

What Paul Says about the Covenants in Galatians 3–4

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Abstract

The present article explores Paul's use and meaning of the *διαθήκη* (*diathēkē*, "covenant" or "testament") in Galatians 3–4, as well as the relation between the covenants mentioned or presupposed in these chapters: the Abrahamic promise covenant, the Mosaic law covenant, and the Davidic and eschatological ("new") covenants. The article first highlights elements that suggest that "covenant" is an important aspect of Paul's biblical-theological argument in Galatians. Two sections develop the content of these covenants. In the final section, the relation between the covenants is brought to bear upon the covenant and Mosaic law in Reformed theology. A historical-redemptive approach is considered necessary for understanding Paul's statements on the Mosaic Torah and covenant in Galatians 3–4, as well as in Reformed theology generally.

Paul uses *διαθήκη* (*diathēkē*) three times in Galatians 3–4.¹ The significance of this for his thinking on the covenant or for framing a biblical understanding of covenants in Scripture is not always noted. Paul uses the term fairly infrequently² and, especially since E. P. Sanders's work on Paul and Palestinian

¹ Gal 3:15, 17; 4:24.

² *Διαθήκη* is used nine times in the *corpus paulinum*: Rom 9:4; 11:27; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14; Gal 3:15, 17; 4:24; Eph 2:12.

Judaism, there has been a tendency to affirm that participationist categories have superseded covenantal perspectives in Paul's soteriology.³ Paul's relative silence on the covenant is thus taken as a rejection of the Jewish understanding of salvation as such.

The usefulness of these chapters for grasping Paul's understanding of covenant is further complicated by the fact that *διαθήκη* can be translated, at least in Galatians 3:15 and 17, as "testament." This is, of course, the usual meaning of the word outside of Jewish religious literature, and one that would naturally come to mind for Paul's Greco-Roman contemporaries. This has led most commentators to assume that Paul here is not thinking, or is thinking only tangentially, of the *covenant* with Abraham. An important question in understanding these chapters thus turns on the meaning of the *word* covenant and, hinging on that, the place the covenant *concept* occupies in Paul's argument.

Only a close reading of Galatians 3–4 can answer these questions. Even beyond that, though, other questions in connection with the covenant remain: given that Paul *does* use the term—and at least, in Galatians 4:24, clearly understands it as "covenant"—what does he mean by it? What role does he see the *διαθήκη* playing as he recounts the history of the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic law? In 4:24 he speaks unambiguously of "two covenants." These are clearly the Mosaic law covenant and either the Abrahamic promise covenant or, more likely, the fulfillment of that covenant, the eschatological "new" covenant spoken of by Isaiah, from which Paul derives his biblical quotation.⁴ Assuming that these statements are not merely *ad hoc* rhetorical devices but reflect a stable aspect of Paul's thinking, what theological relationship can be seen between them?

While not able to fully justify the statement here, it is possible, in my opinion, to affirm with Scott Hahn that "in Gal. 3 and elsewhere, Paul does not abandon the covenantal framework of Judaism; rather, he works within it."⁵ The present article will draw out some of the implications of this

³ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

⁴ This point will be further developed below.

⁵ Scott W. Hahn, "Covenant in the Old and New Testaments: Some Current Research (1994–2004)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 3.2 (2005): 284, summarizing the conclusions of his previous article, "Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah: ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ in Galatians 3:5–18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67.1 (2005): 79–100. See also his *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). I have attempted to demonstrate how *διαθήκη* functions as one organizing element of Galatians 3–4 in my PhD dissertation. Some aspects of that work have been presented in Donald E. Cobb, "Galates 3–4: une alliance ni abrogée ni modifiée," *La Revue réformée* 66.3 (2015): 1–30. The attentive reader will notice several points of agreement in the overall

affirmation for Paul's theology and attempt to relate them to a few perennial concerns of the classical Reformed understanding of covenant and law. My approach will take its point of departure in exegesis, then move—albeit to a lesser degree—toward “biblical theology” and make some suggestions that could perhaps be integrated into a more systematic approach to God's covenant(s).

I. *Preliminary Questions*

Space does not allow a full demonstration of how the word διαθήκη functions in the context of Galatians 3–4. It is helpful, however, to clarify some key elements in this connection. Three points can be briefly highlighted.

1. *A Tripartite Argument*

Galatians 3–4 is Paul's theological response to the argument his adversaries—most likely (self-proclaimed?) Jewish-Christian teachers from the church in Judea—were using to convince the largely Gentile Galatian churches to submit to Mosaic Torah, specifically circumcision. Given the role circumcision played in the Jewish Scriptures and Second Temple Judaism, it can safely be said that the argument must have run pretty much in this way: Circumcision, to which Abraham himself submitted, is the sign of the covenant Christ fulfilled at the cross; those who would enter into that covenant must therefore also be circumcised, thereby becoming “sons of Abraham.” Without circumcision, entry into the covenant is precluded, and access to the righteousness that is at the heart of the covenant cannot be considered as granted.⁶

Although the main points of Paul's response to this argument are clear, some aspects are tantalizingly indirect. One decisive element is the sequence developed in verses 6–14: *Abraham* (vv. 6–9), *the law* (vv. 10–12) and *the work of Christ* (vv. 13–14). Central to these verses is the gift of the Spirit, which fulfills God's promise of blessings to Abraham (v. 14). It is especially important to note that *Paul builds on this same sequence* in verses 15–29, repeating

perspective, but also a number of differences, with N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Volume 4, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). Space unfortunately prevents interaction with this major work.

⁶ Compare Jubilees 15:26: “And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, *belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction*; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's, but (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth, and to be rooted out of the earth, for he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God” (italics added). Cf. also Acts 15:1.

it and adding the element of the *διαθήκη*: *Abraham* (vv. 15–17), *the law* (vv. 18–24), *the coming of Christ* (vv. 25–29). The biggest difference is the focus, not on the Spirit, but on the status of the Galatian Christians as “heirs” or “sons of God” in Christ and, *a fortiori*, “sons of Abraham” (v. 29). The same elements are again reprised in Galatians 4:1–7 (although without Abraham): existence under *the law* (vv. 1–3) and the *work of Christ* (vv. 4–7). This section *combines* the foci of the two previous ones, the gift of the *Spirit* and the status of *heirs*.⁷

This tripartite development is key to an understanding of the coherence of Galatians 3–4: although Paul constructs his argument from different viewpoints, he builds each time on the basic pattern set out in verses 6–14. This, however, means that when he returns to Abraham in verses 15–17, speaking there of God’s *διαθήκη* with him, *he is referring to concepts already alluded to in verses 6–9, more specifically the Abrahamic covenant underlying the Old Testament quotations in those verses*: that is, the covenant established in Genesis 15, independently of circumcision (Gen 15:17–21), and based solely on the patriarch’s faith in God (v. 6).⁸ It is this *διαθήκη*, which, in Galatians 3:15–17, precedes the giving of the law by 430 years. And because of this earlier-coming *διαθήκη*, becoming “sons of Abraham” (v. 7) is connected, not with circumcision, but with faith and union with Christ, the true heir of that *διαθήκη* (3:16, 26–29).

2. Testament or Covenant?

This brings into particular focus the question of how *διαθήκη* should be understood in verses 15 and 17. Based on the preceding, it would seem natural to interpret it in accordance with typical LXX and Second Temple usage; that is, as “covenant.” The choice, however, is complicated by the fact that the language of these verses closely reflects typical testamentary usage: the verbs *κυροῦν* (*kyroun*, “validate, make legally binding”), *ἀθετεῖν* (*athetein*, “declare invalid, nullify”), and *ἐπιδιατάσσεσθαι* (*epidiatassethai*, “add a codicil”), or their cognates, are frequent in testaments of the period. The expression “a man’s *διαθήκη*”⁹ likewise suggests that it is the *διαθήκη* of

⁷ “And because you are *sons*, God has sent *the Spirit* of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but *a son*, and if *a son*, then *an heir* through God” (Gal 4:6–7). Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

⁸ When Paul quotes Gen 15:6 in v. 6, he thus has in mind the overall context of the chapter, which issues, in vv. 17–21, in the establishment of the covenant.

⁹ My translation. The Greek text reads *ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην*. The above definitions are taken from W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Henceforth BDAG.

one person, that is, an individual's testament that is under consideration. That said, the apparent simplicity of this data runs up against a serious difficulty—one not always given its due weight in commentaries—in Paul's affirmation, "Even with a man-made διαθήκη, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified." This statement contradicts established Greco-Roman practices of stating, in explicit and stereotypical terms, that a testament could be modified for any reason by the testator!¹⁰

Given the apparently conflicting data, commentators generally suggest one of three interpretations: understanding διαθήκη 1) unequivocally as "covenant," 2) as merely "testament," or 3) the most often, positing a semantic shift from "testament" in v. 15 to "covenant" in v. 17. In my opinion, the answer lies somewhere between the three: a διαθήκη that no one would modify, by definition, can hardly be a testament. As Hahn has shown, the meaning of "a human covenant," such as those sometimes seen in the LXX, corresponds well with Paul's statement: even with a man-made *covenant*, no one introduces a modification.¹¹ Paul, however, elaborates this idea *using vocabulary that intentionally carries testamentary overtones*. He does it in order to introduce the metaphors he will develop from 3:18 through to 4:7, dealing with heirs, a heritage, guardians set over underage children, and tutelage instituted over those children until they become of age to receive the inheritance. In other words, Paul is talking about *the covenant with Abraham*, but he plays on the language in order to illustrate it with closely related *testamentary practices* with which his readers would be familiar. This, however—combined with what we saw in the preceding section—means that the διαθήκη, far from functioning as a merely rhetorical illustration, plays a prominent role through at least Galatians 4:7. Paul thus takes up the motifs of verses 6–14 and explicitly develops the covenantal foundation already latent there.

3. The Relationship between Promise, Law, and Covenant

In terms of strict usage, the terms "promise" and "law" are significantly more frequent in Galatians 3–4 than "covenant."¹² This sometimes leads to the conclusion that "promise," *as opposed to covenant*, is central to Paul's argument.¹³ "Promise" and "covenant" are thus played off against each other

¹⁰ "So long as I survive, I am to have power over my own property, to make any further provisions or new dispositions and to revoke this will. But if I die with this will unaltered ..." See *P Oxy.* 490:3–4; 491:3–4; 492:4, and often.

¹¹ Hahn, "Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah," 84–85.

¹² Paul uses "promise" (ἐπαγγελία, *epaggelia*) ten times in Galatians 3–4 (Gal 3:14, 16–18, 21–22, 29; 4:23, 28). "Law" (νόμος, *nomos*) is used nineteen times (Gal 3:2, 5, 10–13, 17–19, 21, 23–24; 4:4–5, 21).

¹³ Cf., e.g., James D. G. Dunn, "Did Paul Have a Covenant Theology? Reflections on

or at least sharply separated. In the same way, it has been suggested that Paul does not recognize the connection between Mosaic law and “covenant,” reserving the term exclusively for the arrangement with Abraham.¹⁴

I would contend that careful analysis leads to different conclusions. It is striking, first of all, to notice that Paul’s use of ἐπαγγελία (*epaggelia*, “promise”) in Galatians 3:15–16 is nestled between the two occurrences of διαθήκη in verses 15 and 17. Moreover, the interplay between the two shows that, in Paul’s thought, they are closely connected, indeed interwoven, concepts:

Even with a man-made *covenant*, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now *the promises* were made to Abraham and to his offspring. (Gal 3:15)

This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, *does not annul a covenant* previously ratified by God, *so as to make the promise void*. (Gal 3:17)

Although “covenant” and “promise” are not synonymous, they cannot be separated. Even less can they be opposed! Without entering into detail at this point, we may safely suggest that the covenant with Abraham is *the concrete form* of the promise. The covenant formalizes and makes possible the promise’s fulfillment. To put it another way, the Abrahamic covenant, as Paul presents it, *is fundamentally characterized by God’s promise*.¹⁵ What, specifically, is this promise? The link with verses 6–14, already highlighted, makes it clear: it is the blessing promised to Abraham for the nations, defined by justification and the gift of God’s life-giving Spirit.¹⁶

The connection between the covenant and Mosaic law is more tenuous. Of course, in Jewish Scripture the two are nearly synonymous concepts, and they would have been presented as such by Paul’s adversaries. In Galatians 3:1–4:7, Paul seems to deny the connection altogether, reserving the “covenant” for that made with Abraham. This actually runs counter to his practice elsewhere; for example, in 2 Corinthians 3 he speaks of the “old covenant” with Moses, that of “the letter,” contrasting it with the “new covenant” of “the Spirit” (vv. 3, 14). Even in Galatians, though, Paul does

Rom 9:4 and 11:27,” *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period*, ed. S. E. Porter and J. C. R. De Roo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 291–92.

¹⁴ J. Louis Martyn, “Covenant, Christ, and Church in Galatians,” *The Future of Christology: Essays in Honor of Leander E. Keck*, ed. A. J. Malherbe and W. A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 143.

¹⁵ Or, “promises” in the plural (vv. 16 and 21). This plural probably refers to the different aspects of the one promise globally considered. Note that the same overall perspective, and in similar terms, is developed in Eph 2:12, speaking of “the covenants of the promise.”

¹⁶ Cf. esp. v. 14: “in order that in Christ Jesus *the blessing of Abraham* might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive *the promise* of the Spirit through faith” (NASB).

not deny the foundation of the Torah in the covenant given at Sinai. We see this in Galatians 4:24, where he talks about two *covenants* (δύο διαθήκαι, *dyo diathēkai*), “one . . . from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.”

Paul does, then, recognize the connection between the law and the Mosaic *covenant*, just as he affirms the connection between the promise and the Abrahamic *covenant*. This remains true, even if other terms receive a greater focus. The reason for this will be touched on later.

II. *The Content of the Law Covenant and the Promise Covenant*

The preceding paragraphs have sought to show that the covenant *concept* plays a greater role than is often recognized in the structure and content of Paul’s argument, even before the term itself is introduced in verses 15–17.¹⁷ How, then, does he understand the role and the content of these covenants?

1. *The Foundational Character of the Abrahamic Covenant*

Galatians 3:6–9: the primary and teleological nature of the Abrahamic covenant

Galatians 3:6–14 makes up the first section of the biblical-theological argument of 3:1–4:7 (vv. 1–5 setting the stage through a series of rhetorical questions). Because these verses present a chain of quotations from Scripture, the content being largely determined by the way the quotations are strung together, Paul’s logic is as much implied as it is explicated.¹⁸

At bottom, verses 6–9 presuppose a typically Jewish manner of reasoning: since Abraham was the “ancestral founder” of God’s people, his relationship to God also defines the *modus vivendi* of those who come after him, that is, his “sons.” According to Scripture, Abraham was justified through faith (Gen 15:6); it follows that his true “sons” will be those who, like him, are also justified through faith. Additionally, since the blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3) was promised “in” or “with” him (“*In [or ‘with’] you shall all the*

¹⁷ Covenant concepts can actually be traced back to 3:1–5, where Paul clinches the argument from the outset by focusing on the Spirit (cf. v. 2: “This is the only thing I want to find out from you,” the idea being that, if this point is conceded, the rest of the argument necessarily follows). As elsewhere, Paul is probably basing his teaching on Old Testament texts centered on the eschatological (“new”) covenant and the gift of the Spirit (Ezek 36:25–27; 37:1–14; Isa 44:3–4). Since his Judeo-Christian adversaries contested the Galatians’ belonging to the covenant (and, consequently, access to God’s righteousness), Paul points to the reception of the Spirit as proof that they are already in the covenant.

¹⁸ Cf. Moises Silva, “Abraham, Faith, and Works: Paul’s Use of Scripture in Galatians 3:6–14,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 253.

nations be blessed,” v. 8), the content of that blessing must be defined in connection with what was given to Abraham, that is, again, justification received through faith.

Without developing this point, we should note that the expression “sons of Abraham” in rabbinic Judaism is itself a covenant expression: Abraham’s “sons” are the “sons of the covenant.” The expression designates the true members of God’s covenant.¹⁹ In the same way, the “blessing” terminology, especially when coupled with that of “curses,” is typical covenantal language.²⁰

The importance of these verses can hardly be overstated. Against his adversaries, who were insisting on circumcision as the means for the Galatian Christians to enter into the covenant and gain access to God’s righteousness, Paul shows that the basic *modus vivendi* of the covenant and the means by which its promised blessings were to come to fruition were, from the beginning, *through faith*. The covenant—as it was established in Genesis 15—has all to do with faith. Circumcision in no way enters into the purview of this text; circumcision and the Torah cannot, therefore, fundamentally define those who are in the covenant and how they are to live.²¹

Galatians 3:10–14, which introduces the opposite covenantal term (“curse”) and another covenantal text (Deut 27:26), is a traditional *crux interpretum*. We can summarize its basic thrust by saying that Torah in Scripture, and particularly in Deuteronomy, is characterized by a curse on unfaithfulness. As such, God’s giving the law to Israel cast a shadow, as it were, on the trajectory set out for the promised blessing to the nations. For even the casual reader of Scripture, this threat was far from theoretical: Old Testament history is largely a history of Israel’s national disobedience, God’s punishment on that disobedience, and the ultimate fulfillment of the Deuteronomic curse, in the form of Assyrian, then later Babylonian, exiles. Consequently, the perspective of many Jewish texts, from the biblical prophets to Second Temple literature, is one of defeat and, at the same time, hope in God: *for the prophetic promises of blessing and salvation to come to realization, and for that blessing to extend outward to the nations, the curse of the law had first to be dealt with*. In a word, the law, though a gift from God, went hand in hand with judgment. This statement does not, of course, exhaust the contents of Galatians 3:10–14; individual and “existential” aspects

¹⁹ Cf. Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Rabbinic Understanding of Covenant,” *Review and Expositor* 84 (1987): 289–98.

²⁰ Gen 12:3; Deut 11:26, 29; 30:1, 19; Josh 9:2, etc.

²¹ Cf. Donald Garlington, *An Exposition of Galatians: A Reading from the New Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 189–90.

need to be recognized, alongside national and historical perspectives.²² But it does help us to better understand the thrust, in particular, of verses 13–14: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.”²³ Christ’s work on the cross removed the curse of the law, so that the blessing promised to Abraham might finally become a reality for the nations.

All this means that, in contradistinction to Mosaic Torah—and, therefore, to the Mosaic *covenant*—the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is the primary content of God’s plan going back to at least Genesis 12. The patriarchal covenant enshrines the foundational *modus vivendi* of God’s people, independently of circumcision and other “typical” aspects of Old Testament Torah. It is also, for Paul, the teleological goal of God’s working in history since, beyond Jewish law, which was given in a specific place and for a specific time, it is how *all* the “sons of Abraham” are to live, now that God has fulfilled his promise in present-day history.

Galatians 3:15–17: The originating *διαθήκη* and the later-coming law
The same point is brought out in a slightly different way in 3:15–17. According to these verses, the Abrahamic *διαθήκη* cannot be modified or revoked. From the beginning, that covenant had as its goal the fulfillment of the promised inheritance through Abraham’s one “seed,” the Messiah (v. 16). This messianic “inheritance” must be understood, in connection with the preceding section, as justification through faith, eschatological life, and the gift of the Spirit. That inheritance, Paul states, could never come through the law: obedience to Torah could not take the place of God’s covenant promise as the means by which the Messiah would come. Additionally, because “promise,” by definition, calls for faith—that is, looking to God for

²² On this whole subject, see the contrasting treatments of, on the one hand, N. T. Wright, “Curse and Covenant: Galatians 3.10–14,” *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 137–56, and James M. Scott, “For as Many as Are of Works of the Law Are Under a Curse’ (Galatians 3:10),” *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. C. A. Evans and J. A. Sanders (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 187–221, and, on the other hand, A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 145–70.

²³ This takes the two mentions of “us” here as a reference to Old Testament Israel. The perspective widens, however, at the end of v. 14. The “we” in the final clause (“so that *we* might receive the promised Spirit through faith”) should thus be taken as inclusive of all those, Jews and Gentiles, who are in Christ. See, e.g., Régis Burnet, “Les ambiguïtés du ‘nous’ dans l’épître aux Galates,” *Regards croisés sur la Bible. Etudes sur le point de vue. Actes du iii^e colloque international du réseau de recherche en narrativité biblique* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 467–76, and Terence L. Donaldson, “‘The Curse of the Law’ and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3:13–14,” *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 94–112.

fulfillment—the law could not alter the covenant’s basic structure of promise received through faith.²⁴

The Abrahamic covenant thus has priority over the law in respect to both its goal and its foundational character. The law (covenant), coming as it did several hundred years later, did not introduce another way of bringing the promise to fulfillment, nor did it modify the fundamental promise–faith structure of God’s dealings with humans (v. 17).

This also means, as Paul goes on to insist, that the law was not, and was never intended to be, *in competition* with the promise covenant: “Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (v. 21). This is perhaps one of the most important statements in Paul concerning the intrinsic limits of the law: the law *was not given so that life—i.e., the Spirit-given life that is inseparable from justification itself—might be obtained by obedience to it*. Because the law, by definition, is incapable of creating life, this was not the purpose for which it was given. The language harks back to verses 11–14, where justification, life, and God’s life-producing Spirit are the essential components of the promise.²⁵ The law, in sum, is not an intruding institution that could change God’s dealings with men or introduce an alternate way of relating to God.

2. The Secondary Character of the Mosaic Covenant

All this logically raises the question: if the law did not have the purpose of justifying the members of the covenant, why was it given in the first place? Paul brings up this question in verse 19: “Why then the law?”

The answer, especially in the context of Second Temple Judaism, is surprising. Far from being a life-giving institution, Torah was added, says Paul, specifically *in connection with transgressions* (παραβάσεων χάριν, *parabaseōn charin*). The statement is ambiguous and has been translated either as “it was added *because of* transgressions”²⁶ or “it was added *for* transgressions.”²⁷ Grammatically speaking, both are possible, and commentators have often preferred the former, seeing the law as a salutary gift to curb inherent sin. However true that may be, it is probably *not* what Paul is saying. “Transgressions” here are specifically acts of *overstepping an established boundary*.²⁸

²⁴ Thus Paul’s insistence in v. 18: “But to Abraham, God gave it through grace, by way of promise (δι’ ἐπαγγελίας κεχάρισται ὁ θεός)” (my translation).

²⁵ See also Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36, 45; 2 Cor 3:6.

²⁶ ESV, NRS, NASB, etc.

²⁷ NAB, etc.

²⁸ Cf. BDAG. As Daniel B. Wallace, “Galatians 3:19–20: A *Crux Interpretum* for Paul’s View

The idea is more likely that the law was given as the established norm. In going beyond or against it, one not only “sins” but, more specifically, *transgresses*. The law was thus instituted in order to define sin and bring it to manifestation as acts of transgression.

This means that, in Paul’s description, the law is emphatically *not* a “law of liberty,” or “life”—and his adversaries would have doubtless affirmed—but a law that, negatively, serves to reveal one’s sinfulness. Verses 22–24 confirm this, stating that Scripture, including the law, “shut up all things under sin” (v. 22).²⁹ As a law touching on all areas of existence, it showed God’s people that wherever one looked, sin was present and Israel’s transgression a reality. The law was designed to function in this way, “so that *the promise by faith* in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (v. 22b).³⁰

Paul drives his point home with the “custodian” metaphor in verses 24–25. In antiquity, a “custodian” (παιδαγωγός, *paidagōgos*) was, first of all, a household slave charged with taking the slave owner’s children to school. He shared in some of the rudimentary education (manners, etc.) but was not, as such, a tutor. The idea of the law as a “schoolmaster,” frequent in theological formulations, may be correct as such, but it is more a construction based on the wording of this passage than a deduction from the text itself. Beyond positive or negative connotations connected with the “custodian” figure, Paul’s concern is to show that, as long as “the child” Israel was under the law, he could not be said to be free; he was under the Torah’s constant surveillance, which hemmed in his existence on all sides, pointing out his sin and lack of righteousness.

Three points in these verses help clarify Paul’s thought. 1) As in Galatians 3:13, Paul discusses the Torah’s function *as it concerned God’s people, before*

of the Law,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 236, has written, Rom 4:15 (“where there is no law there is no transgression [παράβασις, *parabasis*]”) is practically a definition of the term “transgression.”

²⁹ My translation. The usual rendering, “the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin,” in my opinion, goes beyond the language, which nowhere evokes prison images. See Marc Rastoin, *Tarse et Jérusalem: La double culture de l’apôtre Paul en Galates* 3, 6–4, 7 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2003), 210–12.

³⁰ It is interesting to compare these statements with that of Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:173–174: “But for our legislator, ... beginning immediately from the earliest infancy, and the appointment of everyone’s diet, he left nothing of the very smallest consequence to be done at the pleasure and disposal of the person himself. Accordingly, he made a fixed rule of law what sorts of food they should abstain from, and what sorts they should make use of; as also, what communion they should have with others, what great diligence they should use in their occupations, and what times of rest should be interposed, that *by living under that law* as under a father and a master, we might be guilty of no sin, neither voluntary nor out of ignorance” (italics added). Cf. also *Letter of Aristaeas* 142. From a Jewish standpoint, Paul’s formulation is in fact only truly surprising in that this “shutting up” is viewed negatively!

Christ's coming. The “we” in verses 23–25 is, specifically, Old Testament Israel. He is thus not speaking of “law” as a timeless entity, but of the Mosaic Torah’s role during the period separating its giving from Christ’s appearance. 2) The law (covenant) is therefore, according to Paul, a *temporary institution*. Verse 25 states this clearly: “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian.”³¹ This repeats what Paul has already affirmed in verse 19: the law was added only “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.” Paul will make the same point again in Galatians 4:1–5, where the testamentary connotations are the most explicit: the Mosaic laws and stipulations were “guardians and administrators,” set up to regulate the child’s life until that time when, as an adult, he could receive the inheritance willed by testamentary disposition. The overall point is clear: *the Mosaic covenant was given as a provisional institution to regulate Israel’s existence until the coming of Christ, the true “heir” of the Abrahamic covenant.* 3) It is worthwhile to note that, in Paul’s metaphors here and in the final biblical argument of Galatians 4:21–31, the law is consistently represented as a *household slave* (“custodian,” “guardians and administrators,” “concubine”). This shows both the law’s God-given status and its limits. It was appointed by the “household master,” God himself. However, in relation to the promise covenant, it has a merely ancillary function: it is in service to the promise.

III. *The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in Christ*

In Paul’s perspective, the Abrahamic διαθήκη finds its fulfillment in Christ. That said, a close reading of Galatians 3–4 also reveals fairly strong underpinnings of both the Davidic and new covenants as they are presented in Jewish Scripture.

1. *The Coming of Christ and the Davidic Covenant*

References to the Davidic covenant are discrete, evinced primarily through allusions to key Old Testament texts used elsewhere in Second Temple literature. Together they present a coherent picture of God’s dealings in Christ. The most widely noted is Galatians 3:16, where Paul says, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but to one, ‘And to your seed,’ who is the Messiah (καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὃς ἐστὶν Χριστός).”³² The logic of Paul’s argument has

³¹ My translation.

³² My translation. Cf. Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in*

often puzzled commentators. Beyond what one might consider a grammatical sleight of hand, there is most likely a sustained theological reflection: using a technique later rabbis would call *gezerah shawah*—i.e., drawing together seemingly unrelated Scripture passages by means of common vocabulary (and sometimes similar subject matter)—Paul ties together the mention of the “seed” God promised to Abraham, and through whom “all nations will be blessed,” and the messianic “seed” promised to David in 2 Samuel 7: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you (καὶ ἀναστήσω τὸ σπέρμα σου μετὰ σέ) . . . I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (vv. 12–14).³³ Connections can already be seen between the two “seeds” in Second Temple Jewish texts, as well as elsewhere in Paul, so they would not be particularly surprising here.³⁴

Another allusion often noted by specialists comes a few verses later, where Paul states that the law was added “until the offspring (σπέρμα, *sperma*) should come to whom the promise had been made” (3:19). This could well echo Genesis 49:10, a text regularly referred to in reference to the expected Davidic seed, as in the Jerusalem Targum: “Kings shall not cease from the house of Judah, nor scribes teaching the law from his children’s children, until the time that the King Messiah shall come, whose is the kingdom, and to whom all the kingdoms of the earth shall be obedient.”³⁵ As in this text, but with a more negative outlook, Paul affirms that the Mosaic Torah was to remain—only—until the coming of the Messiah, the Abrahamic “heir.”

Thirdly, it is possible that the language of an “inheritance” and an “heir,” though immediately inspired by the Abrahamic covenant³⁶ and testamentary practices, is also rooted in the biblical presentation of the Davidic covenant.

Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138–42.

³³ So, e.g., Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 85.

³⁴ A clear example can be found in LXX Ps 71:17 (MT 72:17), which translates thus the Hebrew text announcing the ideal Davidic descendant: “Let his name be blessed through the ages; his name shall endure longer than the sun. *And all the tribes of the earth will be blessed in him; all the nations will pronounce him happy*” (NETS, italics added). Cf. Gen 12:3. In a similar way, Paul states in Rom 15:8: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, *in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs*.” He then gives Scriptural confirmation of this by quoting a number of passages, several of which allude to David or his ultimate descendant (vv. 9–12). Many commentators have seen in these Davidic allusions an *inclusio* with Rom 1:1–5 (cf. vv. 3–4: “his Son, who was descended from David [ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ] according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness”).

³⁵ My translation. One can find Gen 49:10 paraphrased or alluded to in explicitly messianic contexts in such passages as Testament of Judah 22:3; 4QpatrBIV 1–4, etc.

³⁶ Cf. Gen 15:4, 7–8.

In Psalm 2:8, habitually interpreted as a messianic text in Second Temple literature and the primitive church, the Davidic king is established as heir to the nations in terms borrowed from 2 Samuel 7: “The LORD said to me, ‘You are *my Son*; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and *I will make the nations your heritage*, and the ends of the earth your possession.’” At the end of Galatians 3, this idea of Messiah as universal heir is quite possibly fused with the eschatological promise in Hosea: in the future, when God establishes his covenant, all God’s people will be “sons of the living God” (Hos 1:10 NASB).³⁷ Paul seems to allude to this passage (which he will later quote in Rom 9:25–26), combining it with perspectives from Psalm 2, and stating that, because the heir and ultimate Abrahamic/Davidic “Son” has entered into his inheritance, those who are “in him” become “sons” and “heirs” with him: “For in Christ Jesus *you are all sons of God*, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, *heirs* according to promise” (vv. 26–29).

Intertextual allusions must be approached with a certain caution. The least that can be said about those proposed here is that 1) they provide a consistent picture of fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise via the Davidic covenant and Messiah, and 2) they reinforce Paul’s argument that the Mosaic law is a provisional measure, until Christ’s coming. The law is *not*, and never has been, God’s appointed means of salvation! The practical upshot is, of course, that, since the covenant promises have found their fulfillment in Christ, the Davidic Messiah, those who are “in him” have no need of circumcision in order to enter the covenant and obtain its righteousness. They are already “sons of God” through the true Son and so, *a fortiori*, “sons of Abraham,” members of the covenant in full standing.

2. The Coming of Christ and the New Covenant

As we have just seen, Galatians 3:26–29 suggests that Paul alludes to the end times covenant announced in Hosea. This covenant, which in Jeremiah is termed a “new covenant,” is a regular feature of New Testament texts, including Paul’s letters. New covenant allusions in Galatians 3–4, though, are not limited to these verses. Without seeking to be exhaustive, we see that two other sections also evidence new covenant perspectives.

First, Galatians 3:13–14 speaks of the curse of the law falling upon Christ in order that “the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that

³⁷ Hos 2:1 in MT. This chapter explicitly mentions God’s end-times covenant in 2:18–23 (MT 2:20–25): “And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground” (NETS).

we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (NASB). As we look to biblical texts that “promise” the eschatological outpouring of God’s Spirit, Ezekiel 36:25–27, or 37:1–14 with its vision of God’s Spirit breathing life into Israel’s dry bones, immediately come to mind, all the more so since Paul alludes to these passages elsewhere in similar contexts.³⁸ The gift of “life,” in close proximity with the Spirit’s renewing power (3:11–12, 21; cf. 2 Cor 3:6) is a hallmark of the “new covenant” as prophesied in the Old Testament.

Second, and more explicitly, in Galatians 4:21–31, Paul develops an extended allegory on Abraham’s two “women,” treating them as “two covenants” (v. 24). This section, which is particularly important since it concludes Paul’s biblical-theological argument in Galatians 3–4, speaks explicitly of the Mosaic institution in terms of a “covenant.” But what is the other covenant, represented by (the unnamed) Sarah? Commentators have long puzzled over this. Major headway has been made as recent scholars³⁹ have become more sensitive to the larger context presupposed by the quotation of Isaiah 54:1: “For it is written, ‘Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband’” (Gal 4:27). In Isaiah, this verse reads as the direct result of the work of Yahweh’s servant (Isa 52:13–53:12): it introduces a situation of blessing in which redeemed Jerusalem—a “barren woman” actually compared to Sarah in 51:2–3—finds herself to be the mother of innumerable children.⁴⁰ In this way the Lord is faithful to his “covenant that brings peace to his people” (Isa 54:10 LXX). Isaiah 55:3 further describes this as “an eternal covenant,” that of God’s holy and faithful promises to David. Although recent commentators often view the covenant represented by Sarah as God’s original covenant with Abraham, in context Paul is more likely referring to the eschatological “new” covenant, made possible by the suffering servant’s atoning work.⁴¹

In all these passages, the progression is identical: the Abrahamic covenant, which promises blessing to the nations (i.e., justification, life and the

³⁸ See in particular 2 Cor 3:1–6.

³⁹ Cf., e.g., Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 114–15; Karen H. Jobes, “Jerusalem, Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Galatians 4:21–31,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993): 299–320.

⁴⁰ Cf. Isa 49:18–21.

⁴¹ So, rightly, Steven Di Mattei, “Paul’s Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21–31) in Light of First-Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics,” *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 116–18, Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 140, Joel Willitts, “Isa 54,1 in Gal 4,24b–27: Reading Genesis in Light of Isaiah,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96 (2005): 200, etc.

generous gift of God's Spirit) finds its fulfillment and full "unfolding," via the Davidic covenant, in the eschatological "new" covenant. The Abrahamic covenant, unlike the Mosaic, is not abolished—those who have obtained covenant righteousness in Christ have been made "sons of Abraham." The ancient promises have come to concretization in the eschatological covenant through Christ's death on the cross. Again, the Galatian Christians need not submit to circumcision, for, as those who have received God's end-time Spirit and the status of "sons of God," they are already members of God's new covenant.

IV. *The Covenant in Galatians: Its Relevance for Reformed Theology*

If the preceding is a fair representation of Galatians 3–4, it must be conceded that the covenant is a consistent and important element of Paul's overall argument in these chapters. In the following paragraphs, I would like to step back from the exegetical details and ask, from a more systematic viewpoint, what conclusions can be drawn concerning the relationship between the covenants as Paul sees them.

1. *The Law, a Covenant?*

Before we enter into the terrain of systematics, though, one question needs to be addressed briefly: if Paul does recognize the Sinai covenant as a covenant, why does he avoid using the term in connection with the law? It is often claimed that Paul denies the law any covenant status. Galatians 4:24, as we have seen, refutes such a conclusion, but it must be stated that Paul does seem to shy away from using *διαθήκη* here to designate the law.

In my opinion, it is not that he refuses to acknowledge the covenant status of the Sinaitic Torah; rather, his burden is to show that the Abrahamic covenant is the covenant *par excellence*. God's covenant with Abraham, as established in Genesis 15, embodies the basic thrust of what a covenant is, that is, God's promise to be received in believing trust and outside of any consideration of works of the law that would bring one into a relationship with God. The Abrahamic covenant is primary and, in Paul's eyes, it is only as the foundational, promissory nature of this covenant is understood that the idea of "covenant" can then be extended—secondarily—to the Mosaic Torah. "Covenant" thus derives its basic definition, not from the law but from the Abrahamic promise. It is also for this reason that Paul favors the use of "promise" over "covenant." Given the proximity in Jewish interpretation

between “covenant” and “law,” Paul prefers to speak of “promise,” thus insisting on the covenant’s fundamental content.

2. Paul’s Redemptive-Historical Understanding of the Mosaic Law

It would be easy to think, and has often been assumed, that Paul’s argument in these chapters centers on what the law is and always has been, or what it does and always has done. Closer inspection shows that Paul is concerned to describe what the law *was* before Christ’s coming and *what it has now become*. This is immediately apparent in his metaphor of the law as a “custodian,” established for a set period and situation—Israel during its “childhood”—and rendered obsolete by the coming of the “heir” (Gal 3:23–25). Specifically, the Mosaic law, during the time for which it was given, was a “vector” of the Abrahamic promise: its purpose was to focus Israel’s attention on the promise and its coming fulfillment in Christ (Gal 3:22–23). From a more systematic viewpoint, and bringing other biblical texts into the discussion, we could say that, in the Old Testament, it was through obedience to the Mosaic law that believing Israelites expressed their faith in the God of the promise, their attachment to the promise itself, and their relationship with the God who gave it.⁴² Once that promise came to fulfillment in Christ, however, the Mosaic law reached its goal; it thus no longer plays the role for which it was originally given.

It could be said that Paul, in these chapters, is operating with an unstated question: what can be said of the law—what can the law offer—now that the promise has found its fulfillment in Christ? The clear answer is this: all the law can do, separated from the promise, is pronounce a curse on those who, living by it, seek God’s righteousness but do not attain it. The only promise that remains is, “Do these things (fully) and you shall live.” But this is not—and never was—the way of faith (Gal 3:12–13). It is not that for which the law was given (v. 21).

A reading of Galatians that is sensitive to the redemptive-historical perspective also allows for a better understanding of one of the more difficult passages—at least from a classical Reformed perspective. Galatians 4:24 affirms that the Sinai covenant is “bearing children for slavery (εἰς δουλείαν γεννῶσα).” Neglecting to take account of Paul’s historical viewpoint could lead one to understand that the Mosaic covenant *as such* produces slaves and has done so since its inception. Galatians 4:1–3, thematically and formally close to this verse, gives the key to its meaning. At the beginning of

⁴² Cf., e.g., Ps 119 and Thomas E. McComisky, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 72–76, 150–53, and *passim*.

chapter four, Paul speaks of the faithful members of Old Testament Israel living in *quasi*-slavery, although they were “owners of everything” (Gal 4:1). The *condition* of the child in this metaphor is likened to that of a slave although, clearly, his *status* is qualitatively different: from the outset, he is established as heir to his father’s belongings! This quasi-slavery is to be distinguished 1) from the very real slavery the Gentiles Christians had experienced in paganism (v. 7), but also 2) from the slavery for which the law is *presently* “bearing children,” now that the *new* covenant—that embodied by the “new Jerusalem”—has come. Israel, during its period of infancy, was destined to inherit the promised legacy, once the true Davidic heir came. However, to seek to remain, or to place oneself, in that situation defined by the Mosaic law now that the heir has come, is to truly place oneself into slavery! Again, the underlying issue is, what can be said of the law now that the promise has come to fulfillment in Christ?

3. *The Sinai Covenant, a Continuation of the Abrahamic?*

Paul’s presentation of the promise covenant and the law covenant in Galatians also raises an important question for the relationship between the covenants: should they be seen in continuity or discontinuity? Evangelical theology, particularly classic Dispensationalism, has tended to drive a wedge between the Old Testament generally and the New Testament. Reformed theology, on the contrary, has had a marked tendency to see the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants as various dispensations of the one overarching “covenant of grace,” God’s response to the covenant of works violated by Adam’s sin. Recent “new covenant theology” seeks a mediating position, but with a fairly pronounced disjunction between the Old Testament covenants and the new covenant in Christ.

It is my conviction that the classical Reformed position is, on the whole, a close approximation of the biblical witness. That said, Paul’s presentation of the covenants can lead to a somewhat more nuanced understanding. Rather than speaking in binary terms of “continuity” or “discontinuity,” it may be helpful to speak simultaneously in terms of “continuities” and “discontinuities,” in the plural.

Clearly, for Paul there is a provisional character to the Mosaic covenant that is not present in the Abrahamic. This includes specific laws, but also extends to the whole of the Mosaic covenant as such. Israel’s *situation*, controlled by the Mosaic covenant, is characterized by an absence of liberty. It is fundamental to grasp, however, that, in Paul’s eyes, the Mosaic covenant was never designed to exist or to have effect *independently of the Abrahamic covenant*. The Mosaic covenant was established as a means of focusing faith

on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of turning Israel's expectation toward the coming Messiah and the righteousness in him.

Much of the discontinuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant is also determined by the historical-redemptive situation. Two elements should be highlighted here. First, the specific contours of the new covenant are defined by the gift of the Spirit. Although the Spirit was present and active already in Old Testament times,⁴³ it is only in the new covenant that he assumes the specific role of “the Spirit of the Son,” reproducing Christ's active obedience in those who belong to him.⁴⁴ Only in the new covenant, therefore, does the Spirit's transformative work become *a central, defining aspect* of the Church's life.⁴⁵ A second aspect of discontinuity is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing toward the nations: God's people are no longer delimited by—that is, limited to—Israel's national frontiers. It now extends to the nations. As Paul says in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . , for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In principle, both these elements were present in Old Testament times and, more specifically, in the Sinai covenant. But with the fulfillment of the promise, they become central components of the new covenant situation.

That said, the continuity in these chapters is no less striking. In Paul's argument, the underlying foundational element giving continuity to all the covenants is the promise. The promise, received by faith, is the central element of the Abrahamic covenant; this same promise grasped through faith continues throughout the Mosaic covenant, providing the latter its—only—*raison d'être*. And it is the fulfillment of that same promise, in Christ's death on the cross and the bestowal of the Spirit, that signals the coming, and the present reality, of the new covenant.

The continuity between the Abrahamic and eschatological covenants is particularly conspicuous: already in Galatians 3:8, the promise to Abraham is the gospel “proclaimed beforehand (*προευγγελίσατο*, *proeuēggelisato*).”⁴⁶ Indeed, one must go further: the new covenant in Christ does not terminate the Abrahamic covenant. Rather, it permits its full flowering, for through the gift of the Spirit, justification now goes out to the nations as a present reality. One could well say that in the new covenant the Abrahamic covenant finds its concrete fulfillment, as the blessing that accrues from Christ's work flows out to the nations, now reaching the uttermost parts of the earth!⁴⁷

⁴³ Ps 51:13; Isa 63:10–11, 14; Hag 2:5, etc.

⁴⁴ Gal 4:6; Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19; 1 Pet 1:11.

⁴⁵ Gal 5:17–25; Rom 2:29; 5:5; 7:6; 8:1–17; 14:17; 1 Cor 3:16; 12:13; 2 Cor 3:3–8, 17–18, etc.

⁴⁶ Cf. Martyn, “Covenant, Christ, and Church in Galatians,” 149.

⁴⁷ A question that typically divides Reformed and Calvinistic theologies touches on the status of children in the covenant: does the new covenant abolish the genealogical principle

4. *Is Galatians Antinomian?*

One final question: it could be possible to conclude from Galatians that Paul has nothing positive to say about Torah, and that the ideal Christian relation to the Old Testament is one in which the law is no longer a binding reality. The last two chapters of Galatians oblige us to nuance this conclusion as well. In Galatians 5:14, Paul highlights the fact that mutual Christian love is a true “fulfillment” of the law. In chapter 6, he says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). The expression τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ here can fairly be paraphrased as “the messianic Torah.” Without entering into the difficult question of how later rabbinical writings conceived of Torah in the messianic age, it is obvious that Paul differentiates between “Mosaic Torah” and “messianic Torah.”⁴⁸ It would not be excessive, therefore, to distinguish between the law as it found provisional expression in the Mosaic covenant and as it is permanently and fully expressed in the “eschatological Torah,” fulfilled in the lives of believers through the Spirit’s transforming work.

Classical Reformed theology has long distinguished between ceremonial law, civil law, and moral law in the Old Testament: with Christ’s coming, the first two have been removed, leaving only moral law.⁴⁹ This comes close to Paul’s presentation but can be helpfully completed. Paul’s primary concern in Galatians is with Gentile circumcision as a means of entry into the covenant, and thus of access to righteousness. It could be claimed, therefore, that he simply points to the removal of ceremonial law and focuses, in chapters 5 and 6, on moral law. That said, the distinction between Mosaic

that characterizes both Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants? For many commentators, Paul’s driving question in these chapters is, “How does one become a member of the new covenant?” the response being, “Through faith in Christ.” This reading of Galatians would obviously preclude the inclusion of believers’ children within the covenant. It seems to me that, in its historical context, the question of Galatians 3–4 is more pointed and situational, i.e., how can the Gentile Christians of Galatia know that *they are, already*, members of the eschatological covenant? The answer is the gift of the Spirit and sonship in Christ, both of which already characterize these uncircumcised believers. As J. Zeisler put it: “For Paul, the indisputable fact that they have the Spirit is proof that they are God’s people (cf. Ezek. 36.22–27), and his argument is that the law had nothing to do with it. It therefore cannot be a necessary condition for being the people of God” (Quoted in Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 211). In reality, the genealogical question must be answered by responding to another question, not raised in this epistle, i.e., does the covenant relationship, as a historical reality—thus also including the new covenant—and the promises it enshrines extend *per se* to the offspring of its faithful members? See also my article, “La place des enfants dans la nouvelle alliance et dans l’Église,” *La Revue réformée* 63.4 (2012): 9–25.

⁴⁸ See also 1 Cor 9:21.

⁴⁹ Cf., e.g., *Westminster Confession of Faith* 19.3–4.

law and Christian behavior in Galatians goes beyond simply the categories of Old Testament “moral” and “ceremonial law.”

Clearly, Paul sees the sacrificial and outward expressions of Mosaic Torah as no longer binding because of Christ’s sacrifice and the new situation it has brought about. But the moral aspects of the law also receive in the new covenant *a deeper and more explicitly ethical formulation, as well as a more pervasive practical—and, among other things, collective—expression*. A good example of this can be found in Galatians 6:1–2, which we have been considering: “If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” One can find similar injunctions in Jewish Scripture (particularly in Wisdom literature); but such a consistent focus on “gentleness,” on heart attitudes and care for fellow believers, really only comes into its own in the new covenant. Expressed in a slightly different manner, the moral content of the law was indeed present in Jewish Scripture, but its inward character, manifesting itself in particular as love for one’s neighbor, was not expressed as pointedly and was made to accompany other expressions of obedience that were not as immediately ethical in character.

At any rate, one cannot say that Paul is against the law as such: he is certainly opposed 1) to *the Mosaic expression of the law* being imposed on new covenant believers, 2) to it being used as a condition for righteousness, a use for which it was never intended, and 3) to it—rather than the Spirit—functioning as the primary impetus for Christian life. The law, reconfigured as “messianic Torah,” continues to *define* obedience in the New Covenant era and furnishes the imperative demands the church is called to put into practice. But obedience flows not only from gratitude for God’s prior salvation as in the Old Testament already, but even more fundamentally from the initiating, transforming work of the Spirit.

Conclusion

The present article began by noting that Paul’s scant use of the term *διαθήκη* is often taken as an indicator of his abandonment of Jewish—and, more specifically, Old Testament—soteriological categories. Upon closer investigation, it appears that although the in-breaking power and attendant newness of salvation in Christ are indeed fundamental for Paul’s proclamation, salvation finds its deepest roots in the redemptive-historical work of the God of Abraham as it unfolds in Jewish Scripture. The covenants that structure the Old Testament narrative are for Paul—at the very least—an

adequate way of describing those stages through which God moved his promise forward to its fulfillment in Christ.⁵⁰

Beyond the use of the term, covenantal texts, concepts, and categories continue to determine the way in which Paul describes the work of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, and the life of believers. Said otherwise, that which allows the church to understand God's redemption in Christ is the Old Testament, structured by the promises and law of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and eschatological covenants.

Clearly, Paul redefines the covenant concepts held by his fellow Jews and, no doubt, much of first-century Christianity. For Second Temple Judaism, the fundamental aspect of covenant is the life-giving Torah. Paul, in a very unique way for his time, sees faith in the promise, in contradistinction to obedience to the law, as its most decisive element. But even this redefinition, stemming from the discovery of salvation in Christ, seeks its foundation in Scripture. And it is because Paul seeks to reconcile the joyous discovery of the Messiah and the reception of God's Spirit by the nations with the abiding message of those Scriptures that his inspired grappling with the issues of promise, law, and covenant continues to be relevant for the task of theology today.⁵¹

⁵⁰ As Bernard C. Lategan, "Paul's Use of History in Galatians: Some Remarks on His Style of Theological Argumentation," *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002): 128, aptly puts it, "Paul does not dispute the accepted sequence of major events of the history of Abraham. He also does not change this story, nor does he offer an alternative history. What he does do, is to show ... what was always there, but what was never properly realised or what has become hidden in the course of Torah-centric revision of Israel's past. He does so by bringing into sharp focus what has been overlooked by the dominant tradition—the Torah-less nature of Abraham's calling, of the promise and covenant with God."

⁵¹ The author wishes to thank Paul Wells and Alistair Wilson for their comments on an earlier version of this article.