The Covenant Allegory

A.W. Pink:

The last eleven verses of Galatians 4 are far from being free of difficulties appears from the diverse expositions of the commentators. Nor will the limited space now at our disposal allow us to enter into as full an elucidation as could be wished, nor permit the pausing now and again to furnish collateral proofs for what is advanced, as would be our desire. Brevity has its advantages, but it does not always make for clarity. We must, however, content ourselves now with a comparatively terse running comment on this passage, and that, according to the limited light which we have therefrom.

Galatians 4:21-31 is in several respects very similar to the contents of 2 Corinthians 3. In each case the apostle is opposing himself to the errors which had been sedulously propagated amongst his converts by Judaisers. In each case he shows that the fundamental issue between them concerned the covenants, for any teacher who is confused thereon is certain to go astray in all his preaching. In each case the apostle appeals to well-known incidents in the Old Testament Scripture, and with the wisdom given him from above proceeds to bring out the deep spiritual meaning thereof. In each case he establishes conclusively the immeasurable superiority of Christianity over Judaism, and thus completely undermined the very foundations of his adversaries' position. Though of peculiar importance to those unto whom the apostle wrote immediately, yet this passage contains not a little of great value for us today. "Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?" (Gal. 4:21). Here the apostle addresses himself to those who had been lending a ready ear to their spiritual enemies. By his "ye that desire to be under the law" signified those who hankered after subjection to Judaism. His "do ye not hear the law?" means, Are you willing to listen unto what is recorded in the first book of the Pentateuch and have pointed out to you the dispensational significance of the same? Paul's design was to show those who were so anxious to be circumcised and submit themselves to the whole Mosaic system, that, so far from such a course being honorable and beneficial, it would be fraught with danger and disgrace. To yield unto those who sought to seduce them spiritually would inevitably result in "bondage" (see 4:9) and not "liberty" (5:1). To prevent this, he begs them to listen to what God had said.

"For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free woman. But he who was born of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the free woman was by promise. Which things are an allegory" (vv. 22.24). Very remarkable indeed is this, for we are here divinely informed that not merely did the Mosaic rites possess a typical significance, but the lives of the patriarchs themselves had a figurative meaning. Not only so, but their affairs were so controlled by providence that they were shaped to shadow forth coming events of vast magnitude. Paul was here moved by the Spirit to inform us that the domestic occurrences in Abraham's household were a parable in action, which parable he had interpreted for us. Thus we are granted an insight to passages in Genesis which no human wisdom could possibly have penetrated.

The transactions in the family of Abraham were divinely ordered to presage important dispensational epochs. The domestic affairs of the patriarch's household were invested with a prophetic significance. The historical incidents recorded in Genesis 16 and 21 possessed a typical meaning, contained beneath their surface spiritual truths of profound importance. The apostle here reminds his readers of the circumstances recorded of the two wives of Abraham, and of their respective offspring, and declares that the mothers adumbrated the two covenants, and their sons, the respective tendencies and results of those covenant, in other words, Sarah and Hagar are to be viewed as the representatives of the two covenants, and the sons which they bore as representatives of the kind of worshipers which those covenants were fitted to produce.

"For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid the other by a free woman." The apostle's design was to wean those Galatians who were Judaistically inclined from their strange infatuation for an obsolete and servile system, by unfolding to them its true nature. This he does by referring them to an emblematic representation of the two economies. Abraham had a number of other sons besides Ishmael and Isaac, but it is to them alone—the circumstances of their birth, subsequent conduct, history, and fate—that Paul's discussion exclusively relates.

In her unbelief and impatience (unwilling to wait for God to make good His word in His own time and way) Sarah gave her maid to Abraham in order that he might not be wholly without posterity. Though this caused confusion and brought trouble upon all concerned, yet it was ordained by God to presage great dispensational distinctions, nor did it in any wise thwart the accomplishment of His eternal purpose. "Abraham had two sons", Ishmael, the son of an Egyptian, a bondslave; Isaac, the son of Sarah, a free woman, of the same rank as her husband. As we have already said, these two mothers prefigured the two covenants, and their children the worshipers which those covenants tended to produce.

"But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the free woman was by promise" (v. 23). Great as was the disparity between the two mothers, greater still was the difference between the way in which their respective sons were born. Ishmael was born in the ordinary course of generation, for "after the flesh" signifies to the carnal counsel which Sarah gave to Abraham, and by the mere strength of nature. In connection with the birth of Ishmael there was not any special promise given, nor any extraordinary divine interposition. Vastly different was it in the case of Isaac. for he was the child of promise and born in direct consequence of the miracle-working power of God, and was under the benefit of that promise as long as he lived. What is here specially emphasized by the apostle is that the son of the slave was in an Inferior condition from the very beginning.

"Which things are an allegory" (v. 24). An allegory is a parabolic method of conveying instruction, spiritual truths being set forth under material figures. Allegories are in words what hieroglyphics are in printing, both of which abound among the Orientals—Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is the best-sustained allegory in the English language. "For these (feminine) are the two covenants" (v. 24). Here the apostle proceeds to give us the occult meaning of the historical facts alluded to in the preceding verse. He affirms that the domestic incidents in the family of Abraham constituted a divinely ordained illustration of the basic principles in regard to the condition of spiritual slaves and of spiritual freemen, and are to be regarded as adumbrating the bondage which subjection to the law of Moses produced and the liberty which submission to the gospel secures.

"These are the two covenants." This cannot of course be understood literally, for it was neither intelligible nor true that Sarah and Hagar were actually two covenants in their own persons. The words is and are frequently have the force of represent. When Christ affirmed of the sacramental bread "This is my body," He meant, this bread emblematizes My body. When we read of the cliff smitten by Moses in the wilderness (out of which gushed the stream of living water) "that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4), it obviously signifies, that rock prefigured Christ. So too when we are told "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20), we are to understand that the one symbolized the other.

"These are the two covenants." There has been much difference of opinion as to exactly which covenants are intended. Some insist that the reference is to the everlasting covenant of grace and the Ademic or covenant of works; others argue it is the Abrahamic or covenant of promise and the Sinaitic; while others conclude it is the Sinaitic and the Christian or that which is made with the people of God in the gospel. Really, it is more a matter of terms than anything else, for whatever nomenclature we adopt it comes to much the same thing. "The one from mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Hagar" (v. 24): by which is meant, that order of things under which the nation of Israel was placed at Sinai, appointed for the purpose of keeping them a separate people, and which because of its legalistic nature was fitly foreshadowed by the bondslave.

"The one (covenant) from mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage" or produces those of a servile spirit, for it made slaves of all who sought justification and salvation by their own doings. It is to be carefully borne in mind that the relation entered into between God and Israel at Sinai was entirely a natural one, being made with the nation as such; and consequently all their descendants, upon their being circumcised, automatically became subjects of it without any spiritual change being wrought in them. "So far as this covenant gave birth to any children, those were not true children of God, free, spiritual, with hearts of filial confidence and devoted love; but miserable bondmen, selfish, carnal, full of mistrust and fear. Of these children of the Sinaitic covenant we are furnished with the most perfect exemplar in the Scribes and Pharisees of our lord's time" (P. Fairbairn).

"For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia" (v. 25). Here again Is signifies "represents": Hagar prophetically anticipated and prefigured Mount Sinai—not the literal mount, but that covenant which Jehovah there entered into with the nation of Israel. Nor is this mode of expression by any means unusual in Scripture: when representing Samaria and Jerusalem by two women the prophet said, "Samaria is Aholah and Jerusalem Aholibah" (Exek. 23:4). "And answereth to Jerusalem which now is" (v. 25). "Answereth to" signifies "corresponds with," or as the margin gives it, is in the same rank with": the origin, status, and condition of Hagar supplied an exact analogy to the state of Jerusalem in the apostle's time. Jerusalem, which was the metropolis of Palestine and the headquarters of its religion, stands for Judaism.

"And is in bondage with her children (v. 25). Judaism was subject to an endless round of ceremonial institutions, which the apostles themselves declared to be a yoke "which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Those under it enjoyed none of that spiritual liberty which the gospel bestows upon those who submit to its terms. That large part of the nation which had no interest in the covenant of promise made with Abraham (whereof faith was an indespensable prerequisite for entering into the good of it), was indeed outwardly a part of Abraham's family and members of the visible church (as Hagar was a member of his family);

yet (like Ishmael) they were born in servitude. and all their outward obedience was of a slavish character, and their privileges (as his) but carnal and temporal.

"But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all" (v. 26). Here Paul shows what was prefigured by Sarah. Three things are said in describing the covenant and constitution of which she was the appropriate emblem, each of which must be duly noted in the framing of our definition.

1. "Jerusalem which is above." This word "above" (ano) is generally employed of location, and would thus signify the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb.12:22) in contrast from the earthly. But here it is placed in antithesis from "which now is" (v. 25) and would thus mean the prior and primitive Jerusalem, of which Melchizedec was king (Heb. 7:2) and to whose order of Priesthood Christ's pertains. Or the "above" may have the force of excellency or supremacy as in "high calling" (Phil. 3:14). Combining the three: Sarah shadowed forth the entire election of grace; all true believers from the beginning to the end of time.

2. Which "is free": such was the status and state of Sarah in contrast from that of Hagar, the bondslave. Suitably did Sarah set forth that spiritual liberty which is to be found in Christ, for He redeems all His people from the bondage of sin and death. Believing Gentiles are freed from the curse of the moral law, and believing Jews are freed from the dominion of the ceremonial law as well.

3. "Which is the mother of us all." The reference is not to the church either visible or invisible, for she cannot be the parent of herself; rather is it the everlasting covenant of grace which is in view, in which were included all true believers. Thus the difference between the systems represented by Hagar and Sarah are: the one was earthly, carnal, slavish, temporary; the other, heavenly, spiritual. free, eternal.

"For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that barest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath a husband" (v. 27). This was obviously brought in by Paul to confirm the interpretation he had made of the covenant allegory. It is a quotation from the predictions of Isaiah. Four things call for our consideration: (1) the needs-be for this comforting promise which God then gave; (2) the precise place in Isaiah's prophecy from which this quotation is taken; (3) the particular manner in which it is here introduced; (4) its striking pertinency to the apostle's purpose.

The needs-be for this reassuring word given by the lord is His believing yet sorrowing people in the days of Isaiah is not difficult to perceive, if we bear in mind the exact terms of the promise originally given to the patriarch and his wife, and then consider the state of Israel under Judaism. The grand promise to Abraham was that he should be "a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:4), and that Sarah should be "a mother of nations" (Gen. 17:16). But at Sinai Sarah's natural children were placed under a covenant which erected a middle wall of partition, shutting them off from all other nations. How rigorous the restrictions of the covenant were and the exclusiveness it produced, appear plainly in the unwillingness of Peter (till supernaturally authorized by God) to enter the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:28).

The Sinaitic covenant consisted largely in "meats and drinks and carnal ordinances"; yet was it imposed only "till the time of reformation" (Heb. 9:10). It was well adapted to Israel after the flesh, for it encouraged them to obedience by the promise of temporal prosperity and restrained by fear of temporal judgments. Amid the great mass of the unregenerate Jews there was always a remnant according to the election of grace, whose heart God had touched (1 Sam. 10:26), in whose heart was His law (Isa. 51:7). But the nation as a whole had become thoroughly corrupt by the time of Isaiah, being deaf to the voice of Jehovah and fast ripening for judgment (1:2-6). The godly portion had diminished to "a very small remnant" (1:9), and the outlook was fearfully dark. It was to strengthen the faith of the spiritual and comfort their hearts that Isaiah was raised up.

The quotation here made by Paul was from Isaiah 54:1, and its very location intimated clearly that it looked forward to gospel times, for coming immediately after that graphic description of the Redeemer's sufferings in the previous chapter, it at once suggests that we are then given a picture of those new covenant conditions which followed His death. This is ever God's way: in the darkest night He causes the stars of hope to shed forth their welcome light, bidding His people to look beyond the gloomy present to the brighter future. God had not forgotten His promise to the patriarch; and though many centuries had intervened, the coming of His Son would make good the ancient oracles, for all the divine promises are established in Christ (2 Cor. 1:19, 20).

Let us next note the manner in which Paul 9 introduces Isaiah's prediction into his discussion: "For it is written." It is clear that the apostle cites the prophet to establish what he had affirmed regarding the allegorical significance of the circumstances of Abraham's household. This at once fixes for us the elucidation of the prophecy. Paul had pointed out that Abraham had sons by two diverse wives, that those sons represented the

different type of worshipers which the two covenants produced. that Sarah, (as representing the Abrahamic covenant) which he here likened unto "Jerusalem which is above," is "the mother of us all." In turn, Isaiah refers to two women, views them allegorically; apostrophizing the one as "barren" and contrasting her from one "who had a husband," assuring the former of a far more numerous progeny.

How pertinent Isaiah's prediction was to the apostle's argument is evident. His design was to turn away the hearts of the Galatians from Judaism, and to accomplish this he demonstrates that that system had been superseded by something far more blessed and spiritually productive. "For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren." Whom was the prophet there addressing? Immediately, the godly remnant in Israel, the children of faith, those who had their standing in and derived their blessing from the Abrahamic covenant. Isaiah addressed them in the terms of the allegory. Just as the historical Sarah was childless for many years after she became the wife of Abraham, so the mystical Sarah (Abrahamic covenant) had for long centuries shown no sign whatever of coming to fruition. But as the literal Sarah ultimately became a mother, so the mystical one should bear a numerous seed.

Marvelous indeed are the ways of God, and remarkably is His decree wrought out through His providences. That parable in action in the household of Abraham contemplated that which took thousands of years to unfold. First, was the marriage between Abraham and Sarah, which symbolized the covenant union between God and His people. Second, for many years Sarah remained barren, foreshadowing that lengthy period during which God's purpose in that covenant was suspended. Third, Hagar, the bondslave, took Sarah's place in the family of Abraham, typifying his natural descendants being placed under the Sinaitic covenant. Fourth, Hagar did not permanently supplant Sarah, adumbrating the fact that Judaism was of but temporary duration. Fifth, ultimately Sarah came into her own and was divinely enabled to bear a supernatural seed—an emblem of the spiritual children of God under the new covenant.

"Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not." The Abrahamic covenant is here represented as a wife who (like Sarah) had long remained childless. Comparatively few real children had been raised up to God among the Jews from Moses onward. True, the nation was in outward covenant with Him, and thus was (like Hagar in the type) "she who hath a husband"; but all the fruit they bore was like unto Ishmael—that which was merely natural, the product of the flesh. But the death of Christ was to alter all this: though the Jews would reject Him, there should be a great accession to the spiritual family of Abraham from among the Gentiles, so that there would be a far greater number of saints under the new covenant than had pertained under the old.

"Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise" (v. 28). Here the apostle begins his application of the allegory. As Sarah prefigured the covenant of grace, so Isaac represented the true children of God. Paul was here addressing himself to his spiritual brethren, and therefore the "we" includes all who are born from above— believing Gentiles as well as Jews. "We," the children of the new covenant, represented in the allegory by Isaac. Our standing and state is essentially different from Ishmael's, for he (like the great mass of those under the Sinaitic covenant) belong to the ordinary course of mere nature; whereas genuine Christians are "the children of promise"— of that made to Abraham, which, in turn, made manifest what God had "promised before the world began" (Titus 1:2). The relation into which believers are brought with God originates in a miracle of grace which was the subject of divine promise.

"But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now" (v. 29). Here the apostle brings in a further detail supplied by the allegory which was germane to his subject. He refers to the opposition made against Isaac by the son of Hagar, recorded in Genesis 21:9. This received its counterpart in the attitude of the Judaisers toward Christians. They who still adhere to the old covenant were hostile to those who enjoyed the freedom of the new. Probably one reason why the apostle mentioned this particular was in order to meet an objection: How can we be the "children of promise" (God's high favorites) seeing we are so bitterly hated and opposed by the Jews? The answer is, No marvel, for thus it was from the beginning: the carnal have ever persecuted the spiritual.

"Nevertheless what saith the Scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman" (v. 30). Here is the final point in the allegory (taken from Gen. 21:10, 12) and which incontestably clinched the apostle's argument that Israel after the flesh are finally set aside by God. Hagar represented the Sinaitic covenant and Ishmael its carnal worshipers, and their being cast out of Abraham's household prophetically signified God's setting aside of Judaism and the fact that the natural descendants of Abraham had no place among his spiritual children and could not share their heritage (cf. John 8:34, 35). The two cannot unite: pure Christianity necessarily excludes Judaism. In its wider application (for today): none who seek salvation by law-keeping shall enter heaven.

The Covenant Allegory

"So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free" (v. 31). Here the plain and inescapable conclusion is drawn; since Christians are the children of promise, they and not carnal Jews are the true heirs of Abraham. Since the new covenant is superior to the old and believers in Christ are freed from all debasing servitude, it obviously follows they must conduct themselves as the lord's freemen. The time had now arrived when to cling to Judaism was fatal. The controversy turned on the question of who are the real heirs of Abraham (see 3:7, 16, 29). In chapter 4 the apostle exposes the empty pretensions of those who could claim only fleshly descent from the patriarch. We are the children of Abraham, said the Judaisers.

Abraham had two sons, replies Paul—the one of free, the other of servile birth: to which line do you belong? whose spirit have you received?

To sum up. Paul's design was to deliver the Galatians from the Judaisers. He showed that by submitting to Judaism they would forfeit the blessings of Christianity. This he accomplished by opening up the profound significance of the covenant allegory, which presented three principal contrasts: birth by nature as opposed to grace; a state of bondage as opposed to liberty; a status of temporary tenure as opposed to permanent possession. Just as Hagar was rightfully the handmaid of Sarah but was wrongfully accorded the position of Abraham's wife, so the Sinaitic covenant was designed to supplement the Abrahamic but was perverted by the Jews when they sought from it salvation and fruitfulness.