

Can a Curse be a Source of Blessing? Another Look at Galatians 3:10-14 in the Light of Paul's Attack on the Identity-Markers of his Opponents

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Introduction

'Blessings' and 'Curses', the two operative concepts at stake in the theme of this year's CABAN's Conference, feature in the Galatians' pericopé under consideration in this article. The passage is part of Paul's attempt to deconstruct the identity-markers of his opponents' worldview, albeit, from an altogether different perspective than is presupposed in the Conference theme. Having linked the experiences of the Galatian converts' reception of the Spirit with the ways in which Abraham received the promise of blessings – all happened on account of faith (Gal 3:2-9); Paul moves in the passage under consideration to dislodge the opponents' argument that blessings could come from the law.

Where Paul's opponents argue that blessings can come from keeping the law, Paul makes the case for the exact opposite: namely, that the law brings about a curse. In a rather awkward exegesis of a catena of Old Testament (henceforth OT) passages taken from both the Law and the Prophets, Paul asserts that by taking upon himself the "curse" of the law on the cross, Jesus has become a "blessing" and a "source of blessing" to both those living under the "curse" of the law and those living "outside" the law's promised blessings.

This article explores the intricacies of this rather awkward arguments of Paul with a view of revealing not only the vicarious nature of Jesus' death on the cross, but also the vicarious dimension of the Christian life that at times does imply and should imply choosing to be cursed so that others may be blessed.

Delimitation of Text

The unity of the themes of ‘law’, ‘curse’, ‘faith’ and ‘blessings’ suffices to establish Gal 3:10-14 as an independent sub-unit within the larger unit of Gal 3:1-18 where Paul seeks to ground his symbolic universe on the blessings of Abraham rather than on ‘the works of the law’. In Gal 3:1-9, Paul has compared the experience of the Galatian converts with that of Abraham, the first individual who received blessings in trust for both Jews and Gentiles. Here, the theme of Abraham was dominant. In the pericopé under consideration (vv. 10-14), Paul seeks to show that the law propagated by the opponents brings curse rather than blessing; but even at that, Paul insists that those under such a curse imposed by the law should count themselves fortunate since Christ has redeemed them (“us”) from the curse of the law. That vv. 15-18 is altogether different is evident both from the change in tone and the nature of the argument. The ‘brethren’ formula in 3:15 introduces a change of tone on Paul’s part, in contrast to the somewhat distant and formal beginning of chapter 3. It is as though Paul now invites the erring Galatians to reason along with him as he resorts to an analogy. This address also marks a shift in his argument from the interpretation of Scriptures to an analogy from the sphere of human life (cf. Rom 3:5; 1 Cor 3:3; 9:8; Gal 1:11), this time precisely from the sphere of human jurisprudence.

Galatians 3:10: The Law as Bringer of Curse

Having positively established his doctrine of justification by faith (Gal 3:6-9), Paul now turns to its negative counterpart: the impossibility of justification by law. The opponents have proclaimed another gospel, which in Paul’s view is a perversion of the gospel (1:7) since it would compel the Galatian Gentile converts to establish their identity on the basis of certain ‘works of the law’. In the first four verses of Paul’s formal argument (vv. 6-9), he has cited two OT texts (Gen 15:6 {in v. 6} and Gen 12:3 {in v.8}). Now, Paul quotes from the OT three more times in vv. 10-12; in each case demonstrating that any attempt to live by the law, rather than producing blessings, actually brings a curse.

“For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them””.

Paul's claim here is that all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse or better put "under curse" since there is no article. The phrase is general = accursed. The specific character of the curse is not stated. It is not merely the wrath of God as it issues in final destruction; but it represents a condition of alienation from God caused by the violation of his law.

With the phrase 'for it is written', Paul proceeds to quote the clause in the law by which this curse was imposed. The quotation is from Deut 27:26, where it forms the conclusion of the series of curses to be pronounced from Mount Ebal. The Hebrew text reads in literal translation: "Cursed be he that confirmeth not the words of the law to do them." The word "all" is not expressed in the Hebrew in Deuteronomy, but it is evidently implied, and has been inserted in almost all English translations. The Hebrew reads simply "he that"; "for everyone who"; so that the absolute and sweeping nature of the condemnation would seem to be much less marked in the original. It is not, however, clear whether this character was first given to the passage by Paul. It is found, however, in six manuscripts of Kennicott and DeRossi; in the Samaritan text; in the Septuagint (henceforth LXX); and in several Targums. "Everyone" is also found in the Peshito Syriac, which may have been influenced by the language of Paul; "in *all* things" is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch, which certainly was not so influenced. And the citation is made by Justin in precisely the same words as in Paul.¹

The word rendered "curse" (*katara*) means properly 'imprecation' or 'cursing'. It is used in Scriptures particularly in the sense of the Hebrew '*alah*, malediction or execration (cf. Job 31:30; Jer 29:18; Dan 9:11), of the word *me'ēraah* (Mal 2:2; Rev 22:3); and especially of the common Hebrew word *qelaalaah*, a curse (Gen 27:12-13; Deut 11:26, 29; 23:5; 27:13). It is here used evidently in the sense of devoting to punishment or destruction; and the idea is, that all who attempt to secure salvation by the 'works of the law' must be exposed to the law's penalty.

Gal 3:10 is of crucial importance for a proper evaluation of Paul's theology vis-à-vis Torah and Judaism. And as is expected, it has remained among the most disputed verse in the entire Galatian

¹ Justin, *Trypho*, par 95

correspondence. The dispute centres around the issue of whether Paul is here referring to people who are trying to attain their own righteousness through ‘good works’, or to those who, although they believe in Christ, mistakenly think that they must adopt a Jewish way of life as well.²

Most of the prior interpretation of this verse have been dependent on the theological presuppositions about Paul’s relation to the law as generating sin. Since the earlier references to the law had been consistently refutational (2:16, 19, 21; 3:2, 5), so goes the argument, then it is most likely that this further juxtaposition of the law with promise prepares the reader for a thoroughly negative assessment of the law in this verse.³ But such a proposition seems a priori implausible for Paul to have held. Such a reconstruction, Dunn points out, “would hardly cut much ice with his readers, and on this point, Paul could hardly simply assume that his readers shared his presuppositions. ... Moreover, such a theology attributes a very perverse motive on the part of God in giving the law; it is hard to think that Paul would be unaware of such a corollary or would willingly embrace it”.⁴

Paul has also been interpreted as arguing that in contrast to the Abrahamic promise, the law levels a curse on those who live under it because they do not persevere in doing all the things written in the book of the law. And for those who break even an iota of the law, the law itself imposes a curse. For proponents of this view, the major premise is the statement of Gal 3:10b that all who do not keep the law fully are cursed; the minor premise is implicit and states that no one can obey the law fully); and the conclusion is the statement of Gal 3:10a that all who depends upon the works of the law are under a curse. In this way, the law itself cursed the very person on whom it imposes its obligation.⁵

² Frank J. Matera, “Galatians in Perspective,” in *Interpretations* 54 (2000), 233-245 (240).

³ Klaus Berger, “Abraham in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen”, *MTZ* 17 (1966), 47–89 (51).

⁴ James, D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville/Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 234.

⁵ Most scholars believe that the idea of the universal non-fulfilment of the law is implied in Gal 3:10. See J.W. Drane, *Paul: Libertine or Legalist* (London: SPCK, 1975), 28; F.F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary

This interpretation, however, operates on the basis of the so-called hidden premise (what Paul does not say or what he takes for granted)⁶ and hardly makes sense. Among its limitation is the fact that such a notion has no support in Jewish texts of either the first or later centuries. There is no evidence that the law was understood to require “perfection” in that sense. The obedience required by the law is within the framework of the covenant, including the provision for atonement in case of infringement. Such an obedience was considered not only as possible but also as practical; and both Saul the Pharisee and Paul the apostle had nothing against such a view of covenant obedience.⁷

How then do we make sense of Paul’s midrash? The answer to this question, some suggest, can be found in understanding Paul’s usage of “works of the law”. For Paul, those who are *ex erga nomou* are those who have understood the scope of God’s covenant people as Israel *per se*, i.e., as that people who are defined by the law and marked out by its distinctive requirements. Such an understanding of the covenant and the law inevitable puts too much weight on physical and national factors, on outward and visible enactments; and gives too little weight to the Spirit, to faith and love from the heart.⁸

So, while most Jews of Paul’s days would simply assume that to be “of the works of the law” is the appropriate response to the covenant in that it involves remaining within all that the Torah lays down for covenant belongingness, Paul here denies that equation. For him, to be “of the works of the law” is not the same as fulfilling the law, is less than what

NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), 159; T.R. Schreiner, “Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Possible? A Re-examination of Galatians 3:10”, *JETS* 27 (1984), 151-160; G.W. Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Context*, JSNTSup 39 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 117.

⁶ Hans Hubner, *Law in Paul’s Thought: A Contribution to the Development of Pauline Theology*, translated by James C.G. Greig (London/New York: T & T Clark, 1986), 18-20; H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983), 94-96

⁷ James, D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 361; E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 27-28.

⁸ James, D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 226-227

the law requires and so the individual who attempts this, falls under the law's own curse.

The theological connection involved in Paul's linkage of the law with 'curse' is difficult to grasp, primarily because Paul's statement in relation to Deut 27:26 is difficult to understand in and of itself.⁹ As a matter of fact, the passage seems to suggest the very opposite of Paul's charge.¹⁰ Deuteronomy 27:26 announces a curse, but that curse is meant to forestall the failure to follow the law. The Deuteronomic curses were warnings not to break the law, given with the intent that paying heed to the warning would keep Israel in good relationship with the Lord. Those living in OT times who were faithful to the Lord were not under the curse but rather had the witness from the Spirit of God that they were acceptable to him. For this reason, it is frequently maintained that Deut 27:26 formed part of the platform for the position of Paul's opponents.¹¹ If this is the case, as is most likely, then Paul is here out-smarting his opponents, returning their serve while adding his own theological spin.¹²

Making sense of the full import of this citation demands an examination of the Deuteronomy text in its original context.¹³ The quotation comes from a long section in Deuteronomy in which Moses, in his farewell speech, sets out a series of blessings, which will result from keeping the

⁹ It has been pointed out that the Deuteronomy passage cited by Paul does not fully agree with either the MT or the LXX. R. Yates ("Saint Paul and the Law in Galatians", *ITQ* 51 (1985), 105-124) notes that "whereas the MT and the LXX speak of 'this Torah', meaning the section of the twelve curses, Paul broadens its meaning to 'the book of the law' as such, meaning the entire Pentateuchal corpus with its 613 prescriptions (see esp. 111).

¹⁰ H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NLC (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976), 123

¹¹ C.K. Barret, *Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 24-25.

¹² B.W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 135.

¹³ For more on the original context of the Deuteronomy text that Paul cites, see, H.J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East*, transl. by J. Moiser (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in the Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel", *JBL* 98 (June 1979), 161-185; E. Nielsen, "Moses and the Law", *VetusTestamentum* 32 (January 1982), 87-88.

law and the curses which will ensure for those who do not (Deuteronomy 27-30). Within the larger pericopé, Deut 27:15-26 deals with a series of twelve curses, the so-called “Dodecalogue of Shechem”. The first eleven curses deal with transgressions committed in secret;¹⁴ and the last curse cited here is the generalising summary of the twelve curses and includes more than the curses specified. It is essentially the revelation of God governing the Israelites’ individual and national lives in Canaan under the covenant – under the form of treaty stipulations. The Israelite must “uphold” or make effective this law by following it. It is not enough to assent to it; the individual must confirm, uphold and establish it by his/her life in action.

Among the important points to bear in mind is that the law is not the precondition of Israel’s covenant relationship with God, but the result. God first elected Israel and established himself to be her God through his great saving act of the Exodus; and then gave her the law at Sinai that she might lead a holy life before him. The law has nothing to do with the establishment of the covenant. Rather, obedience to the law is a proper response to the grace of God and adherence to the law permits Israel to remain in the covenant. The transgression of the law, however, incurs a curse because it demonstrates disloyalty to God and renders the individual unworthy of relationship with God. This curse of the law is actually the curse of God, the lawgiver. This curse, however, is imposed on those who do not uphold the demands of the law *by doing it*.¹⁵

The distinction between ‘doing’ and ‘fulfilling’ is an important clue to understanding the spin Paul puts on this passage. For him, those who ‘do’ the law are not ‘fulfilling’ the law. Most *probably*, the *emmenēi* (upholding) of the Deuteronomy quotation is semantically and also theologically roughly the equivalent of *peplērōtai* (fulfilled) in Gal

¹⁴ Albrecht Alt, “Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts”, in Alt, A. (ed.), *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (München: Beck, 1953), 314; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, transl. by Dorothea Barton (London: SCM Press, 1966), 168.

¹⁵ In Gal 5:14, Paul speaks of ‘fulfilling’ the law and not of ‘doing’. According to Barclay, the Greek *plāroun* and its Hebrew *alm* are never used in Jewish sources in either Hebrew or Greek with reference to the law. Again, when Paul refers to the Jewish observance of the law, he uses *phulassō* (keep), *poiēō* (do) and *prassō* (practice) but not *plāroun* (fulfil)

5:14.¹⁶ The Hebrew equivalent *yāqîm* of the verse certainly means “to fulfil the requirements of” as well as “to preserve”. The message of Deuteronomy was that failure to respond to God’s manifested will was to court disaster. The alternative to blessing was curse.

In Paul’s view, this is what had happened with all who rely on “works of the law”. In continuing to insist on Israel’s privilege and separation from other nations, they were resisting the manifest will of God in the gospel. Consequently, their understanding and practice of the law was deficient. Despite their best intentions, they were not in fact ‘abiding by all that has been written in the book of the law to do it’. Therefore, they were under the curse pronounced by Deut 27:26.¹⁷

Galatians 3:10 points to the degree that Paul’s Christian reflections on Jewish experience apart from Christ has veered away from traditional Jewish categories. No doubt, what Paul is saying here about the law would have sounded strange to Jewish ears; and perhaps even to the ears of the Galatian converts accustomed to the ‘gospel’ of his opponents who advocated some form of law observance as the logical consequence of faith in Christ. It depicts further how Paul drastically reinterpreted the meaning of ‘doing the law’ in a fashion that has little semblance to the traditional Jewish view that he held prior to his Damascus experience (cf. Phil 3:6).

Galatians 3:11-12: Life/Blessing was promised on the basis of Faith

What Paul has already proved by negation in the previous verse – he who does not fulfil the provisions of the law is cursed; he will now go ahead to prove through a more positive argument – that no one can, by doing the law, arrive at righteousness.

Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for “He who through faith is righteous shall live” [Hab 2:4]; but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them” [Lev 18:5].

Paul’s argument in invoking these two citations is simple. For him, while Scripture makes it clear that blessings or justification or righteousness

¹⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), note 10, 301.

¹⁷ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 362.

awaits those who live by faith, the law does not promise life on the condition of faith but only *by doing it* (*ho poiēsas auta*). The quotation is from Hab 2:4, where it refers to the preservation of the righteous Israelite amidst the general ruin caused by the Chaldean invasion. Though the wicked and proud shall be destroyed, the righteous man shall live “by his faith”.

Significant here are the variations in the Habakkuk text quoted by Paul and that of the MT and the LXX.¹⁸

MT: the righteous [man] by his faith/faithfulness shall live (*yiḥyeh be’ēmūnātōw wəṣaddîq*).

LXX: the righteous out of my faith/faithfulness shall leave (*ho de dikaios ek pisteōs mou zēsetai*).

Paul: the righteous out of faith/faithfulness shall live (*ho dikaios ek pisteōs zēsetai*).

Evidently, there are differences in understanding between the three variants. The MT text is, in effect, a restatement of Lev 18:5: “the one who does them shall live by them”. It indicates the content of the righteousness of the covenant member. It was by his faithfulness with regard to the law that he lived his life. Such an understanding is the one dominant in the Qumran commentary on this verse where Hab 2:4 was interpreted of “all doers of the law” and thus of the members of the community. God will save them from the house of judgment on account of their suffering and their faithfulness to the teacher of righteousness.¹⁹ The doing of the law is here the supreme and decisive idea.²⁰

¹⁸ For more on the circumstances surrounding the prophecy of Habakkuk, see C.E. Amerding, “Habakkuk”, *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* 2, revised edition by G.W. Bromily et al (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), 583-86; D.E. Godwin, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979); J. Janzen, “Habakkuk 2:2-4 in the Light of Recent Philological Advances”, *HTR* 73 (1980), 53-78; D.T. Tsumura, “Hab 2:2 in the Light of Akkadian Legal Practice”, *ZrW94* (1982), 294-95; George J. Zemek Jr., “Interpretive Challenges Relating to Habakkuk 2:4b”, *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (1980), 43-69.

¹⁹ 1Qp Hab 7:10-11; 8:1-3.

²⁰ Cf. O. Michel, “Pistis”, *NIDNTT*, 226.

The idea of unwavering hold of the word of God against all contrary appearances is changed by the promise in the LXX. By the addition of the pronominal suffix *mou*, the LXX rendered the text as referring to God's covenant faithfulness and affirms that the life of the covenant member was enabled and sustained by God's continued faithfulness to his commitment to Israel.²¹

It was this LXX reading that Paul followed in his citation. But by omitting both personal adjectives ('his' and 'my'), Paul allows the text to be read in different ways and prevents it from being read in the restrictive way that the MT implied. By so doing, he makes the point that human righteousness was a matter of *pistis* (faith/faithfulness) from start to finish. It follows from this that those who live by faith are the righteousness, i.e., the justified.

To show that the law, as the covenant obligation, does not rest upon faith, Paul goes ahead in Gal 3:12 to quote Lev 18:5, which, in part, reads: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the LORD." He then argues that those who live by the law do not live by faith, since the Leviticus verse explicitly reads: "He who *does them lives by them*," i.e., one who does the commandments lives by *them* and not by faith.²²

The contrast that Paul draws between law (citing Lev 18:5) and faith (citing Hab 2:4) is quite sharp.²³ Paul says of Lev 18:5 that "the law is not based on faith". Even if Paul quoted Lev 18:5 as his opponents used it, he answered their misinterpretation with abundant quotations of the OT giving the true interpretation of the law. His interest is not to 'solve' the problem of the apparent contradiction between the two biblical passages – life is by faith versus life is by law observance²⁴ – but to

²¹ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 374.

²² K. Berger, "Abraham in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen", MTZ 17 (1966) 47-89 (52).

²³ M. North, *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies*, Transl. by D.R. Ap-Thomas (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 126.

²⁴ Paul makes a similar argument in Rom 11:6 where he writes: "And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it of works, then it is no more of grace: otherwise work is no more work". Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 601; *idem*, "'Righteousness from the Law' and 'Righteousness from Faith': Paul's Interpretation of Scripture in Romans 10:1-10," G.F.

emphasise the contradiction between the two texts with a view of pointing out that whereas one – God’s promise that faith leads to life in Hab 2:4 – is the truth of the Gospel; the other being propagated by his opponents – that observance of the law will lead to life (Lev 18:5) – is the falsification of the same gospel.²⁵

Galatians 3:13: Christ Freed from Curse by being the Curse of the Law

Having deconstructed the opponents’ argument for the necessity of the law, Paul goes ahead in Gal 3:13 to show how even the intended positive function of the law as the stipulation of the Sinai covenant and as guaranteeing life within the covenant has been terminated on the cross.²⁶ To do this, Paul brings both the theme of blessing and curse together under the person of Christ.

Abruptly and without any connecting particle, Paul introduces the work of Christ: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law” (*Christos hēmas exēgorasen ek tēs kataras tou nomou*).

Significant for our understanding of the passage is the determination of the referent of the *hēmas* (‘us’). Does it refer to Christians generally, to the Jews, or specifically to those Jews who have put their faith in Christ? While a case can be made for any of these reading, it is most likely that the *hēmas* refers to the Jewish people, standing as it does in clear distinction from “the Gentiles” in 3:14.²⁷ The introduction, at this stage, of the verb *exēgorasen*, which in antiquity can mean “to buy”²⁸ as well as “to buy somebody free from imprisonment”²⁹ has additional import.³⁰

Hawthorne and O. Betz (eds.), *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of E. Earle Ellis for his 60th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 223 where he reads the Leviticus text as a typical expression of Israel’s sense of obligation under the covenant ‘do and thus live’.

²⁵ For more on the hermeneutical tradition of textual contradictions, see J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (London, T&T Clark, 1997), 183-190

²⁶ I. Hong, “Does Paul Misrepresent the Jewish Law? Law and Covenant in Gal 3:1-14”, *NovT* 36 (2, ’94), 164-182 (179).

²⁷ Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God*, 92.

²⁸ Plato, *Diod Sic*, 36. 2.2.

²⁹ F. Buschel, “*exēgazō*”, “*exēgorazō*”, *ThWNT*1, 125-128.

Although not technically the verb ‘to redeem’, it can hardly be doubted that in these two contexts, Paul has the metaphor in mind.³¹

To support his claim that Christ redeemed the *hēmas* from the curse of the law by becoming himself ‘a curse for the *hēmas*’, Paul cites as proof-text Deut 31:23 (‘cursed be anyone who hangs on a tree’), the curse levelled against the exposed body of a criminal executed through crucifixion. The background is the Deuteronomy injunction against allowing the corpse of a criminal to remain hanging before sundown for fear that it would defile the land. According to this injunction, when a person is put to death for wrongdoing and his body is hanged on a tree, the body must not remain overnight. The reason is simple. Since the dead body is under God’s curse, more exposure would desecrate the land. Hanging the body exhibits the person to public humiliation (cf. Josh 8:29; 10:26-27). The criminal was under the curse of God, i.e., under the indictment of death by God’s judgment. Since judgment basically is God’s (cf. Deut 1:17), the judgment that takes a person’s life out of the covenant community as a perpetrator of the worst kind of sin and displays that judgment by the humiliation of hanging the body in public shows that the person is under God’s curse.

Worthy of note is the fact that both the Hebrew and the Greek texts of the passage that Paul cites insert “of God”, making both to read: “He that is hanged is cursed of God.” Paul omits this qualification as an expression of his unwillingness to attribute Christ’s curse to God since this belies his understanding of the intricate dynamics of the relationship between God and his faithful Son. To speak of Christ being ‘cursed by God’ in such an unqualified manner might have perpetuated further confusion in the Galatian churches.³²

How could Paul come to have applied this verse to Christ? The Deuteronomy text literally reads: “A curse of God is hung”³³, or since

³⁰ Apart from Gal 3:13, Gal 4:4 serves as the only instance where the verb *exēgorasen* is used in the entire Pauline corpus.

³¹ See also 1 Pet 1:18-19; Acts 20:28 for similar usages of the verb in terms of redemption.

³² Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God*, 146.

³³ This is the actual reading of the MT. The additional phrase ‘on the cross’ is added by the LXX and is found in versions of the passage found among the Qumran Essenes in

there is no way to distinguish subject from nominal predicate in Hebrew other than context, “the hung one is a curse of God”³⁴. In Hebrew and Aramaic, the verb ‘to hang’ is often used with the sense ‘to crucify’. One could easily then interpret the verse to read that the crucified one is the curse of God. From this, the substitutional Christology that Paul here implies can easily be derived. Knowing that Christ died by this manner, Paul argues that the curse of the law materially applies to him as the object and carrier of the curse. Since Paul has at the back of his mind the idea that Christ is righteous (though he did not explicitly state it here)³⁵, he concludes that the curse of the law that Christ bears is not his. By pre-association, Paul maintains that Christ – the curse of the law in the sense of Deut 21:23 – blotted out by his death the curse levelled against those under the law in Deut 27:26. As one hanged on a cross, Christ shares the curses levelled upon the *hēmas*; and by being the curse of the law, he released those who identify with him from it without remainder. That is to say, by taking their destiny in its full force upon himself, Christ effected the means of their redemption. By becoming a curse for ‘their’ sake, Christ has redeemed the *hēmas* from the curse. By so doing, he has suppressed the effects of the Sinaitic curse imposed on all who are of “the works of the law” and has allowed the antecedent blessings to once more come into effect.³⁶

In considering the doctrinal implications of this passage, however, it has to be remarked that the curse which fell upon Christ was not the same as that described above as the consequence of humanity’s inability to fulfil the requirements of the law. The death of Christ involved a curse, but only because the manner of that death was by suspension from a cross. Nothing more than this is said by Paul. Christ, the sinless One, died for sinful humanity. If he had not died, humanity must have been subjected

4Qp Nah 8. Cf. Gert Jeremias, *Der Lehrer der Gerechtigkeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 133.

³⁴ Boyarin, *Paul: A Radical Jew*, 143.

³⁵ Longenecker (*The Triumph of Abraham’s God*), outlines this unexpressed assumption in terms of faithfulness of Christ vis-à-vis the infidelity of those “under the law” (143-144).

³⁶ Cf. Berger, “Abraham in den paulinischen Hauptbriefen”, 52; Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God*, 92-93.

to perpetual death. His death acted – in some inscrutable way – so as to propitiate the wrath of God.

But it is not said that the actual load of human of human guilt was laid upon him. Neither is it said that his death was the actual punishment for that guilt. In this respect, it would seem as if the symbolism of the scapegoat (which has been adduced in some circles in explanation of this passage) does not perfectly apply. In the case of the scapegoat, the high priest was to lay his hands upon its head, and to “confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat”; and the goat was to “bear upon it all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited” (Lev 16:21-22). No such process as this really took place in the case of Christ.³⁷ Rather, Paul expressly distinguishes between the curse which fell upon Christ and the curse, which was due to human sins, though the incurrence of the one led to the abrogation of the other.

Galatians 3:14: Christ makes Israel’s Blessings available to the Nations

Paul concludes this section of the argument with a twofold statement-of-purpose assertions of Christ’s redemptive activity: namely, “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,” and “so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith”. The two clauses introduced by *hina* (“in order that”) relate to the statement in the previous verse that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law”. The first purpose is so that the blessing of Abraham, that is, his justification (Paul here is referring to justification as he does in vv.8, 9) on the basis of faith is shared by all (both Jews and gentiles) in Christ alone. As such, Gentiles do not need to become Jews to partake of this blessing.

In the second clause – “so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” – Paul reinstates the conclusion of 3:5. The Galatian converts did not do anything related to the law to receive the Spirit except to respond to Paul’s message with faith. In this way, they share

³⁷ Contra B.H. McLean, *The Crucified Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion in Rituals and Pauline Soteriology*, JSNTS 126 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996), 126-134.

the same position of Abraham who did not do anything to be reckoned righteous except to respond in faith to God's promises.³⁸ The promise, which is the Spirit, is also received by faith because of Christ's death. In other words, participation in the freedom from the curse only takes place through faith, not just any type of faith, but faith in Christ.

These last two clauses, stating the purpose for which Christ redeemed us from the curse, are coordinates. That is, they express the same reality from two perspectives. Both return to the point from which Paul started his argument, namely: that the blessing of Abraham, seen now in the reception of the Holy Spirit, is received through faith only. By so arguing, Paul correlates Abraham's trusting God and believing God who raised Jesus from the dead by making use of the multivalence of the *pistis* term to link diverse meanings. But whereas the focus in Abraham's faith was on his confidence that God would make it possible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child, trusting God who raised Christ from the dead includes, as an important component, believing in the reality of that event.³⁹

Conclusion

The implication of Paul's argument in Gal 3:10-14 for Christian Identity vis-à-vis the law (and by implication the curse imposed by the law) is obvious. The crucified Christ reveals the true human identity and the true human fate. On the cross he undertook upon himself the curse and the judgment of death passed over the *homo peccator*, whose identity he freely accepted. Hence making the "works of the law" the parameter of righteousness now that Christ's self-sacrifice of himself on the cross has been realised and accepted by the Father is bound to leave the individual outside the framework of those justified in him. The law always reveals

³⁸ D.E. Garland, "Paul's Defence of the Truth of the Gospel Regarding Gentiles (Galatians 2:15-3:22)", *RevExp*91 (1994), 165-181.

³⁹ H.W. Boers, "A Context for Interpreting Paul", Fornberg, T/Hellholm, D. (eds.), *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in their Textual and Situational Contexts, Essays in Honour of Lars Hartman* (Oslo: The Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 430-453 (451).

the individual (as the crucified showed on the cross) as a cursed sinner that has not fulfilled all that the law commands.⁴⁰

The relevance of this finding to the theme of blessings and curses in the practice of Christian faith today is obvious. Anyone who is ‘in Christ’, operates in a sphere of blessings made available by the death of Christ on a cross. Since through this death the individual has been redeemed from the worst possible curse – exclusion from belongingness to God’s covenant community; no other curse – primordial, ancestral or otherwise – has any power over the Christian so redeemed. The Christian should therefore live out the faith in the conviction that Christ’s death has redeemed him/her from any death-dealing forces, a.k.a. from any curse.

But there is also another implication, even when drawing this conclusion would imply accusing the present author of *eisegesis*.⁴¹ Following after Christ, the Christian should also be disposed to undertake the transitory ‘curses’ of life upon the self so that blessings can flow therefrom to others. Maybe this story attributed to Pastor Richard Wurmbrandt (1909-2001), the founder of the Romanian underground Church, should serve as a worthy conclusion to this article, even if such art of storytelling “*diminishes*” the *scholarly* quality of such an academic journal.

I was once looking for a Presbyterian pastor in a certain town. I went to the Church, but the caretaker told me that he lived some distance away. Some boys were playing in the Churchyard. Overhearing our conversation, one of them offered to show me the pastor’s house. While we were walking along, I asked him if he believed in Christ. The boy, aged 14, decidedly answered “No!” I became very curious. When I asked him why, he replied in his childish manner. “I believe that if God created this good, meek and loving Jesus 2000 years ago in Palestine, in whom we are meant to trust, he must have created some little Jesuses in every

⁴⁰ Helmut Merklein, *Studien zu Jesus und Paulus II*, WUNT 105 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 306.

⁴¹ Merriam Webster (*New Collegiate Dictionary*, 8th ed. {New York: G. & C. Merriam, 1976}, 364) sees this as “the process of interpreting text in such a way as to introduce one’s own presuppositions, agendas or biases. It is commonly referred to as *reading into* the text, often done to “prove” a pre-held point of concern, and to provide confirmation bias corresponding with the pre-held agenda.”

generation in every place, so that in looking at the little Jesuses, we may believe in the big one. But I have never met a little Jesus. I am a poor child. My father is a drunkard and beats me. My mother is a washerwoman and has no time for me. I have never had a good suit. Nobody has ever bought me chocolate or sweets. I have had no toys. If God is almighty, why did he only make Jesus once? An almighty God could make many Jesuses. Then it would be easy to believe.” I asked him again: “But is not your pastor a little Jesus?” His answer was as decisive as the first: “No!”

We were still having this discussion as we arrived at the pastor’s house. The boy left. I was alone with the pastor. I spoke with him about Christ. It was an interesting subject for him. Then I told him what the boy had said. The pastor exclaimed “What an idiot!” And he is right. ***Only that somebody else is the idiot.***

Who knows, maybe that is the problem with Christians today that leads to the apparent obsession with the effects of curses among a people whom Christ has redeemed “from the curse of the law” and, with it, from all allied curses; and the frantic search for rituals and personages for freeing us from these curses. Maybe among the greatest challenge of faith facing Christians today that make us cow down before curses – real or imagined – is our inability to be little *Jesuses*, our inability to follow after the way of Christ, our inability to undertake *vicariously* the transitory curses of life upon ourselves so that blessings can flow to others. I could imagine Jesus saying to all of us in this regard what he said to the disciples after the Washing of Feet episode: “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15).