

Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14

T. David Gordon

[N.b. This was published in *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (P&R, 2009), pp. 240-58.]

Introductory thoughts

In Galatians 3:6-14, Paul began a discussion of the differences between two covenant-administrations, one made with Abraham and another made with the Israelites at Sinai 430 years later.¹ Were the occasion of the letter different, he might very well have discussed their similarities, and it is no part of my thesis to deny that there are similarities between them, or to deny that Paul was aware of them. That is, one would not develop a full biblical theology of these two covenant-administrations merely by studying Galatians 3 and 4. Nonetheless, Galatians 3 (and 4) would make their own distinctive contribution to that discussion.

In substance, this essay has grown out of twenty years of teaching (and occasionally writing about) Galatians, both at the seminary and college level. Early in that study, I became aware of how utterly different my understanding of biblical covenants was from that of the late Prof. John Murray of Westminster Seminary, and this essay intends, in large measure, to function as a counter-argument to Murray. I will argue that Paul enumerates five differences between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant in Galatians 3. These five differences (some more than others) are fatal to Murray's thesis that:

¹ "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)

What needs to be emphasized now is that the Mosaic covenant in respect of the condition of obedience is not in a different category from the Abrahamic. It is too frequently assumed that the conditions prescribed in connection with the Mosaic covenant place the Mosaic dispensation in a totally different category as respects grace, on the one hand, and demand or obligation, on the other. In reality there is nothing that is principally different in the necessity of keeping the covenant and of obedience to God's voice, which proceeds from the Mosaic covenant, from that which is involved in the keeping required in the Abrahamic.²

Paul's Basic Argument in Galatians

Paul corrected the Galatians, who were requiring that members of the New covenant community identify themselves ceremonially as members of the Sinai covenant community. Paul effected this correction by placing the Sinai covenant in its own covenant-historical context, as a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that would eventually yield to its entire fulfillment in the New covenant. To do so, he established the historical priority of the Abrahamic covenant over the Sinai, and he indicated several of the differences between those covenants, in which cases the New covenant is similar to the Abrahamic covenant and dissimilar to the Sinai covenant.

Paul understood the covenant with Abraham to include essentially three promises: That God would give Abraham numerous descendants ("seed"), that God would give Abraham (and

² *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study*. London: The Tyndale Press, 1954, p. 22.

his seed) the land of Canaan, and that God would bless all the nations of the world through Abraham and his seed. Plainly enough, the Israelites became numerous during their four hundred years in Egypt, and equally plainly, through Joshua and the judges, they inherited the land of Canaan. But they did not become the means by which all the nations/Gentiles were blessed until the calling of Paul. Arguably, as long as the Sinai covenant distinguished Jew *from* Gentile, the seed of Abraham *could* not become a blessing to all nations. That is, the terms of the Sinai administration itself, being made with one peculiar nation and excluding others through dietary, ceremonial, and other laws, prevented the entire fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, even while it preserved memory of that promise and even while it preserved the integrity of Abraham's "seed" by prohibiting intermarriage with Gentiles.

Paul thus understood the Sinai covenant to be both subservient to the purpose of the earlier Abrahamic covenant (by preserving the integrity of Abraham's "seed" and the promises made thereto) and an obstacle to the fulfilment of that covenant. Ironically, Sinai was necessary (to preserve the "seed" and the promise) but Sinai was also a barrier (by excluding Gentiles, they could not be blessed). For Paul, this means that the Sinai administration must have been temporary; instituted as a vehicle to carry both the Abrahamic promise and the Abrahamic "seed" until that moment when the "Seed" would come through whom the promise would be fulfilled and the nations would be blessed (3:19).³ Paul identified the "Seed" as Christ (3:16),

³ I intentionally distinguish "seed" from "Seed," because the original promise in the original Hebrew employed a collective noun, and might have been understood as a reference to Abraham's descendents collectively considered. The Septuagint, however, had no similar Greek collective noun, and therefore had to choose between translating the Hebrew as either dative plural (τοῖς σπέρμασιν) or dative singular (τῷ σπέρματι). They chose the latter, and Paul approves that decision in Galatians 3:16, expressly declaring there that the promise was not given to his collective seed but to his singular seed, which Paul there identifies as Christ. So,

and argued that the nations are indeed now being blessed by that Seed of Abraham, and that therefore, the temporary covenant made only with Abraham's descendants must become obsolete and disappear, because its purpose to guard and protect the Abrahamic seed until the "Seed" would come, (ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπήγγελλται, 3:19) has been fulfilled.

Paul therefore discussed the entire matter in covenant-historical terms. He illuminated the realities of the New Covenant by illuminating the realities of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants, respectively.⁴ He perceived the Sinai covenant as guiding and guarding the people of God in the time of historical minority, before and until the "fullness of times" came (Gal. 4:4, but cf. the other indications of the same reality at 3:23-26 and at 4:8-11). After that, he argued, its guardianship was not only no longer needed, but rather a positive hindrance to the realities of the fullness of times, including the reconciliation of all creation to its Creator, and therefore also the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to one another through Abraham's Seed. If we could employ

when I employ "seed" in the lower case, I am referring to the original, more-ambiguous Hebrew, and when I employ "Seed" in the upper case, I am referring to Paul's understanding of the theologically-correct interpretation of the LXX.

⁴ In some sense, then, my arguments here deliberately and self-consciously bypass all of the discussions over the last twenty-five years about the nature of Palestinian Judaism in the first century. Valid enough as an historical question in its own right, the question is irrelevant to interpreting Galatians, for two reasons. First, Paul is addressing the *Christian* assemblies at Galatia, not Jewish *synagogues* at Galatia. Second, and more importantly, Paul's reasoning in Galatia is covenant-historical. Paul distinguishes the Abrahamic covenant from the Sinai covenant as each was instituted by God, not as either covenant was or was not later perverted either by Jews or by Christians. When he says "nomos," he most emphatically does not mean some first-century aberration of that covenant, whether Jewish or Christian. He means the Sinai covenant as it was instituted by God through the hand of Moses. The so-called "New Perspective on Paul," whether as originally described by James D. G. Dunn in his article by that title, or as it is currently understood today, as a revision of Paul's understanding of justification in the works of scholars such as N. T. Wright, is irrelevant to my thesis. Paul's objections to "nomos," throughout this letter, are not due to any misunderstanding of it. His objection is to the members of one covenant (the New Covenant) implicitly or explicitly identifying themselves by the rites of another covenant (the Sinai Covenant). Paul objects to Christians observing the Sinai covenant *per se*; he does not object to their *mis*-observing it.

an anachronism in the history of doctrine, one might argue that Paul perceived the New Covenant realities in Christ as bringing the final third of the Abrahamic promise to fruition; and he perceived the Sinai Covenant as a “parenthesis” between the promise pledged to Abraham and the promise fulfilled in Christ. Part of how he achieved this was to indicate five ways in which the New Covenant’s realities are like the Abrahamic realities, but unlike the Sinai realities. To these five differences we now turn.

First Difference: The Abrahamic covenant includes the nations/Gentiles; the Sinai covenant excludes them

The concern of the entire letter is, in many ways, the concern of Paul’s entire ministry, since Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; 2:2; 2:7-9). Paul perceived his ministry as the initial means by which God was fulfilling the third part of His promise to Abraham. None in his day would have disputed the fact that the Sinai covenant was made exclusively with the descendants of Abraham, but perhaps some, if not many, in his day, failed to perceive that such a one-nation covenant necessarily disrupted and prevented the promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s seed. Paul therefore attempted to resurrect memory of the original Abrahamic promise: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal. 3:8). But if the nations are still being treated as though they were *out* of covenant with God, then the pledge to Abraham has not been fulfilled. For Paul, the reason the church could not require circumcision (or the dietary laws or the Jewish calendar) is that they were part of a covenant-

administration that excluded the nations.⁵ And Paul focused on these three aspects of the Sinai administration not merely because they were parts of a nations-excluding covenant, but moreso because they were those particular aspects of that covenant that marked the Jews as being distinct *from* the nations. But the original Abrahamic covenant comprehended the nations within its blessings, and envisioned the various nations of the earth as one day finding blessedness through the seed/Seed of Abraham.

Second Difference: The Abrahamic covenant blesses; the Sinai covenant curses

Some people cannot hear what Paul says in Galatians 3:6-14 because they cannot imagine that he would say what he has said. They cannot imagine that the Sinai covenant cursed, and some have difficulty imagining that the Abrahamic did not, in some senses curse. I am more than content to say that Paul's treatment of each covenant is abbreviated here, and that he might have said more about each of them. Nonetheless, the language he employs to contrast them on this point must be permitted to speak.

⁵ Although circumcision was originally given to Abraham, as part of that covenant-administration, even there it was part of the "narrowing" of the covenant people to Abraham and his descendants, a distinction not made in the Edenic covenant or the post-diluvian covenant with Noah.

Abrahamic

8 “In you shall all the nations be *blessed*.”

9 So then, those who are of faith are *blessed* along with Abraham, the man of faith.

14 so that in Christ Jesus the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the Gentiles

Sinai

10 For all who rely on 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.”

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

A minor translation observation must be made at this point. Some English translations are entirely gratuitous (and entirely wrong) to add the words “rely on” here in verse 10.⁶ The text says nothing about “relying on” the Law here,⁷ and note that the expression is semantically identical to that in verse 9, where it is merely translated “who are *of faith*”; not “who *rely on faith*.” That is, the substantive use of the preposition *ek*, to indicate characterization (those who are characterized by faith, or those who are characterized by the works of the law) should either be translated by a simple ambiguous English “of faith” and “of works of the law,” or it should be translated by a fuller, more-paraphrastic expression such as “characterized by faith” and “characterized by works of the law.” What is misleading and erroneous to the point of irresponsibility is to translate them *differently* in such a manifestly parallel place. The hapless English reader does not perceive the Pauline parallel between the two expressions (“of faith” and

⁶ Not all English translations commit this error. The Authorized Version competently translates: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse,” and the NKJV follows this translation.

⁷ Though Paul does talk this way at Romans 2:17: “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on (ἐπιαναπαύη νόμῳ) the law and boast in God...”

“of works of the law”), and worse, perceives the second in a perjorative manner because of the utterly gratuitous “rely on.”⁸

This translation error, erroneous enough in its own right, also flies in the face of the text. Note that Paul does not condemn any alleged *abuse* of the Sinai covenant here. It is not those who *abuse* (“rely on”) the law who are under a curse; it is those who are covenantally under the law that are under its threatening curse-sanction. Twice here Paul quotes the law’s own words,⁹ indicating that the curse-sanction was an inherent part of the administration itself, long before anyone allegedly perverted or distorted it. It was not, that is, some later false reliance on the law that cursed; it was disobedience to its statutes and ordinances in the first generation (and in all subsequent generations) that cursed.¹⁰

Again, one could (if one so desired) fault Paul for not mentioning other realities at Sinai, because in addition to the six tribes articulating the conditional curses from Mt. Ebal there were six tribes articulating conditional blessings from Mt. Gerizim (Deuteronomy 27). But before faulting Paul we should first hear him; in *some* sense, he is saying that the Abrahamic covenant blessed and the Sinai covenant cursed. I have no interest in faulting Paul here, because I think

⁸ Indeed, such a gratuitous error is difficult to account for apart from sheer theological prejudice, a sheer unwillingness to grant that Paul is here speaking of the covenant-administration given at Sinai *itself*, not some later, alleged Jewish perversion thereof.

⁹ He cites Deuteronomy 27:26 in 3:10, and Deuteronomy 21:23 in 3:13.

¹⁰ In saying this, I am here rendering no opinion on the historical question of the nature of first century Palestinian Judaism. I am merely saying that in the rhetoric of Paul’s argumentation, he is here in Galatians 3 discussing the nature of the Sinai covenant itself, as instituted through Moses. Paul is not addressing what may or may not have happened to that covenant in his generation. The “law” that Paul discusses in Galatians 3 is the one that was given “430 years after” the promise, and his citations of the Deuteronomy passages prove that what he is discussing is the curse-sanctions of the covenant itself.

his point is well-taken: The Abrahamic covenant, taken as a whole, is largely promissory (though it does require circumcision): it pledges that an aging couple will have descendants more numerous than the sand of the sea; it promises that they will inherit a marvelous, arable land; and it promises that one day all the nations of the earth will be blessed by one of their descendants. When Sinai comes along, the point is not that there aren't conditional blessings associated with it; the point is that what is new and distinctive is the threat of curse-sanctions, threats that are entirely absent from the Abrahamic administration. What is "new" or distinctive about Sinai is not the (conditional) blessing; what is new or distinctive is the conditional cursing. And Paul, knowing (as any first century Jew would have known) Israel's actual history under those conditions, knew perfectly well that the prophets were right for pronouncing judgment on a people who rather consistently failed to remain obedient to their covenant duties. So, even though in theory Sinai proffered either blessing or cursing, in plain historical fact it rarely brought anything but cursing. The Israelites were constantly harassed by the indigenous nations during the period of conquest; their first monarch was removed from office in disobedience and shame; their second monarch was not permitted to build the house of God because he was a violent (and adulterous) man; their third could not even teach his own sons to heed the counsel of their elders (though his Proverbs constantly encouraged such); after which the Israelites were divided into two nations, weakened, and increasingly battered by (and once captured by) their enemies.

Third Difference: The Abrahamic Covenant is Characterized by Faith; the Sinai Covenant is Characterized by Works of the Law

Analogous to the previous difference, this difference is perfectly apparent in the text, if one is willing to allow Paul to speak for himself rather than for us. We might not have said this, we might not have put the matter this way, and we might be peeved with Paul for having put the matter as he did. But once all of this ill-will toward the apostle is vented, we still have his words to deal with, and we cannot safely deny what he said simply because we wish he had not said it.

Note how frequently in Galatians 3:6-14 Paul contrasts belief/faith on the one hand, with works/doing/law on the other hand. The contrasts are both frequent and sustained: There are five references to faith/belief on the Abrahamic side, and five references to doing, abiding, works, and “not faith” on the Sinai side.

Abrahamic

6 just as Abraham “*believed* God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? 7 Know then that it is those of *faith* who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by *faith*, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” 9 So then, those who are of *faith* are blessed along with Abraham, the man of *faith*.

Sinai

10 For all who rely on *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.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by *faith*.” 12 But the law is *not of faith*, rather “The one who *does* them shall live by them.”

Again, if we were to write our own biblical theologies, we might do differently than Paul. We might, for instance, protest that Abraham’s covenant had conditions also, such as circumcision, and we surely might wish to argue that Israel at Sinai was required not only to do but also to believe. This is all well and good, but it is all pettifogging. Yes, Abraham was required to circumcise Isaac, but had God not already fulfilled His promise to give Abraham descendants, there would have been no Isaac to circumcise. So Abraham’s circumcision of Isaac was not a condition of getting Isaac; God already fulfilled the pledge to give Abraham a

seed before requiring that this seed be circumcised. At Sinai, however, the matter is entirely different: the conditional blessings depend upon Israel's obedience. If anyone doubts this, just ask the question: How many long years of blessedness did Moses and Aaron enjoy in the so-called "promised land"? Zero. And why was this so? Because the people disobeyed. While the land was eventually given to the Israelites, the terms of the Sinai covenant delayed their inheritance by forty years, and diminished the actual blessedness of the land during the generations of their tenure there. And even the inheritance of the land was due not to the stipulations of Sinai, but due to the promises made to the patriarchs, as Moses interceded for the Israelites in those terms:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.' And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (Ex. 32:13-14).

Some would have been much happier if Paul had not said "But the law is not of faith," but again, there must be some truth in his statement. Further, note that what follows this is a quotation from the Mosaic institution of the covenant itself, not some later abuse thereof: "But the law is *not of faith*, rather 'The one who *does* them shall live by them,'" citing Leviticus 18:5. Paul explains what he means by saying the law is not of faith by reference not to some first-century Jewish sect or misunderstanding, but by reference to the institution of that covenant-administration through the mediatorship of Moses. To understand Paul, we must recognize that

he was speaking of these covenant-administrations in terms of their distinctives. In terms of its distinctives, contrasted with the Abrahamic administration, Paul could truthfully say that what was new and distinctive about Sinai is not faith, which was already taught in the Abrahamic administration. What was new and distinctive is a substantial body of legislation that required the obedience of the Israelites. If Abraham had one law (circumcise the males), Moses had hundreds of laws. What was therefore new and distinctive, compared to the earlier covenant, was this large body of legislation that required *doing*, not believing.¹¹

Fourth Difference: The Abrahamic covenant justifies; the Sinai covenant does not

It should not be surprising by now to note this fourth contrast: The Abrahamic covenant is a justifying covenant; the Sinai covenant is not.

¹¹ Space does not permit me to re-assert here what I have argued elsewhere regarding Romans 9:32. Paul does not, in Romans 9:32, say that Jews pursued the Law the wrong way (by works). The only way for one to rightly pursue the Sinai covenant is by works; the terms of that covenant do not say “*Believe* this and you will live,” but “*Do* this and you will live.” Many English translations supply the ellipsis in Romans 9:32 wrongly, asserting “Because they did not *pursue* it through faith” (RSV). “Pursue” is not in the original text, and the text is better understood if the copula supplies the ellipsis: “Because it (the Sinai covenant) *is* not of faith (not characterized by faith), but as by works.” That is, Romans 9:32 says exactly what Galatians 3:12 says, except that the copula is expressed in Gal. 3:12, and only inferred at Romans 9:32. See my “Why Israel Did Not Obtain Torah-Righteousness: A Translation Note on Romans 9:32.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 163-66.

Abraham

6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as *righteousness*”? 7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would *justify* the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

Sinai

11 Now it is evident that *no one is justified* before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” 12 But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

Paul argues here two things about the Sinai covenant: first, that no one is justified before God by the law,¹² and second, that the reason for this is because the law is not characterized by justifying faith, but rather by works. Since the Sinai covenant requires *doing*, and is not characterized by faith, it justifies no sinners. The Abrahamic covenant, by contrast, is promissory, requiring nothing of Abraham or Sarah as a condition of the promise being kept by God; its recipients merely believe in the trustworthiness of the promising God. In so believing they are justified.

Paul does not say here what many people fear he is saying. He does not say that none of the Israelites were justified. He says nothing about that matter, because it does not concern him in terms of the rhetorical needs of his situation. However, insofar as those Israelites were justified, it was because of the justification by faith that was already theirs through the Abrahamic covenant-administration; but the Sinai covenant, in terms of its own distinctive administration, did not justify anyone: “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.” Surely, many Israelites, under the law, were justified by faith; but they were not justified before God “*by the law*,” rather, they were justified before God by Abrahamic faith.

¹² Which he had already asserted at Galatians 2:16.

Note also that Paul asserts this as an incontrovertible fact (“Now it is evident,” *δηλον*) which would be utterly fatal, rhetorically, if he imagined any sect or party within Judaism or Christianity of the first century would have disputed it. Such rhetorical statements are employed to settle one dispute by appealing to an undisputed matter and building on it.¹³ If the undisputed matter were, in fact, disputed, the entire rhetorical power of the statement would vanish. Thus, it is one thing for Paul to render his opinion that no one is justified before God by the law; but it is another entirely when he adds the rhetorical adjective *δηλον*.

Fifth Difference: The Abrahamic covenant is referred to as “promise;” the Sinai covenant is referred to as “law”

Few contributions to Pauline studies in the last several decades are more important than the now widely-recognized lexical reality that for Paul, *ὁ νόμος* means “the Sinai covenant,” far more consistently than it means anything else. As Douglas J. Moo has said: “What is vital for any accurate understanding of Paul’s doctrine of law is to realize that Paul uses *nomos* most often and most basically of the Mosaic law.”¹⁴ That is, Paul uses the term very differently than the term later came to be used in Christian theology, ordinarily to denote something like God’s demand. Again, Moo is right to correct this notion:

¹³ Ordinarily, Paul employs some form of *γινώσκω* or *οἶδα*. Cf., e.g., in Galatians, 2:16, 3:7, 4:13. Perhaps the most significant for my purposes is 2:16, where Paul asserts that “we who are Jews by nature, and not Gentile sinners, knowing (*εἰδότες*) that a person is not justified by works of the Law, have believed in Christ...”. Rhetorically, if some who were Jews denied this point, Paul lost all the power of his argument; but Paul considered it an incontrovertible reality that Jews (whatever the bewitched Gentiles at Galatia might have thought) knew perfectly well that no human was justified by observing the Law.

¹⁴ “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): p. 80.

As we have seen, the Reformers, as most theologians today, use “law” to mean anything that demands something of us. In this sense, “law” is a basic factor in all human history; and man is in every age, whether in the OT or NT, confronted with “law.” What is crucial to recognize is that this is *not* the way in which Paul usually uses the term *nomos*.¹⁵

In no place is this distinctive use of *nomos* more obvious than in Galatians 3:17: “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.” Note here that what is distinguished is the two covenant-administrations spoken of throughout Galatians 3 and 4, covenant-administrations that are historically inaugurated 430 years apart from each other. But we may rightly ask: “Why does Paul use ὁ νόμος to designate the Sinai covenant?” The answer is by way of synecdoche: Since law-giving so characterizes that covenant-administration, it can be referred to by its dominating feature: law. Similarly, note that he can refer to the Abrahamic administration by a different synecdoche: promise (ἡ ἐπαγγελία). Note that Paul uses the “promise” lexical stock 8 times between 3:14 and 3:22, because he conceives the Abrahamic covenant as distinctively (albeit perhaps not exclusively) promissory. In the same way, he conceives the Sinai covenant as being distinctively (albeit perhaps not exclusively) legal: “But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them’” (3:10).

This consistent use of the synecdoche “promise” to refer to the Abrahamic administration, and the equally consistent use of the synecdoche “law” to refer to the Sinai

¹⁵ Moo, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

administration, demonstrate convincingly that Paul did not conceive these two covenants as similar in kind, but rather as dis-similar in kind: One is characteristically promissory; the other is characteristically legal. I prefer to say “characteristically,” because I do not deny that each may have other aspects to it. Insofar as the Sinai covenant reminds its recipients of the gracious pledges made to Abraham, for instance, it has a “gracious” aspect or dimension to it, one we do not wish to overlook. But even here, the gracious aspect is borrowed, as it were, from a previous covenant-administration, and is therefore not its own *distinguishing* characteristic. I might even be persuaded to go so far as Charles Hodge:

Besides this evangelical character which unquestionably belongs to the Mosaic covenant, it is presented in two other aspects in the Word of God. First, it was a national covenant with the Hebrew people. In this view the parties were God and the people of Israel; the promise was national security and prosperity; the condition was the obedience of the people as a nation to the Mosaic law; and the mediator was Moses. In this aspect it was a legal covenant. It said, “Do this and live.”¹⁶

But Paul was not giving a thorough, comprehensive account of either covenant in Galatians 3. Here in Galatians 3 he was discussing their distinctives, what distinguishes each from the other. And when the question is put that way, he did not hesitate to call the one “promise” and the other “law.”

Concluding thoughts regarding the five differences

¹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 375.

When one places portions of Galatians 3:6-14 in parallel columns side-by-side, these five differences are very pronounced. The differences are less pronounced if the text is left in a single column, without italicizing the differences. Once this typesetting voodoo is done, however, the differences are stark. Many are uncomfortable with such contrasts, fearing that they are implicitly Lutheran (or worse, Dispensational). In an effort to diminish these unwelcome contrasts, many in the Reformed tradition have dismissed the contrasts by suggesting that what Paul is contrasting is some first-century legalistic *abuse* of the Sinai covenant to the Abrahamic covenant, not the two covenant-administrations themselves. The evidence of the text will not permit such evasive action, however. Throughout the critical section of 3:10-14, Paul consistently cited Old Testament texts to prove his point. It was not some first-century rabbi who introduced the idea that: “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Moses introduced this idea in Deuteronomy 27:26. Similarly, it was not some famous (or obscure) first-century Jewish sectarian who said, “The one who does them shall live by them;” it was Moses who said this in Leviticus 18:5. It was not the Law, as allegedly perverted a millenium after Moses that Paul discussed in Galatians 3, but the law which came 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant that Paul discusses (Gal. 3:17). When he illustrated the matter in chapter 4, for instance, citing Sarah and Hagar, he did not say that these two women were figuratively two ways of *understanding* the covenant, one right and one wrong. Rather, he said “these women are two *covenants* (αὐταὶ γὰρ εἰσὶν δύο διαθήκαι). One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar” (Gal. 4:24).

Some may not like Paul's opinion on the matter. What we must not do is evade the plain teaching of Paul that the Sinai covenant *itself*, as it was delivered by the hand of Moses 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant, was a *different* covenant, different in *kind*, characteristically legal, Gentile-excluding, non-justifying because characterized by works, therefore cursing its recipients and bearing children for slavery. If this doesn't sound like any bargain, recall that the original Israelites did not consider it a bargain either, and they resisted Moses's efforts to engage them in it. All things considered, many of the first-generation Israelites, who received this covenant while trembling at the foot of a quaking mountain and then wandered in the wilderness, preferred to return to Egypt rather than to enter covenant with a frightening deity who threatened curse-sanctions upon them if they disobeyed. I don't blame them; their assessment of the matter was judicious and well-considered, albeit rebellious. The Sinai covenant-administration was no bargain for sinners, and I pity the poor Israelites who suffered under its administration, just as I understand perfectly well why 73 (nearly half) of their psalms were laments. I would have resisted this covenant also, had I been there, because such a legal covenant, whose conditions require strict obedience (and threaten severe curse-sanctions), is bound to fail if one of the parties to it is a sinful people.

But this administration, burdensome as it was for the hapless Israelites, was needed for a variety of reasons. In terms of Paul's concerns in Galatians, it was necessary for there to be a covenant that, at a minimum, preserved two things: memory of the gracious promises made to Abraham and his "seed," and the biological integrity of the "seed" itself. Sinai's dietary laws and prohibitions against inter-marrying with the Gentiles, along with Sinai's calendar and its circumcision, set Abraham's descendants apart from the Gentiles, saving them (in some degree)

from their desire to inter-marry with the *Am ha-Aretz* until the time came to do away with such a designation forever. There were things necessary to teach, via the types and sacrifices of the Old Testament system, in order for the work of the coming Christ to make any sense when he appeared. And during this season of preparing the world for the coming Christ, it was necessary to have a covenant administration that preserved both memory of the Abrahamic promises, and the integrity of Abraham's seed, until the "Seed" of Abraham came. Such a covenant-administration would need, by the harshest threats of curse-sanctions, to prevent inter-marriage and idolatry among a people particularly attracted to both. Sinai's thunders did not prevent this perfectly, but they did so sufficiently that a people still existed on earth who recalled the promises to Abraham when Christ appeared, and the genealogy of Matthew's gospel could be written.

How did Murray misunderstand the matter so badly?

It may be well now to re-acquaint ourselves with Murray's assessment of these two covenant-administrations:

What needs to be emphasized now is that the Mosaic covenant in respect of the condition of obedience is not in a different category from the Abrahamic....In reality there is nothing that is principally different in the necessity of keeping the covenant and of obedience to God's voice, which proceeds from the Mosaic covenant, from that which is involved in the keeping required in the Abrahamic.¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study*. London: The Tyndale Press, 1954, p. 22.

Yet we have discovered five ways in which the Abrahamic covenant is different from the Mosaic, and at least four of them touch rather directly on precisely this question of the “condition of obedience.” “Promise” does not differ from “Law”? Is not promise, by definition, unconditional? “Blessing” is not different from “cursing”? “Those of faith” are not different from “those of works of the law”? A covenant that justifies is not different from a covenant that does not? I raise these questions gratefully, rhetorically, and instructively.

I raise these questions grateful that John Murray, to my knowledge, never wrote so much as a paragraph about the Galatian letter.¹⁸ He could have made no sense of the letter, and anything he might have written about it would therefore have been obfuscatory in the highest degree. We can only speculate as to why such a prolific writer as he never wrote about it, and I like to think that he was, at some level, aware of his incapacity to make any sense of it (which explains why I, for instance, have never written about the Calculus). I like to think that he was aware that he was entirely flumoxed by Paul’s reasoning, and that he therefore determined not to write anything about the matter until he could make some sense of it. Bravo for him, because many people go ahead and write about things that are entire mysteries to them.

¹⁸ According to the bibliography published in volume 4 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982, pp. 361-374), from 1931 to 1973 Murray wrote 221 reviews, articles, essays, and books. Not one of these addresses Galatians generally, nor a particular passage within Galatians, specifically. Considering that Murray was both a New Testament scholar and a professor of Systematic Theology, it seems odd that he would publish nothing about what many consider to be one of Paul’s most important theological letters. Luther, for instance, was less squeamish than Professor Murray, and was quite willing to write a lengthy commentary on the letter. But then Luther was willing to recognize the covenantal contrasts in Galatians, and so was happy to write about it.

I also raise these questions rhetorically, because I think all it takes to refute Murray's implicit mono-covenantalism is to read Galatians (or the final chapters of Deuteronomy). If Paul says "these are *two* covenants" (Gal. 4:24), how can there only be one? And if Paul contrasts these two in as many ways as he does, how can we continue to resist the notion that some covenants have at least some substantial differences in kind? Indeed, one might even raise the question of why God would inaugurate a covenant at Sinai, unless it were in some important ways different from the already-existing Abrahamic covenant.

But this rhetorical question raises also the instructive concern. How indeed? Since John Murray was very well read theologically, how can it be that he misunderstood significantly the differences between these two covenants, and perhaps the differences between others as well? At a minimum, I believe there are two answers to this, each of which is instructive.

First, as my friend and former-colleague at Gordon-Conwell, David Wells, has frequently said: To understand someone, you must understand his conversation-partners. With whom is he speaking, and about what? And especially, with whom is he arguing, and about what? The answer to this line of questioning, in John Murray's case, was Dispensationalism. Even the historic premillennialists once associated with Westminster Seminary felt such discomfort with Murray on this point that most left and affiliated with other institutions. And his non-scholarly literary output, for denominational and informal magazines, was dense with anti-Dispensational argumentation. Knowing this helps us understand that Murray's reaction to dispensationalist thought pushed him away from the center of the historic covenant theology, and moved him to

believe that the historic covenant theology needed what he called a “re-casting,”¹⁹ a re-casting in a much more mono-covenantal direction.

It was this desired “re-casting” of covenant theology in a mono-covenantalist way that was so attractive to Murray the opponent of dispensationalism. Murray the controversialist, facing the peculiar controversy of dispensationalism in the mid-to-late twentieth century, sought to construe biblical covenants in such a manner as to place the construal in the sharpest distinction from dispensationalism, which he did by saying: “From the beginning of God’s disclosures to men in terms of covenant we find a unity of conception which is to the effect that a divine covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and of promise.”²⁰ Now, if the administration is one of *sovereign* grace and promise, then it is not and cannot be conditioned upon the obedience of the creature. Yet Sinai seems to be evidently conditioned thereupon; six tribes on Gerizim shout the blessings, while six tribes on Ebal shout the curses. In each case the blessing or curse is conditional:

“And if you faithfully obey (אִם-שָׁמַרְתֶּם) the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. ... But if you will not obey (אִם-לֹא תִשְׁמַע) the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his

¹⁹ “It appears to me that the covenant theology, notwithstanding the finesse of analysis with which it was worked out and the grandeur of its articulated systematization, needs recasting.” Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (London: Tyndale, 1954), p. 5.

²⁰ *Covenant of Grace*, p. 19.

commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deut. 28:1-2, 15).

This cannot be a sovereign administration of grace and/or promise by any meaningful and ordinary definitions of the terms. The condition, by which either blessings or curses will come upon Israel, is Israel's obedience or disobedience to God's commands. Murray's definition of covenant as being a "sovereign administration of grace and promise" simply does not accurately represent the closing chapters of Deuteronomy.²¹ Nor does it accurately reflect the candid narratives of the Pentateuch. When the Israelites disobeyed, or even grumbled and murmured (Numbers 16, 21), they were cursed by God. By contrast, Sarah and Abraham did some foolish, possibly even unbelieving things. Sarah laughingly disbelieved that God would keep His pledge to provide a descendant (Genesis 18, following her husband's similarly jocular response at Genesis 17:17), and she conspired to have Abraham have (adulterous) relations with Hagar in an effort to procure such a seed (Genesis 16). Yet God did not withdraw his pledge or his care from them, nor did He require 40 years of wilderness wandering. Similarly, on two occasions Abraham told a prevaricating half-lie (Genesis 12, Genesis 20), in the process threatening the well-being of Sarah as seed-bearer, and in each case God delivered Sarah from the danger caused by Abraham, and placed no curse upon them. This is undoubtedly why Paul contrasted the two covenant-administrations as he did, mentioning "blessing" in association with the Abrahamic administration, and "curses" in association with the Sinai administration. The Abrahamic

²¹ Nor, to my knowledge, does it have any lexical basis. I am entirely unaware of any parallels in other Semitic languages suggesting that *berith* or its cognates has anything at all to do with grace and/or promise. To the contrary, the ancient Hittite suzerainty treaties were routinely conditioned upon the vassal nation's satisfying the stipulations of the covenant. The land-grant covenants of the same period were indeed different in kind from the suzerain-vassal covenants; yet each was called "covenant" (*berith*), proving that neither the term itself, nor the concept thereby denoted, is necessarily one of sovereign grace and/or promise.

covenant was truly promissory; apart from Abraham and Sarah's obedience (and virtually no commandments were even given them to obey), God would give them descendants and land, and ultimately would bless the nations of the world through one of their descendants.²² Whether Sarah laughed/scoffed at the notion of bearing children at her age was irrelevant to God's keeping His pledge. Whether Abraham's prevaricating endangered the promise itself (by endangering the bearer of the seed) was irrelevant; God would intervene and keep his unconditional pledge, because this particular covenant truly was one of sovereign grace and promise.

Perhaps even more fatal to Murray's thesis is that Paul used "promise" as a synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant, and he used "law" as a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant. This is fatal to Murray's definition in two ways, partly because Paul did not (as Murray) perceive all covenants as being essentially alike, but also because Paul plainly did not consider "promise" to be an adequate way to speak of the covenant made at Sinai 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant. Paul actually contrasted the Sinai covenant ("law") from the Abrahamic covenant ("promise") by employing the very vocabulary that Murray assigned to *all* covenants.

²² Nor does Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22) disprove this thesis. While it was an obedient act, it was not an act upon which the fulfilment of the promise was conditioned. Apart from the promise already being fulfilled, there would have been no Isaac to sacrifice. Similarly, at Genesis 26:5, it appears that the renewed pledge to Isaac is due to Abraham's obedience. But even here, the pious reference to Abraham (probably referring to his willingness to sacrifice Isaac) does not overshadow that the pledge is also grounded in God's own oath: "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands." (Genesis 26:3-4).

There is a second instructive reason for speculating about how Murray so completely misunderstood Paul. We see in Murray nothing more than what we often see in ourselves: a tendency to seek systematic coherence at the expense of exegetical fidelity. That is, studying a book the size of the Bible is messy business, and sometimes the business is tidier if a few unruly texts (or even entire unruly books!) get swept under the rug. The existential challenge each of us faces, at least those of us who have the leisure to think about theology and exegesis, is whether we will live more easily with a less-consistent system, on the one hand, that is exegetically faithful; or whether we will prefer a system that may appear (to our mind at least) more consistent, but with considerable exegetical problems. Put more simply, I think Murray's recasting of the covenant theology made it difficult for him to read Galatians and feel its actual weight. I think his mono-covenantal system was so attractive to him, for whatever polemical reasons, that he simply didn't feel the impress of the contrasts that appear in this letter.

In some senses, then, the most dangerous systematic conclusions are the ones that are the most comprehensive (and therefore the most abstract). Only a big thinker such as Murray can take on the bigger questions, such as the nature, definition, and/or conception of covenant itself.²³ Murray took it on, and decided this: "From the beginning of God's disclosures to men in terms of covenant we find a unity of conception which is to the effect that a divine covenant is

²³ I'm not even sure there is a definition of covenant that I agree with or even need. To me it is an arrangement of *some* sort that binds *some* parties together in *some* ways, but I am hesitant to say much more than that for fear that the definition will exclude the content of some of the covenants that actually appear in scripture. As much as I appreciate O. Palmer Robertson, for instance, I'm not sure *prima facie* that I want to say that a covenant is a bond "in blood," because there might very well be covenants that had no such bond. I tend to think that the less we say in our definition of "covenant" that would determine the *content* of various covenants, the better off we might be.

a sovereign administration of grace and of promise.”²⁴ Once this definition is admitted, every covenant is a sovereign administration of promise, and therefore the Abrahamic and the Sinai covenants cannot be distinguished as Paul distinguished them (calling one “promise” and the other “law”).

Implications for the Adamic Administration

While the purpose of this essay is to disclose the dis-similarities between the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants, and to disclose John Murray’s incapacity to perceive those dis-similarities, there are broader biblical-theological implications as well. Murray’s resistance to describing the Adamic administration in covenantal terms was more than lexical; it was more than the simple matter that the term “covenant” was not used to describe the Edenic administration.²⁵ If Murray’s definition of “covenant” as a “sovereign administration of grace and promise” is permitted to stand, it would be impossible to describe the Adamic administration properly, since Adam’s mortality is conditional. Murray therefore preferred to speak of it as the “Adamic administration.”²⁶ Yet even here, his construal of the matter displayed the same implicit monocovenantalism revealed in his discussion of the Sinai covenant. Once the term “covenant” is defined in such a manner as to include grace and promise as part of the definition, then the

²⁴ Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, page 19.

²⁵ With the possible exception of Hosea 6:7: “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” It is worth noting here that Hosea is referring to members of the Sinai covenant: “Ephraim,” “Judah,” the “house of Israel,” and that they transgressed the covenant as Adam did. Does this not at least suggest that the Sinai covenant had a works dimension analogous the original covenant of works? How could one transgress a promissory covenant “like Adam”?

²⁶ “The Adamic Administration,” *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. II (Carlisle, PA: 1977), pp. 47-59. Cf. also his article “Covenant,” in J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 264-268; and his “Covenant Theology,” *Collected Writings* vol. IV (1982), pp. 216-240, in which he argues that the expression “covenant of works” to refer to the Adamic administration did not appear until the end of the 15th century.

historic, two-covenant structure of covenant theology is no longer possible; and, as Murray desired, it would be necessary to construct a “re-casting” of the covenant theology, one that removes from any covenant any true sense of conditionality on the part of the human party thereto. Once this conditionality is removed, faith inevitably blends with works, since each is merely the human response to grace. And so, Murray’s disciples inevitably move in a monocovenantal direction; all covenants become essentially the same: Norman Shephard cannot easily distinguish Abrahamic faith from Sinaitic works; Greg Bahnsen could not distinguish Israel’s laws from the laws of non-theocratic nations; the paedo-communionists cannot distinguish a house meal (Passover) from a corporate meal (the Lord’s Supper); the so-called Federal Vision cannot easily distinguish the visible (the “outward Jew” of Romans 2) from the invisible (the “inward Jew” of Romans 2) church. Though Murray himself committed none of these errors, his monocovenantal tendency would inevitably have the effects it has had in each of these areas.

Conclusion

In Galatians, Paul only addressed three of the biblical covenants: The Abrahamic covenant, the Sinai covenant, and the New covenant.²⁷ He said nothing about pre-or-post-diluvian covenants, nothing about a covenant with Phineas regarding priests, nothing about David building God’s house, and nothing overt about the Adamic administration (which he

²⁷ It need hardly be said that Paul did not address here the later distinction between “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace” of Reformed dogmatics. That is, the later dogmatic designation of those various covenants by which God accomplishes the redemption of sinners as “covenant of grace” is many years post-Pauline. In this later designation, the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants would both be parts of the “covenant of grace,” though “differently administered” (WCF 7:5) “under various administrations” (WCF 7:6).

addressed overtly in Romans 5). Paul attempted to make sense of the New Covenant by pointing out its similarities to the Abrahamic administration and its dis-similarities to the Sinai administration.²⁸ Like the Abrahamic administration (and unlike the Sinai administration), the New Covenant is characterized by faith-not-works, and therefore truly blesses and justifies both Jew and Gentile who receive what was promised to Abraham, the man of faith who appeared 430 years before the mediator of the law-covenant.

²⁸ And he doesn't mention all of the dis-similarities. He says nothing about theocracy vs. non-theocracy, he doesn't mention that one of the primary Sinai sacraments (Passover) was a house-meal vs. a community meal, he stunningly says nothing about the Temple, and says nothing about whether the land of Canaan is still holy or not.