

covenant promises.

As one would expect, the typical interpretation of this section by the historic Christian Church has been to find a contrast between the “old covenant” and the “new covenant,” between law and grace. But Paul is not teaching us that the Torah given as covenant at Sinai produces slaves. What he is teaching us is that the Torah, utilized as a means to obtain covenant status, produces slaves, even as the attempts of Abraham and Sarah to produce the promised offspring through Hagar produces Ishmael. But the Torah was never given to Israel as a means to make covenant members. It was given to those who were already covenant members through redemption from Egypt, and as a revelation of the safeguards and standards given to covenant members in terms of their relationship with the covenant Maker, God Himself. It is when the Torah is misused that it produces slaves.

In the allegory put forward by Paul, there is no indication that the desire of Abraham and Sarah for a covenant son was wrong—they were looking for the manner in which the covenant promises would be passed to the next generation. Where they failed was the method they utilized as a means to obtain the promised son—they took matters into their own hands rather than trusting in the divine promise to produce the appointed son. In the same way, Paul does not disparage the Torah, but he speaks against the improper use of the Torah by the Influencers, as a means for Gentiles to enter the covenant.

Why is Sinai singled out as illustrative of the current error of the Influencers? The obvious answer is that the Influencers interpreted the Sinai narrative to teach that all who stood at Sinai automatically became covenant members (Ex. 23:32; 24:7-8; 34:10, 27-28). For them, acceptance of the Torah at Sinai was equal to covenant membership, and the same would obtain for the Gentiles: if they were to become covenant members, they too would have to “stand at Sinai” and receive the yoke of the commandments as defined and administrated by the Oral Torah of the Sages.

But such theology (as Paul has already shown in chapter 3) neglects the covenant made with Abraham! Surely the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had already called the descendants of Abraham His chosen, covenant people. Sinai was not the beginning of the covenant relationship with God for Israel. It was the continuation of a covenant already established. If one comes to Sinai without first participating in the faith of Abraham, the Sinai experience inevitably produces spiritual slavery. Paul knew this from his personal experience, for the Torah was well-known to him before coming to faith in Yeshua. Yet in his pre-faith reading of Torah the Messiah was veiled. As such, the Torah did not produce true freedom of soul and heart to obey God, for the Torah remained as letters on stone rather than as that which is written on the heart (2Cor 3).

26–27 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, “REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND.”

In contrast to the “present Jerusalem” is “the Jerusalem above.” Paul borrows from the Apocalyptic literature of his day when he speaks of “the Jerusalem above.” Note 2Baruch 4:2-5:

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This building now built in your midst is not that which is revealed with Me, that which was prepared beforehand here from the time when I took counsel to make Paradise, and showed it to Adam before he sinned, but when he transgressed the commandment it was removed from him, as also Paradise. And after these things I showed it to My servant Abraham by night among the portions of the victims. And again also I showed it to Moses on Mount Sinai when I showed to him the likeness of the tabernacle and all its vessels. And now, behold, it is preserved with Me, as also Paradise.

4Ezra promises that “the city which now is not seen shall appear” (7:26) and that “Zion will come and be made manifest to all people, prepared and built, as you saw the mountain carved out without hands” (13:36; cf. 8:52; 10:25-59). Enoch speaks of going up into the highest heaven, “into the highest Jerusalem” (2Enoch 55:2). This “heavenly Jerusalem” is alluded to in Hebrews (chapters 8-10) and specifically by John in the Revelation (3:12; 21:1-3, 10-11, 22f).

In the apocalyptic literature, the “heavenly Jerusalem” is the perfect reality of which the present Jerusalem is only an incomplete and inadequate picture. For Paul, the “present Jerusalem” represents the basic Pharisaic soteriology of his day, which had overlooked or rejected Yeshua. The “heavenly Jerusalem,” thus represents the covenant city as God intends it. It is not enslaved through attempts to gain righteous standing in the covenant through fleshly means (Hagar), but is free because it pictures the faithful ones serving God through faith in His Messiah, obeying the Torah from the heart as moved and fashioned by the Spirit.

Here Sarah (though not named) is “our mother.” Those who are the product of faith rather than the flesh correspond to Isaac rather than Ishmael. Once again, Paul employs the “already–not yet” aspects of his theology. The “present Jerusalem” defines the theology of the Influencers, while the “heavenly Jerusalem” pictures those of faith. Yet the “heavenly Jerusalem” awaits its appearance until the end of days. Nonetheless, those of faith constitute a foreshadow of the future “heavenly Jerusalem” in the here and now. What is ultimately “not yet” is already experienced and enjoyed by those who have faith in Yeshua.

Thus, the midrash leaves Paul’s readers with a most basic question, and one which would have a ready answer in the minds of all: “do you want to be the offspring of Hagar or of Sarah?” To the Gentiles this meant that succumbing to the pressures of the Influencers would, in the end, render them non-covenant members (offspring of Hagar) while remaining faithful to the Gospel as Paul had presented it would establish them as the true descendants of Abraham through faith.

In typical fashion, Paul bolsters his argument by appealing to the Scriptures. He quotes (using the familiar “it is written”) Isaiah 54:1 directly from the Lxx (itself a faithful translation of the MT at this point). The theme of the verse fits the context of Paul’s argument perfectly, by emphasizing that Sarah was barren, and that the answer to her barrenness was not to rely upon the flesh but to trust in God. To the exiled Judeans, God’s word of comfort comes from the prophet Isaiah. There would be a new beginning, like that which followed the flood (54:9-10), a new age in which Adonai would once again take Israel as His wife and would rebuild Jerusalem with precious stones (54:11-12), which would suggest a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem (John uses the same imagery, Rev 21:10-11, 18-21). Even as barren Sarah was promised that she would be a

mother of nations and that kings would come from her (Gen 17:16), so God is Isaiah promises the exiled peoples of Judah that her reestablishment would bring about the blessing upon the nations promised to Abraham. For Paul, this had direct application to his own work and mission, as well as to the identity of the Gentiles who had come to faith under the preaching of his Gospel. Here, as always, Paul envisions that his mission and calling were completely in line with the words of the prophets, and that the ingathering of the Gentiles into the people of Israel is nothing more or less than the fulfillment of the divine purpose as revealed by His prophets of old. Far from seeing a replacement of Israel, Paul understands the ingathering of the Gentiles as proof that God is once again reestablishing Israel as He had promised (cf. the “fallen sukkah” prophecy of Amos 9:11 quoted by James in Acts 15:16). For it is when God restores Israel that the nations stream into her, that the Torah will go forth from Zion, and the word of Adonai from Jerusalem (Is 2:3; Mic 4:2).

Paul was not alone in understanding Isaiah 54:1 in this fashion. Qumran (4Q164) uses Isaiah 54 as an illustration of wayward Jerusalem on the one hand, and restored Jerusalem on the other. Likewise the Targum identifies the “deserted wife” with “desolate Jerusalem.” The connection of Jerusalem to a “barren woman” is also seen in some of the apocalyptic literature:

And it came to pass after three thousand years that (David) built the City, and offered offerings: then it was that the barren bare a son. And whereas she told thee that she reared him with travail: that was the (divine) dwelling in Jerusalem. (4Ezra 10:45–46)

So Paul’s use of the text is well in line with its interpretive understanding of his day. But more to the point is that the quote from Isaiah 54 promises that the barren one would give birth to many children (like Sarah who would be a mother of nations). For Paul, this could be mean nothing else but the ingathering of the Gentiles. Thus, the ingathering of the Gentiles is linked to the promise of offspring given to Abraham and Sarah, a promise that is fulfilled by God’s power, not by man’s efforts.

28 And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Here Paul speaks boldly what he has only made implicit in the preceding verses. Paul is speaking directly to the Gentile believers, made clear by the emphatic “you” thrown forward in the clause. We might suggest “And you too, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.” This is not to exclude the Jewish people by any means, but the Gentile believers are Paul’s particular focus here and the subject of his appeal. The Gentiles had come to faith in Messiah, proven by their changed lives and the evidence of the Spirit’s presence. As such, they could rest upon the fact that they were children of Abraham according to promise (3:29) in exactly the same way that Isaac was his promised son and legitimate heir to the covenant blessings.

This statement, therefore, encapsulates Paul’s perspective: for the Gentiles, “getting into the covenant” is a matter of God’s promise to Abraham, and therefore rests upon God’s work, not man’s. The same is true, of course, for the physical descendants of Jacob, with the difference being that the physical offspring enter into the physical aspects of the covenant (temporal

blessing, the land, protection [bless those who bless/curse those who curse], etc.) simply on the basis of their being the offspring of Jacob. However, even the Jewish person remains in the covenant only by faith (relating to the “promise”), since all true covenant members are those with saving faith. Those without faith are eventually broken off from the covenant (though by God’s sovereign hand, they may be regrafted back in, Rom 11).

29 But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

Paul moves from the narrative events of Genesis to a midrashic application to his own times. How was it that he derived the fact that Isaac was “persecuted” by Ishmael? This comes, no doubt, through an interpretation of the narrative notice in Gen 21:9: “Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking.” At a surface level, the word “mocking” could be understood simply as harmless jesting. After all, Ishmael was some 14 years older than Isaac, and so it might be understood as innocent sibling rivalry. But the Hebrew word translated “mocking” (מְצַחֵק, *m'tzacheik*, from צחק) may also have other connotations. The word is used to denote errant sexual behavior in the context of pagan worship. Note Exodus 32:6, “So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play (לְצַחֵק).” Likewise, in Genesis 39:14, 17, the wife of Potiphar accuses Joseph of attempting to “make sport” of her, which is described as “he came to lie with me.”⁵² With these facts in mind, it may have been that Ishmael was doing far more than merely engaging in innocent sibling rivalry. His actions toward Isaac may have involved sexual overtones, or he may have been bullying him into some kind of fight that was more than just a wrestling match. Whatever the case, the situation warranted Sarah’s reaction, voiced to Abraham: “Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.’”

One Midrash considers the sin of Ishmael to be idolatry:

NOW THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL, WHO CAME INTO EGYPT WITH JACOB; EVERY MAN CAME WITH HIS HOUSEHOLD (Ex 1:1): Thus we read: He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes (Prov 13:24). Ordinarily, if a man’s friend says to him: ‘So-and-so, smite your son,’ he is ready even to deprive him of his livelihood. Then why ‘He that spareth his rod hateth his son’? To teach you that anyone who refrains from chastising his son causes him to fall into evil ways and thus comes to hate him. This is what we find in the case of Ishmael who behaved wickedly before Abraham his father, but he did not chastise him, with the result that he fell into evil ways, so that he despised him and cast him forth empty-handed from his house. What did Ishmael do? When he was fifteen years old, he commenced to bring idols from the street, toyed with them and worshipped them as he had seen others do. So when Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, making sport (Gen 21:9) – (the word *mezahkek* being always used of idolatry as in “And they rose up to make merry” (Ex 32:6) – she immediately said unto Abraham: Cast out

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52 It is also considered a strong possibility by the lexicons that the word שחק in 2Sam 2:14 is an alternative spelling of צחק, and in this context the word is used to denote “blood sport.”

this bondwoman and her son (Gen 21:10) lest my son learn of his ways. Hence And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son (ibid. 11), because he had become depraved. (Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 1.1)

The Midrash on Gen 21:9 also incorporates the parallel texts mentioned above:

Thus R. Akiba lectured: AND SARAH SAW THE SON OF HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN, WHOM SHE HAD BORNE UNTO ABRAHAM, MAKING SPORT. NOW MAKING SPORT refers to nought else but immorality, as in the verse, The Hebrew servant, whom thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to make sport of me (Gen 39:17). Thus this teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonor them. R. Ishmael taught: This term S P O R T refers to idolatry, as in the verse, And rose up to make sport (Ex 32:6). This teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them. R. Eleazar said: The term sport refers to bloodshed, as in the verse, Let the young men, I pray thee, arise and sport before us (2Sam 2:14). R. 'Azariah said in R. Levi's name: Ishmael said to Isaac, 'Let us go and see our portions in the field'; then Ishmael would take a bow and arrows and shoot them in Isaac's direction, whilst pretending to be playing. Thus it is written, As a madman who casteth fire-brands, arrows, and death; so is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith: Am not I in sport (Prov 22:18f.)? But I say: This term sport [mockery] refers to inheritance. 'For when our father Isaac was born all rejoiced, whereupon Ishmael said to them, 'You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion.' You may infer this from Sarah's protest to Abraham: FOR THE SON OF THIS BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE HEIR WITH MY SON, WITH ISAAC (21:10). WITH MY SON, even if he were not Isaac; OR WITH ISAAC, even if he were not my son; how much the more, WITH MY SON WITH ISAAC! (Mid. Rab. *Genesis* 53.11)

We may conclude, therefore, that there existed in Paul's day a popular teaching which described Isaac being persecuted in one fashion or another by Ishmael. It is this understanding which Paul brings into his midrash at this point. And it is this interpretation that forms the basis for his application of the Genesis narrative to his own times: the "children born according to the flesh" are the children of the earthly Jerusalem; the "children born according to the Spirit" are the children of the heavenly Jerusalem. And the former are persecuting the later. Indeed, Paul played a major role in exacting such persecution before he came to faith in the Messiah. And while this was surely an intra-Jewish issue (and not the persecutions that came in the era of the emerging Christian Church), it was nonetheless a genuine persecution (cf. 1Thess 2:14-15; 2Cor 11:24).

We should not pass by the change from "promise" to "Spirit" in this verse. Whereas before Paul refers to "son of promise," here Isaac is referred to as "the one of the Spirit," pointing, no doubt, to the work of the Spirit in the miraculous birth of Isaac. This fits perfectly with Paul's midrash. The Gentile believers have been "born by the Spirit," whereas the Influencers are telling them they need to be born "of the flesh" (i.e., circumcision). Isaac therefore represents a different kind of "lineage," one based upon God's promise rather than upon "the flesh."

Isaac, in other words, represents a different kind or line of descent,

one which stands in contrast to merely physical descent. Isaac represents those born through the power of divine promise, which is another way of saying, through the power of God's Spirit.⁵³

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This contrast between Isaac and Ishmael fits Paul's polemic perfectly.

30 But what does the Scripture say? "CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN."

Having used Gen 21:9 to support the idea of the "children of the flesh" persecuting the "children of the Spirit (promise)," Paul is ready to make his next point by quoting Gen 21:10. He quotes the Lxx (which follows the Hebrew text closely) with only a minor change: he puts a double negative in to emphasize that "never" (cf. NIV) will the son of the bondwoman be an heir with the son of the free woman. The two are mutually exclusive in terms of inheriting the covenant promises.

We should see here a direct contrast or rebuttal to the perspective of the Influencers who want to "shut out" the Gentiles (v. 17) but who, according to Paul's analogy, are themselves to be "thrown out" of the covenant blessings. This is not to suggest that Paul is applying such a fierce tone to Judaism in general!⁵⁴ He is rather making such an impassioned statement in regard to the Influencers (and any who stood with them), that their perspective of covenant status, based as it was upon the "flesh" (ethnic status), could not stand together with the truth of the Gospel, which proclaimed sonship in the family of God through faith alone. Even as Ishmael and Isaac could not remain in the same family, so "covenant membership by the flesh" could not remain together with "covenant membership by the Spirit." The two are mutually exclusive.

Obviously, this is not a rejection of his Jewish brothers in general, nor even of those who opposed him and his Gospel. But it is a rejection of the teaching that covenant membership can be based on anything except the work of the Messiah Yeshua, received by faith. That Paul would later explain this in detail in Romans (9-11) may indicate that his fiery language here caused a significant reaction, as we might expect it would.

31 So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

Paul softens his tone with the word "brethren," clearly emphasizing the family relationship that comes as a result of covenant membership. Here he restates his former conclusions (3:29; 4:28), but uses the midrash of Ishmael and Isaac, stressing the antithesis of slave/free, parallel to "flesh/Spirit."⁵⁵ Note carefully that Paul moves from the 2nd person of the previous verses to the 1st person "we" — "we are not children of a bondwoman" In doing so, Paul disregards ethnicity altogether in terms of covenant membership. This builds upon his former "neither Jew nor Greek" of 3:28. Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews, bespeaks his unity with the Gentile believers by including himself in

⁵³ Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 257.

⁵⁴ So Lightfoot, who writes that Paul "confidently sounds the death-knell of Judaism" (*Galatians*, p. 282).

⁵⁵ Paul puts "flesh" and "Spirit" in antithesis only in this passage and in Romans (1:3-4; 8:4, 5, 12-13).

that group identified as children of the “free woman,” that is, children of the promise, born by the Spirit. And it further emphasizes that since all believers have true and abiding covenant status based upon the same criteria of faith in the Messiah, all are equal members of the covenant, with the same privileges and responsibilities within the context of the freedom won for His people by the Messiah.