs*, in 3:2, 5. Much has been written about the accurate rendition of this phrase, literally translated as "hearing with/of faith."²² The controversy stems from the fact that both *akoē* and *pistis* can have two different meanings: *akoē* can denote either the act of hearing or what is heard, viz., message or report; *pistis* can also be taken as either the act of believing or what is believed, viz., the Christian message.

The immediate context, however, is determinative of the precise meaning of the phrase here. In the first place, the *akoēs pisteōs* is set in contrast with *erga nomou* in 3:2, 5. It is undeniable that *erga* here refers to a human activity, namely observing (the law), in which the Galatians themselves actually took part (4:10).²³ It is quite sensible, therefore, to take both *akoē* and *pistis*

¹⁶ Cf. Syr. Bar. 57:2; Straus/Billerbeck, I, 116-121; III, 194, 197.

¹⁷ Cf. Fitzmyer, J. A., *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (The Anchor Bible, 28; New York et al, 1981), 468. See also Lohmeyer, E., *Das Urchristentums: Buch 1, Johannes der Täufer* (Göttingen, 1932), 64.

¹⁸ Cf. Hollenbach, P. W., "Social Aspects of John the Baptist's Preaching Missions in the Context of Palestinian Judaism," in *ANRW* 2,19,2 (1979): 850-875.

¹⁹ Cf. Betz, H. D., "Paul between Judaism and Hellenism," 251.

²⁰ Cf. Hays, R. B., *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (SBL.DS, 56; Chico, 1983), 196-98.

²¹ Cf. Matera, "Galatians in Perspective," 239

²² For a review of most of the back and forth arguments, see Hays, R. B., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (SBL Dissertation Series; California, 1983) 143-45.

²³ For more on the different meanings of "hearing of faith" see Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 135; Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 113; Williams, S. K., "The Hearing of Faith: the *akoē pisteōs* in Galatians 3," in *New Testament Studies* (1989), 86.

in an active sense: *akoē* meaning hearing and *pistis* believing. In this sense, the expression refers to both God's act of proclamation (which the Greek allow) and the human act of hearing understood as a single act. It is, therefore, by this hearing of faith that the Galatians have experienced the Spirit and as such are justified; just as Abraham was justified by believing the God of promise. This experience had nothing to do with the law, because the Galatians were outside the law at the time of their initial response to the gospel of Christ preached by Paul.²⁴

Alternative Reading of the Abraham's Story (Gal 3:4-9)

After the recourse to the Galatians experience, Paul goes ahead to appeal to Abraham to state what Christian faith means and does not mean. He agrees with his opponents that Abraham is the father of God's people and that being a descendant of Abraham is thus crucial to participating in his covenantal promises. However, he refutes their argument on their own ground by offering a completely different understanding of the faith of Abraham. The entire argument is carved in such a rigorous rabbinic exegesis that is outstanding as it is novel.²⁵

Abraham's Blessing/Justification was based on Faith

Paul begins his Abraham's hermeneutics with a quotation from Gen 15:6: "Thus Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." While Paul may well have been responding to arguments from the scripture employed by his opponents, his aim is not just to join the battle on this front by offering his own scriptural proof-text. Rather, he is more interested in bringing Abraham and his Gentile converts together. The opponents, presupposing the pre-existence of the law, had interpreted the faith of Abraham as faithful obedience to the law and regarded this faithful obedience of Abraham even in times of trial, as what counted by God as a real act of righteousness.²⁶ Not so for Paul! He reads the Abraham story in a completely opposite way. And for his reading the quotation from Gen 15:6 is absolutely vital as scriptural warrant that Abraham achieved righteousness through faith and not from the law, since he was not instructed to practice circumcision until later in the biblical account (Gen 17: 9-14). Nothing in the text implies merits in Abraham's faith in the original context. On the contrary, that Abraham believed God means that he placed his confident trust in God to keep his promise. His believing was the total acceptance of God's promise because of the God of the promise alone. And for Paul, this kind of faith that Abraham puts in God in response to his gracious promise is the determinative factor that makes one a son/daughter of Abraham.

To most Jews of Paul's day (including even those who profess faith in Jesus as Messiah) one qualified as a son of Abraham if one was born a Jew, was circumcised, and lived under the law (cf. Gen 17:19-21; 21:12; Jub 16:16-18; Matt. 1:1; Luke 3:8; 16:24; John 8:33, 37, 39-47, 56; 2 Cor 11:22; Jas. 2:21). But the phrase "son of" may be constructed as a Hebrew expression which refers to one who reproduces in his/her own way of life that of another.²⁷ That person is called a

²⁴ Cf. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 125.

²⁵ Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 137.

²⁶ In this, they might have been faithful to conventional reading of the Abraham story. Typical of such reading is *the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan* on Genesis, where the faith of Abraham seems to be just another act of righteousness. Cf. *TJI*, Gen 15:6, see also *TJI* Gen 17:1; 18:17-18; Pereira, F., "The Galatian Controversy in the light of the Targums," in *Indian Journal of Theology* 20 (1-2, '71): 13-29.

²⁷ Cf. Garland, "Paul's Defence of the Truth of the Gospel", 174.

“son of” the other whose way of life he/she reproduces.²⁸ Operating on this latter sense, Paul draws the conclusion that those who believe in the same way as Abraham did are his true children.²⁹

Employing a seemingly independent voice, Paul justifies his claim by alluding to the fact that scripture itself preached the good news to Abraham *in advance* that God would justify the Gentiles *ek pisteōs*. According to Paul, the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “in you shall all the nations be blessed.” Paul’s proof-text is a quotation from Gen 12:3b, where it appears shortly after the account of God’s call to Abraham to leave his homeland and go off to another land (Gen 12:1) and his promises to make of Abraham a great nation (*ethnos mega*), to bless him, to greatly honour his name so that he will be blessed (12:2), and to bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him (Gen 12:3a).³⁰ In this context, Gen 12:3 records God’s promise that the Gentiles will share in Abraham’s blessing. Paul’s argument is simple: since Abraham believed and on account of his faith alone was justified, it follows that if the nations are to be blessed in him, they are to receive this blessing also on account of their faith.³¹ To be descendants of Abraham, therefore, is to be marked out by the same phenomenon of faith that Abraham himself demonstrated. On the same note, for the nations to be blessed “in” (*en*) Abraham (Gen 12:3 and 18:18; cited in 3:8) implies that their faith, like his, leads to their blessing ‘with’ or ‘alongside’ (*sun*) him (Gal 3:9).³²

Paul’s redefinition of what it means to be “sons of Abraham” opens up the possibility for Gentiles to become sons of Abraham without being circumcised. It also opens up the possibility for biological descendants of Abraham not to be “sons of Abraham” (cf. Rom 9:7-8). Under this redefinition, one becomes a legitimate descendant not by physical relationship to Abraham, or by obedience to the law but by faith. This is the case with the Gentile Galatians in the new era. Like Abraham, they heard and believed the gospel in faith. Like him also, they have experienced justification, evident in their reception of the Spirit. In this, they have become true sons/daughters of Abraham. In this way, Paul succeeds in forging a link between Abraham, who believed God and was reckoned righteous, and those who, in his language, are *ek pisteōs*. He also succeeds in bringing the present situation of his Galatian Christians in connection with the promise to Abraham, and claims that the Abrahamic promise, as a matter of fact, is the exclusive property of his Gentile communities since they, like Abraham, have faith in the God of Jesus.

²⁸ For instance, peacemakers are called “sons of God” because, like God, they bring peace in the midst of chaos (Matt 5:9). Those who built and decorated the tombs of the prophets are called “the sons of those who murdered the prophets” because their hypocrisy cloaks the same murderous spirit (Matt 23:29-31).

²⁹ According to Hansen, G. W., *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Context* (JSNTSS; Sheffield, 1989) 112, the statements in 3:6-7 form an argument by enthymeme. There is the implicit premise between v. 6 (the explicit premise) and v. 7 (the conclusion): “as God dealt with Abraham, so he will deal with all men.”

³⁰ See Haacker, K. “Der ‘Antinominus’ des Paulus im Kontext antiker Gesetzestheorie,” in *Festschrift für Martin Hengel*, 387-404, esp. 389, for a consideration of the selective nature of Paul’s scriptural quotations.

³¹ Cf. Berger, „Abraham in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen,” 5. In the parallel passage of Rom 4:9-12, Paul uses Abraham as a model of trust and faith based on Genesis 15 to reassess and reject circumcision as a rite of identification for both Jews and Gentiles. In contrast to most writers with a Jewish background (see especially the letter of James), Paul stresses that Abraham’s qualifications originated prior to his circumcision and is due more to the righteousness that comes through faith than obedience to the demand to circumcise. From this he deduces that circumcision gives no special quality.

³² Cf. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God*, 132.

Identifying the intended Heir of Abraham

In Gal 3:15-18, Paul addresses the question of the real recipient of the inheritance promise. Paul's opponents were not ready to admit that Abraham was justified by faith in God's promise. However, even if he were, they might argue, still the giving of the law later changed the basis for entrance into salvation. Anticipating this objection, Paul draws on the acknowledged character of human wills and covenants to show that no new development could change the promise made to Abraham. This address marks another shift in his argument from the interpretation of Scripture to an analogy from the sphere of human life (cf. Rom 3:5; 1 Cor 3:3; 9:8; Gal 1:11), precisely from the sphere of human jurisprudence.

Two distinct methods of superseding a will are suggested by the verbs *atheteō* (disannul) and *epidiatassomai* (add to). It might be expressly annulled (*atheteō*, "to set aside, nullify, reject," cf. 1 Cor 1:19; Gal 2:21; 1 Thess 4:8; 1 Tim 5:12), or it might be overlaid by new stipulations (*epidiatassomai* "to add provisions to" a document). In v. 17 Paul substitutes for *atheteō* the probably stronger verb *akurō* "to revoke, invalidate." In using these terms, whether consciously or not, Paul appears to have been maintaining the legal metaphor, for the equivalent nouns, *athetēsis* and *akurōsis*, were certainly technical legal terms.³³ This analogy from human jurisprudence also sets the context that will serve the discussion in the proof text of v.16 about the relationship between the promise and the law.

Paul's use of *diathēkē*³⁴ here should be seen in the context of the question: Who qualify as children of God? Having drawn on scripture, Paul now turns to life experience. From human experience Paul argues that it is impossible for anyone to add, subtract or set aside the conditions of a testament (a particular sort of legal instrument) once it has been validated (*kekyrōmenēn*, literally "put into effect," perfect tense!). In other words, once a person's last will/testament (which he refers to as *diathēkē*) has been executed, it cannot be voided or amended. Neither can anybody in between the time of the ratification and realisation introduce any other conditions other than the one included in the original ratification.

While Paul's use of *diathēkē* in this sense is highly controversial,³⁵ there is little doubt that the *diathēkē* he had in mind is the promise made to Abraham in Gen 12:3 and ratified as a covenant in Gen 15. In Abraham's day, an oath was sometimes confirmed by a ceremony in which animals were cut into two parts along the backbone and placed in two rows, the rows facing each other across a space marked off between them. The parties to the oath walked together into the space between the parts and spoke their promises there. This oath would be especially sacred because of the shed blood, and this, according to Gen 15, was what God enacted with Abraham, with only this one exception: In the case of God's covenant with Abraham, God alone passed between the pieces of the slain animals, thereby signifying that he alone stood behind the promises.³⁶ As

³³ For more on the legal dimension of Paul's metaphor, see Deissmann, A., *Bible Studies* (Edinburgh, 1901), 228-229.

³⁴ For a detailed overview of the concept, see Quell, G. and Behm, J., *diatithēmi diathēkē* in *ThWNT* II 105-34; Schildenberg, J., "Covenant," in *EBT* I 140-46; Wenham, G. J., "Legal Forms in the Book of the Covenant," in *TB* 22 (1971): 95-102. See also Anderson, B. W., "The New Covenant and the Old," in *idem* (ed.), *The Old Testament and the Christian Faith*, 1964, 225-42; Baltzer, K., *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, 1971.

³⁵ Cf. Christiansen, *Covenant in Judaism and Paul*, especially 235-236.

³⁶ The author of Hebrews captures this sense of the covenant by saying, "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants. And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised' (Heb 6:13-15).

such, it was a unilateral agreement that does not depend on any condition to be fulfilled by Abraham. The implied promise of blessing was valid the moment that God pledged it to Abraham and it was a promise made with no strings attached. Like the provisions of a will, the promise stands unchanged and remains unconditional. It can neither be recalled nor can the conditions be tacked on to it later.

From his two fundamental premises, namely, that wills are generally (and in almost all cultures) regarded as unchangeable, and that the promise of justification through faith first made to Abraham is permanent; Paul, making use of an interpretive principle called *qal wahomer* (“the light and the heavy”) in rabbinic exegesis (that which applies in a lesser case will certainly apply in a more important case), draws his conclusion. If a human will or agreement cannot be added to or annulled, how much less can there be alteration in the solemn promises made to Abraham and his seed by the living God! The “Johnny come lately” law that arrived on the scene 430 years later,³⁷ therefore, could not make void God’s covenant promise.³⁸ Otherwise, God would be a double dealer, who reneges on agreements.³⁹ By arguing this way, Paul utilizes the testament/will analogy, first, to prove that this covenant is still in effect and, second, to open up a strand of imageries that will allow him to introduce the notion of inheritance at 3:18 and develop it later in the letter.⁴⁰

Rather than move directly from the metaphor to broad statements bearing on his situation, Paul introduces a connection between the promise made to Abraham with Christ. From Gen 13:15 (cf. Gen 17:8; 22:18; Sir 44:21), Paul reads that the promise was given to Abraham and his seed (Gal 3:16). Paul uses the negative - *ou legei* – (“the text does not say”) – to deny one reading of a text from scripture, so that, with the clause introduced by *all’* (“but rather”), he can provide the correct reading. Interpreting the word “seed,”⁴¹ which appears here in the singular (*tō spermati autou*), Paul contends that since it is not in a plural form, it cannot refer to plurality of people (‘seeds’) but must instead refer to a single person.⁴² As he has already established in vv. 6-14, only Christ could have been this rightful heir, since he alone has redeemed us from the curse of

³⁷ The inconsistencies in the texts where the length of Israel’s existence between Abraham and the Law are mentioned have proved some obstacles in understanding Paul’s calculation here. While for the MT, the 430 years mentioned in Exod 12:40 refer to the period during which the people were slaves in Egypt, the LXX sees it as the period between Abraham and Moses. The problem is complicated by the text of Gen 15:13 (cf. Acts 7:6) where the Lord is said to have promised Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a land that is not theirs for *four hundred years*. The difference is of no consequence from the viewpoint of Paul’s argument, because his point depends only on the historical sequence. For a detailed treatment on Paul’s allusion to this time frame here, see Lührmann, D., “Die 430 Jahre zwischen den Verheissungen und dem Gesetz (Gal 3,17),” in *ZAW* 100 (1988): 420-430.

³⁸ Cf. Bachmann, M., “Jüdischer Bundesnominus und paulinisches Gesetzesverständnis, das Fußbodenmosaik von Bet Alfa und das Textsegment Gal 3,15-29,” in *idem, Antijudaismus im Galaterbrief? Exegetische Studien zu einem polemischen Schreiben und zur Theologie des Apostels Paulus*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 40 (Göttingen, 1999), 66-67.

³⁹ Garland, “Paul’s Defense of the Truth of the Gospel,” 177.

⁴⁰ Esler, *Galatians*, 192.

⁴¹ See Quell, G. and Schulz, Z., *sperma speirō spora*, in *ThWNT* VII 537-47 for the different ramifications of this word in antiquity.

⁴² The play on the word “seed” in this passage has attracted a lot of attention. See Wright, N.T., *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, 1992), esp. 162-68; Daube, D., “The Interpretation of a Generic Singular”, in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956), 438-44; Wilcox, M., “The Promise of the ‘Seed’ in the New Testament and the Targumin,” in *JSNT* 5 (1979): 2-20

the law, and since it is only through him that access to the blessing promised to Abraham and the nations is made available.⁴³

Paul's exegesis here has sometimes been criticized for its artificiality. The plural of the Hebrew *zr'* is generally used for grain or crops (e.g. 1 Sam 8:15), and therefore, the original Hebrew of Gen 12:7 would have to be singular, even though the promise to Abraham was not confined to a single individual but extended to his posterity in general.⁴⁴ This is also the sense conveyed in conventional exegeses of this passage, where reference to Abraham's descendants as seed is always in the sense of a collective noun (something similar to the English 'crowd') that contains plural significance not in its grammatical form but in its lexical meaning.⁴⁵ Even Paul himself employs this term with its normal collective sense in Romans 4, where a different exegetical argument allows him to sound almost like one of the opponents. The Abrahamic promise, he claims in this other context, is guaranteed "to all his descendants" (*panti tō spermati*, 4:16).⁴⁶

Unlike his case in Romans, however, in Galatians, Paul audaciously interprets the word as having a single referent first and foremost, simply asserting that referent to be Christ. This type of exegesis existed in the First Century CE and was later known as *peshat*, meaning "plain," or "open," as opposed to *derash*, meaning "hidden."⁴⁷ According to Brewer, *Peshat* readings took two forms, nomological, which treated scripture as if it were a legal document, and ultra-literal, which "demands the literal understanding of the words used in a text even when it is denied by the context and the plain meaning of the idioms" employed.⁴⁸ Paul's interpretation of *tō sperma* here is of the latter form.⁴⁹ His opponents may have been proclaiming that the promises were made to Abraham and to his "seed" the nation (a generic singular), or, possibly to Abraham and to his "seed" Isaac (a specific singular),⁵⁰ and some of Paul's converts may have been taken in by their exposition. As a counterclaim, Paul deliberately furnishes them with a deeper application of the promises of God made to Abraham and to his "seed."⁵¹ His aim is not to disenfranchise his Galatian Gentiles from the promise. Rather, he interprets Christ as its primary recipient so as to later include them via him—through adoption as sons [and daughters] of God and inclusion into Christ (3:26-29).⁵²

In 3:18, Paul argues that "if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise, but God granted it to Abraham through the promise." The word *kecharistai* (rightly understood as "graciously granted," see 1Cor 2:21) is important, because it emphasizes the fact that salvation is a free gift. Its occurrence here in the perfect tense indicates that this free gift to Abraham is permanent. Therefore, whatever may be said about the law, this much is certain: God saved Abraham through promise, not law; and this original way of salvation is still operative. The law which came later and serves a temporary function, could not be the means by which this

⁴³ Berger, "Abraham in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen," 55.

⁴⁴ Cf. Brown, C., "*sperma*," in *NIDNTT*, 77

⁴⁵ According to Demarest, B. A., "*sperma*," in *NIDNTT*, 74, the New Testament frequently employs *sperma* in the sense of "offspring" or "posterity." See Luke 1:55; cf. Gen 17:7; 18:18; 22:17; Mic 7:20; Acts 7:5 f.; cf. Gen 12:7; 17:8; Deut 2:5; Isaac (Rom 9:7; cf. Gen 21:12; Heb 11:18; cf. Gen 21:12) and David (Acts 13:23).

⁴⁶ Cf. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God*, 133.

⁴⁷ Cf. Brewer, D. I., *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 CE* (Tübingen, 1992) 14.

⁴⁸ Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions*, 15

⁴⁹ Cf. Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 142; Pereira, "The Galatian Controversy in the Light of the Targums," 27.

⁵⁰ Cf. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), 440.

⁵¹ Cf. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 441; Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 124.

⁵² Cf. Esler, *Galatians*, 193.

divine will to grant the promise to Jews and Gentiles alike can come about, since it divides humanity into families. On the contrary, to be in Christ, to have put on Christ in baptism (3:27), which the Galatians have already done, means to be allied with the seed of Abraham. Having put on Christ, the Galatians are now children of Abraham.

Conclusion

Paul's argument here is complete. From one point of view, the emphasis is on continuity, on the sameness of God, who, in sending Christ, fulfils covenantal promises. By drawing on the Abrahamic covenantal traditions and by interpreting these traditions, Paul stresses the aspect of the promise. From another point of view, there is the *otherness* of the relationship with God. This is indicated when faith in Christ determines belonging to the community (cf. 3:26-28; 4:1-7). Because Paul sees the Christ-Event and the encounter of the presence of God in the Spirit as a sign of validity, Paul can emphasise the validity of God's promise. In this way, Paul refutes the arguments of the opponents that the Galatians must accept circumcision and the law to inherit the promises. For Paul, faith is the only way of becoming the legitimate sons and daughters of Abraham and of sharing his promises. This has been God's intended means of salvation from the beginning,⁵³ and this remains God's intended means of salvation even in our day.

Seen in this light, Paul's hermeneutics of the faith of Abraham gives us some ideas to ponder on as we deal with the crises of faith today. Among other things, Paul emphasises that the relationship with God that requires the assent of faith is primarily at God's initiative. Faith is a gift from God, freely given, and freely accepted. It is neither induced nor extracted. Abraham's faith consists in the act of accepting God on God's own terms, and dealing with God on those terms. By de-emphasising the sacrifice of Isaac as the reason for Abraham's justification, Paul while not under-estimating the testing that comes to the person of faith, emphasises that relationship with God does not result from this testing. Granted, we all will be tested if we believe. But God does not necessarily relate to us on account of our withstanding or notwithstanding these tests. He would wish that we stand firm as Abraham; but he will also continue to deal with us even if we do not. How this relates to the "do that I may do" mentality, propagated today in the name of faith, stands to be question.

Again, to believe the way of Abraham means to accept God on God's own terms. Even the often-cited attempted sacrifice of Isaac is an intrinsic part of these terms. That Abraham was willing to do away with the agent for the fulfilment of the promise shows his preference of the God of the promise to what was promised. The promise was not the object of his worship or of his religious devotion. He believed God, not what God promised; and it was this that was counted for him as righteousness. How distant Abraham's way of believing is from the tendency to impose their wills and caprices on God characteristic of most of his acclaimed sons and daughters today is self-evident.

Furthermore, Paul's hermeneutics of the blessings promised Abraham necessarily lead to a form of inclusiveness. Paul fights against those who would want to use Abraham's fatherhood to justify their privileged position to the exclusion of others. Today, he would question the type of faith used to promote the superiority of an individual or group with reference to positions of privileges to the exclusion of others. Both Gentiles and Jews are children of Abraham because

⁵³ Cf. Hong, I., "Law and Covenant in Gal 3:1-14," 173.

both groups can accept God on God's terms just as Abraham did. Can we, the professed children of Abraham of today say of ourselves what Paul would have wished of his audience?:

For all of you are the children of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus, since every one of you that has been baptised has been clothed in Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And simply by being Christ's, you are that progeny of Abraham, the heirs named in the promise (Gal 3:26-29).