

# THE ALLEGORY OF HAGAR AND SARAH: GAL 4.21-31

TORSTEN LÖFSTEDT  
SUECIA

## *Resumen*

Este artículo es una "apretada" lectura de Gal 4,21-31. Trata de reseñar brevemente el debate que hay en torno a la clasificación de este pasaje. Esta alegoría, más que confirmar su uso para el desarrollo de una teología sistemática, nos introduce en una nueva perspectiva e ilustra un punto ya abordado por Pablo en alguna otra parte: los seguidores de Jesús son, antes que los judíos, los verdaderos herederos de las promesas de Dios a Abraham.

## *Summary*

This article is close reading of Gal 4.21-31. It briefly reviews the debate regarding the generic classification of the passage, concluding that this passage does not sanction the use of allegory or typology as a basis for developing a systematic theology. Rather than introducing new theological insights, this allegory illustrates a point Paul makes elsewhere, that the followers of Christ rather than the Jews are the true inheritors of God's promise of Abraham.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul turns repeatedly to the Scriptures to refute his opponents, Christian Jews who were trying to convince the Gentile Christians in Galatia to be circumcised (cf Gal 6.12-13) and to follow other aspects of the Mosaic law<sup>1</sup>. This has been considered Paul's most polemical

---

<sup>1</sup> See R. N. LONGENECKER, "Galatians", in . *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 41. (Dallas, TX 1990) xcv,c. Following common theological usage. I will refer to these opponents as 'Judaizers', although strictly speaking the verb *ἰουδαίζω*, means "to live according to Jewish religious regulations" (NEWMAN, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* . [1971] 87) rather than to force a Gentile to submit to Jewish law.

letter. While Paul's emotions are plain to see, the logic behind his arguments is often more difficult to follow. The allegory of Hagar and Sarah is a case in point. Like much in Galatians, its position in the letter is odd. It follows a series of personal appeals (4.12-20), but seems to be an illustration of a point made much earlier (3.6-18). The function of the passage is also unclear. It comes as the last of Paul's appeals to Scripture; should it be considered his crowning argument, as Cosgrove<sup>2</sup> would have it, or is it an illustration added as an afterthought, the view of most commentators? Paul's methodology is *also* obscure; on the first reading he seems to be interpreting passages from the Old Testament completely at will and to be making grand pronouncements without any basis. *Finally* the language of the passage is difficult, and in at least one point there is no agreement on the reconstruction of the *original* text. Much has been written about this passage, but fundamental questions remain unanswered.

I am convinced that there is some sense behind Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar. My goal in this paper is to read the allegory as Paul might have intended for it to be read. Paul's thoughts are ordered, although they are not necessarily systematically presented. I will examine Paul's main points roughly in the order that they were presented, and try to explain the connections he makes. As a conclusion I will try to determine whether this passage is in fact a true allegory, and whether we can use Paul's methods to interpret other passages in the Old Testament.

## II. SETTING THE STAGE

The allegory of Hagar and Sarah has been considered an *ad hominem* argument against Paul's opponents. Paul is turning their reasoning against them<sup>3</sup>. The sentence with which Paul introduces this passage sets the polemical tone: "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not hear the law?" (4.21). Betz notes that Paul is using νόμος ambiguously here; "the first time it refers to the Jewish Torah, the second time to Scripture, or, more pre-

<sup>2</sup> CH. H. COSGROVE, "The law has given Sarah no children (Gal 4.21-30)": *Novum Testamentum* 29. (1987) 219-235.

<sup>3</sup> I follow the definition of an *ad hominem* argument as "an argument taking as its premise something that is accepted by the other party but not perhaps by the arguer and deducing a consequence unacceptable to that other party" (A. FLOW, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York 1984) 5).

cisely, to Scriptural tradition interpreted allegorically<sup>4</sup>. Paul will turn the Jewish understanding of the law against them.

Paul proceeds to give a summary retelling of the story of how Abraham had two children, Ishmael and Isaac, the former through the slave woman Hagar, the latter through his lawful wife Sarah. Traditionally this story has been understood literally: the Jews, as the physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah, are the heirs of the covenant. The story of Sarah and Hagar is part of the family history of the Jews. Scripture teaches that the Jews are the descendants of Isaac, son of Abraham's rightful wife, the free woman Sarah. It was to Isaac that God gave his covenant<sup>5</sup>, the sign of which was circumcision. Ever since Abraham's day, Jewish boys and male converts to Judaism have been circumcised. Without being circumcised a Jewish man could not become a partaker of the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham and Isaac<sup>6</sup>.

It is likely that Paul's opponents in Galatia had argued that unless the Galatian believers were circumcised, they had no share in Abraham's blessing. In their opinion there would be no reason to assume that the coming of the Messiah should have undone the eternal covenant made with Abraham. Some have suggested that Paul's opponents may have used the story of Isaac and Ishmael to strengthen their case. Barrett finds support for this thesis in the abrupt way in which the characters are introduced<sup>7</sup>. Paul introduces the story thus:

"It is written that Abraham had two sons, one from a slave woman and one from a free woman. But the one from the slave woman was born according to the flesh, the one from the free woman through a promise." (4.22-23 my translation)

<sup>4</sup> H. D. BETZ, *Galatians: a commentary on Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia, PA 1979).

<sup>5</sup> "Then God said, '... your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him'" (Gen 17.19, NIV).

<sup>6</sup> The Lord said to Abraham, "My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male... will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen 17.13-14, NIV).

<sup>7</sup> Ch. K. BARRETT, "The allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the argument of Galatians", in J. FRIEDRICH - W. POHLMANN - P. R. STUHLMACHER (eds.), *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag*. (Tübingen-Göttingen. 1976) 9.

In this brief retelling, none of the characters are named. Paul does mention the names Hagar and Isaac in the interpretation which follows, but it is presented as known information. Neither here, nor in the interpretation which follows, does Paul name Sarah or Ishmael. To Barrett this suggests that “the story is already before the Galatians; they will know that the slave is Hagar, the free woman Sarah”<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, it is hard to see how Paul's opponents could have used this story to argue the importance of circumcision; after all, both Isaac and Ishmael were circumcised<sup>9</sup>. But perhaps that is exactly Paul's point when he asks them whether they don't hear the law.

Paul's brief summary of the story hints at the themes which will follow. The phrase “the one from the slave woman was born according to the flesh, the one from the free woman through a promise” (4.23) includes the twin dichotomies of slavery and freedom, flesh and promise. The phrase *κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται* has also been translated “born in the ordinary way” (NIV). But Paul is probably intending more than this. Paul often uses *σάρξ* to refer to the sinful aspect of a human being. In saying that he was born (or conceived) *κατὰ σάρκα* Paul may also be implying that Ishmael was sinfully conceived, the result of human reasoning going against God's will. In contrast Isaac was conceived contrary to human expectation and understanding but in accordance with God's promise to Abraham's rightful spouse, the free woman Sarah.

Further, in his retelling of the story of Hagar and Sarah, Paul is correlating *σάρξ* with slavery and ‘promise’ (*ἐπαγγελία*) with freedom. The dichotomy between flesh and promise in turn echoes a central theme of this letter, namely that circumcision (of the flesh)<sup>10</sup> leads to slavery under the law while faith in the promised Christ brings freedom (cf Gal 5.2). Finally the phrase *κατὰ σάρκα* brings to mind the Jewish view that they are the chosen people because they were physically descended from Abraham and Isaac. Paul's response is that Abraham's heirs are those who are related to him spiritually, not physically.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. K. BARRETT, *ibid.* This theory has been accepted *inter alia* by J. D. G. DUNN, *The theology of Paul's letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge- New York 1993) 96; K. H. JOBES, “Jerusalem, our Mother: metalepsis and intertextuality in Galatians 4.21”: *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1993) 300; LONGENECKER, *a. c.*, .200.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gen 17.23 (COSGROVE, *a. c.*, 223). See also p. 20 below.

<sup>10</sup> Paul uses ‘flesh’ in reference to circumcision in Gal 6.13: “they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.” (NIV).

## III. HAGAR, MOUNT SINAI, JERUSALEM

As his summary has already suggested, in Paul's opinion there is more to the story of Hagar and Sarah than its literal meaning. He writes, "For these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, it gives birth into slavery. This is Hagar. She is Mount Sinai in Arabia, but she corresponds to Jerusalem today, for Jerusalem is enslaved with her children" (4.24-25, my translation). Paul is clearly intending to shock the Judaizers in Galatia. He connects Hagar, slavery, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem twice using slightly different constructions; there is no way that the Jewish readers can avoid taking offense at his words. While the emotional impact is easy to imagine, Paul's reasoning is more difficult to follow.

The phrase τὸ δὲ Ἰαγάρ Σινᾶ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Αραβίᾳ is difficult. Evidently the scribes also found it confusing, as the manuscripts differ considerably here. The UBS reading quoted above is supported by A, B, D gr and others. It would be translated "now the word (or name) Hagar is Mount Sinai..."<sup>11</sup>. But there is reason to suspect that the original reading did not include the word Ἰαγάρ. Some of the oldest manuscripts lack this word<sup>12</sup>. The τὸ γὰρ Σινᾶ accounts for the origin of the other readings and is arguably no easier than the UBS reading<sup>13</sup>. It actually does not matter which reading we choose. The reading without the word Ἰαγάρ could be translated "Mount Sinai is in Arabia, but it corresponds to Jerusalem now, for Jerusalem is enslaved with her children," but this is not the most likely translation. Rather an understood 'she', referring to Hagar, is the subject of both ἐστὶν and συστοιχεῖ<sup>14</sup>. Hence my translation, "She is Mount Sinai in Arabia, but she corresponds to Jerusalem today, for Jerusalem is enslaved with her children"<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The neuter article τό would specify that Hagar is being treated as a lexical item (perhaps τὸ ὄνομα Ἰαγάρ) rather than as a person (cf. H. D. BETZ, a. c., 244).

<sup>12</sup> Τὸ δὲ Σινᾶ... (p. 46, Old Latin, etc.); τὸ γὰρ Σινᾶ (aleph, C, Old Latin, Vulgate, etc.).

<sup>13</sup> This view is supported by R. J. KEPPLER, "An analysis of Antiochene exegesis of Galatians 4.24-26": *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1976-1977) 249.

<sup>14</sup> So COSGROVE, a. c., 228.

<sup>15</sup> Συστοιχεῖ is a NT *hapax legomenon*, but its meaning is clear: "corresponds to" (cf. BAGD 1979.795 finds this meaning in ARISTOTELES, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1.4 p. 1906b, 6 and *Metaphysica* 1,5 p. 986a, 23). John Chryostom's interpretation of the verb as 'borders on, is contiguous to' with Mt Sinai as the subject is to be rejected (KEPPLER, a. c., 245). The Vulgate's *conjunctus est* (is joined) is also misleading (J. CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI 1948) 139).

Why does Paul mention Mount Sinai and say it is in Arabia? He could simply have said “Hagar is Jerusalem today, for she is enslaved with her children.” Various explanations for this phrase have been advanced. John Chrysostom asserted that there is a linguistic connection between Hagar and Sinai; “The bondwoman is called Hagar, and ‘Hagar’ is the word for Mount Sinai in the language of that country”<sup>16</sup>. Others have tried to show that Paul is equating Hagar with the Hebrew *hahar*, the mountain, but this is phonetically unlikely<sup>17</sup>. Steinhauser<sup>18</sup> tries to show that the phrase “now the word (or name) Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia” depends on a targum on Gen 16.7, identifying Shur, the place where God confronted Hagar, as Hagra. According to *Targum Onqelos* on Gen 16.9, God tells Hagar to let herself be enslaved by Sarah again (“be enslaved by her”; in contrast, the MT reads “submit to her”). There is then a precedence for making the name ‘Hagar’ or a version thereof refer to a place rather than a person. I find Steinhauser’s argument weak. Is it likely that the Gentile Christians in Galatia would have recognized these oblique references to Jewish targums? And if they did, what would this add to their understanding of the story? Hagar is already identified as a slave girl in the MT, so the added reference to enslavement does not say much. Further, the parallel in names is very inexact; Paul says Hagar is Mt Sinai, not Hagra is Mt Sinai. The primary connection between Hagar and Mount Sinai is slavery. Ishamel was born into slavery because Hagar was a slave and the present day enslavement of the Jews to the law can be traced to Mount Sinai.

Were Paul simply to have said that Hagar is Jerusalem, enslaved with her children, many Jews would have agreed. Israel was occupied by Rome; they could quote Isaiah (for example) in support of this view: “Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion” (Isa 52.2, NIV). But by adding Mount Sinai to the equation, Paul is saying that the Jews are enslaved to the law<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> NPNF, series 1, 13.34; quoted in KEPPLER, a. c., 245. See also BETZ, o. c., 244: “Paul must have thought that the name Hagar refers to the mountain in Arabia commonly known as Mount Sinai”.

<sup>17</sup> A. T. HANSON, *Studies in Paul’s technique and theology* (London 1974) 95 refers to Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts*, p. 202.

<sup>18</sup> M. G. STEINHAUSER, “Gal 4,25a: Evidence of Targumic tradition in Gal 4,21-31?”: *Biblica* 70 (1989) 234-240.

<sup>19</sup> We may assume that in speaking of ‘Jerusalem now’ Paul refers not only to the city but to the whole Jewish people, or in Betz’s words, to “the political-religious institution of Judaism” (o. c., 246).

Paul puts the law in very negative light; he is saying that just as Hagar the slave gave birth to the unfree Ishmael, so the law which was given at Mount Sinai led to slavery. In his telegraphic style, Paul traces the origin of the law only to a mountain in Arabia, not to God's prophet Moses, much less to God himself. It was not necessary to specify that Mount Sinai is in Arabia; I would suggest that Paul is trying to further denigrate the law by associating its place of origin with the Arabs, the descendants of Ishmael<sup>20</sup>. The reference to Arabia may also be intended to stress the distance between the law and the promise; the law was given outside the land of the promise<sup>21</sup>. Paul downplayed the supposed divine origin of the law earlier in the letter by saying, "the law was put into effect through angels by a mediator" (3.19)<sup>22</sup>. This assertion seems to depend on a rabbinic interpretation of the Deut 33.2 and Ps 67.18 in the Septuagint<sup>23</sup>. It was evidently widely accepted, as it is referred to again in Acts 7.38, 53 and Heb 2.2<sup>24</sup>.

The notion that the law leads to condemnation and slavery, not righteousness is a central theme in Galatians<sup>25</sup>. Paul's low opinion of the law is always contrasted with his high view of the promise, which was given directly to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. The law came 430 years later than the covenant God made with Abraham (3.17); it was a late creation with only temporary validity. Rather than being a redefinition of the Abrahamic covenant, as the Jews held, the law was introduced to bring about knowledge of sin, until the promised Christ would come<sup>26</sup>. Dunn argues that Paul has a more posi-

<sup>20</sup> Many of the names of the sons of Ishmael (Gen 25.13-15) are Arabic in origin (HAMILTON, *Genesis* vol 2, NICOT, 170-2. Traditionally Arabs have viewed themselves as descendants of Ishmael. Theodoret of Cyrrhus had a similar explanation for the juxtaposition of Hagar and Sinai: "alongside that mountain the race of Hagar has been dwelling" (MPG 82.492, quoted in KEPPLER, *a. c.*, 247).

<sup>21</sup> HANSON, *o. c.*, 96. See also Calvin (*o. c.*, 139) "[The mountain] lies in Arabia, beyond the limits of the holy land, by which the eternal inheritance was prefigured."

<sup>22</sup> [ὁ νόμος] διαταγείς δι' ἀγγέλων ἐν χειρὶ μεσίτου. Note that Paul does not refer to Moses by name here.

<sup>23</sup> LONGENECKER, *o. c.*, 139-140. "The Lord is come from Sina... on his right hand were his angels with him" (Deut 33.2 - Brenton); "the chariots of God are ten thousand fold, thousands of rejoicing ones: the Lord is among them, in Sina, in the holy place" (Ps 67.17 - Brenton)

<sup>24</sup> See also Jub. 1.29-2.1, PHILO, *Som.* 1.143. LONGENECKER, *o. c.*, 139; DUNN, *o. c.*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (2.21 NIV); "For all who rely on observing the law are under a curse.. Clearly no one is justified before God by the law" (3.10-11, NIV). See also 4.3; 4.9.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gal 3.19; Rom 3.20, 4.15; 7.7. See also LONGENECKER, *o. c.*, 138.

tive view of the law; he suggests for Paul the role of the law was “to provide through its sacrificial system a means of atoning for transgression and thus of facilitating Israel's daily living within the covenant”<sup>27</sup>. At any rate, after Christ's resurrection the law was no longer binding<sup>28</sup>. It had now lost its purpose, and served only to enslave people. Thus, contrary to what Jews assert, they are not the spiritual descendants of Sarah, but of Hagar, the slave woman.

#### IV. SARAH, THE JERUSALEM ABOVE, AND ISAIAH 54.1

Paul introduced his interpretation by saying that the two woman are two covenants; one would expect him to now say that Sarah is the covenant promised to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, and that Sarah corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem, which enjoys freedom, together with her children<sup>29</sup>. Instead he writes simply, “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.” (4.26, NIV)<sup>30</sup>. Corresponding to the earthly Jerusalem which is in slavery there is then a free city, the Jerusalem above, and it is to this city that we belong.

The portrayal of Jerusalem as a mother is attested in Hebrew Scriptures<sup>31</sup>, and the notion of a heavenly Jerusalem is widespread in Jewish literature<sup>32</sup>. While in Jewish literature the heavenly Jerusalem refers to something yet to

<sup>27</sup> DUNN, *o. c.*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Cf Gal. 3.25 “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” (NIV)

<sup>29</sup> Some commentators feel that a reference to Mount Zion in this second half of the allegory would have been a fitting counterpart to Mount Sinai; Mount Zion does have eschatological significance elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Heb 12.22). But as LONGENECKER notes, such a reference would have been confusing in the present context (*o. c.*, 214).

<sup>30</sup> Some manuscripts read μήτηρ πάντων ἡμῶν (alpha<sup>1</sup>, A, C2; but p. 46, alpha<sup>\*</sup>, B, C<sup>\*</sup>, D support support the reading without πάντων. There is no significant difference in meaning - the Jerusalem above is the mother of all who believe in Christ.

<sup>31</sup> e.g., Ps 86.5 (LXX) “A man shall say, Zion is my mother”; Isa 50.1 “Because of your transgressions, your mother was sent away”; Isa 66.7-11 (quoted below); 4 Ezra 10.7 “For Zion, the mother of us all, is in deep grief and great distress” (NRSV) (LONGENECKER, *o. c.*, 215).

<sup>32</sup> It is reportedly found “in embryonic form” in Ps 87.3; Isa 54; Ezek 40-48; Sir 13.36; 36.13ff; Tob 13; 1 En. 53.6; 90.28-29; 2 En. 55.2; Pss. Sol. 17.33; Test. of Dan 5.12; 4 Ezra 7.26; 8.52; 10.25-28; 2 Bar. 4.2-6; 32.2; 59.4 ) (LONGENECKER, *o. c.*, 214). In many of those verses the reference to a new or heavenly Jerusalem is not explicit; there is not space enough here to explain the interpretations of these passages.



come, in the realized eschatology of the New Testament it is identified with the church<sup>33</sup>, e.g., "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Heb 12.22; cf. Heb 11.10, 14-16; 13.14). Though the church is the heavenly Jerusalem now, it will be further glorified: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev 21.2, NIV).

Paul explains what he means in calling the heavenly Jerusalem 'our mother' by quoting from the Septuagint of Isaiah:

"Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children;  
break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains;  
because more are the children of the desolate woman  
than of her who has a husband." (Gal 4.27, NIV).

Isaiah is portraying Jerusalem as a barren and forsaken woman, whose rightful position will be restored. This connection is clearly implied in the present passage, as a comparison of Isa 54.1 and Isa 54.11-12 shows:

"O afflicted city<sup>34</sup>, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels and all your walls of precious stones" (Isa 54.11-12, NIV).

This identification between Jerusalem and the barren woman is made explicit in Targum of Isaiah 54.1 "Sing praises, O Jerusalem, who was a barren woman who bore not..."<sup>35</sup>. Isaiah refers to Jerusalem as a barren and or forsaken woman elsewhere<sup>36</sup>. This contrasts with Jerusalem's earlier state as the "city of righteousness, the faithful mother-city Zion" (Isa 1.26)<sup>37</sup>. Isa 66.7-8 builds on Isa 54.1, further clarifying how Jerusalem will have children although she has not even had birthpangs, i.e., how she will suddenly be reestablished although there is nothing but desolation now:

---

<sup>33</sup> Contra BETZ "[Paul's] 'heavenly Jerusalem' is pre-existent and remains in heaven; those who are to dwell in it must ascend to it" (o. c., 246), "Paul does not equate the 'heavenly Jerusalem' with the church" (248).

<sup>34</sup> Neither the Hebrew nor the Greek actually use the word for "city" but it is clearly implied.

<sup>35</sup> LONGENECKER, o. c., 215; the translation of the Targum of Isaiah was not available.

<sup>36</sup> e.g., "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me...'" (Isa 49.14, NIV); [Zion will say] "I was bereaved and barren, I was exiled and rejected" (Isa 49.21, NIV); "The Lord will call you back, as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit- a wife who married young only to be rejected" (Isa 54.6, NIV).

<sup>37</sup> These parallels were noted by JOBES, a. c., 310.

"Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her she delivers a son. Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is aon in labor than she gives birth to children." (Isa 66.7-8, NIV).

4 Ezra, a Palestinian apocalypse from the intertestamental period, also plays on the connections between the present Jerusalem as a barren and rejected woman and grieving mother, turning into (and/or giving birth to) a new, heavenly Jerusalem. This connection is vividly portrayed in the following verses:

"While I was talking to her [the grieving woman who had lost her son], her face suddenly began to shine exceedingly; her countenance flashed like lightning, so that I was too frightened to approach her, and my heart was terrified. While I was wondering what this meant, she uttered a loud and fearful cry, so that the earth shook at the sound. When I looked up, the woman was no longer visible to me, but a city was being built, and a place of huge foundations showed itself." (4 Ezra 10.25-27, NRSV).

The angel Uriel then explains to the seer, "The woman who you saw is Zion, which you now behold as a city being built." (10.44). We may assume that the "loud and fearful cry" refers to the woman's birthpangs in giving birth to the New Jerusalem. Similar birthing imagery is also found in Rev 12.2:

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon... The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that he might devour her child the moment it was born." (Rev 12.1-4, NIV).

The meaning of this passage is not perfectly clear; it is likely that the woman refers to the church, and the one who is born is Christ<sup>38</sup>. This may at first seem an unlikely interpretation – should not Christ be the one who gives life to the church? – but it is reflected in Galatians, in a verse immediately preceding our passage: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..." (Gal 4.19 NIV)<sup>39</sup>. Given the preva-

<sup>38</sup> BAUCKHAM, *The Theology of Revelation* (1993) 128, writes, "She is the mother of Jesus and of Christians- Eve and Mary, Israel, Zion and the church all combined in an image of the spiritual essence of the covenant people of God." I would add Sarah's name to the list of ingredients.

<sup>39</sup> The same verb ὠδίνω is used here and in the LXX of Isa 54.1.

lence of the imagery about Jerusalem as a barren woman giving birth, and about the church (or the apostle) giving birth to Christ, it is likely that the Galatian readers would have made a connection between Isa 54.1 and the birth of Christ and through him, the church. One might expect some explicit connection between Isa 54.1 and the narrative of Hagar and Sarah. One such linkage is the use of the word *στεῖρα* in both accounts (Gen 1 1.30, Isa 54.1); according to the rabbinical principle of interpretation called *gēzêrâ sâwâ* (interpretation by verbal analogy)<sup>40</sup>, the presence of the same word in two passages allows the interpreter to use one of those passages in interpreting the other. This is not a very strong connection, however. Jobes suggests we turn to Isa 51. 1-2 for the key to Paul's argument: "Listen to me you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord... look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth" (51.1-2). Here Sarah is portrayed not as the mother of Isaac (although her giving birth to Isaac is not denied), but as the mother of those who are righteous and seek the Lord. While Isaiah is speaking to a Jewish audience, Paul applies his message to all who are righteous and seek the Lord, including the uncircumcised Gentile believers; they are the true children of Sarah. One of the weaknesses of this interpretation is that not only does Paul not cite Isa 51.1-2, he does not even refer to Sarah by name in this passage. One reason for this may be that although Isaac was a child of promise (Gal 4.28), neither he nor Sarah is the one from whom Christians should trace their genealogy. We are heirs to the promise through Jesus, not Isaac<sup>41</sup>.

Jesus is not named explicitly in this passage either, but when Paul quotes Isa 54.1, he hints at Jesus' role as the firstborn<sup>42</sup> of the new nation. Paul quotes Gen 18.13 for the same purpose in Rom 9.9: "For this is how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son'" (NIV). It is significant that Isa 54.1 is preceded immediately by a suffering servant passage (Isa 53.1-12). This passage is referred to repeatedly in the NT<sup>43</sup>, and formed part of the early church *kerygma* about Christ. It includes verses telling of the justification of the people: "By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (53.11); and "For he bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgres-

<sup>40</sup> BARRETT, a. c., 12, LONGENECKER a. c., 215.

<sup>41</sup> On the other hand Paul has no qualms about speaking of Sarah in the similar context of Rom 9.9.

<sup>42</sup> On Jesus as the firstborn among brothers see Rom 8.29.

<sup>43</sup> Matt 8.17; Luke 22.37; John 12.38; Acts 8.32-33; Rom 10.16; 1 Pet 2.22.

sors" (53.12). Although he does not quote them in this letter, Paul presumably intended for his readers to use these verses to account for how 'the barren woman' finally received offspring<sup>44</sup>. It is only through Jesus that anyone may be counted righteous (cf. Gal 2.16, 2.21). Would Paul's Galatian audience have made this connection? Jobes assumes that Paul had earlier cited some of those passages from Isaiah in proclaiming the gospel to the Galatians; in citing one of the key verses, Isa 54.1, they would have been reminded of the other verses used to build up the argument.

### V. CHILDREN OF FLESH AND CHILDREN OF PROMISE/SPIRIT

Paul sums up his argument by writing: "And you, brothers, are children of promise, like Isaac" (4.28, my translation). This sentence reflects the earlier statement "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3.29 NIV). In the traditional Jewish reading, when the Lord says to Abraham "these promises were made to you and to your seed (καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου)"<sup>45</sup>, the collective noun σπέρμα (Heb zerá) is understood to refer to Isaac and his descendants. Now Paul argues that Abraham's seed was ultimately not Isaac and his offspring, but Jesus (cf. Gal 3.16). It is only through our identity with Christ that we may be considered the seed of Abraham. Thus, followers of Christ are spiritually the offspring God promised Abraham and Sarah. This is the logical conclusion of his argument so far. Paul restates this thesis in Romans:

"Not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants, but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you'. This means that it is not the children of flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise are counted as descendants" (Rom 9.7-8, NRSV).

The phrases 'children of flesh' (τέκνα τῆς σαρκός) and 'children of promise' (τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας) in Rom 9.8 echo the phrases κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται and οἱ ἐπαγγελίας used earlier in this allegory (Gal 4.23). Both Ishmael and Isaac are physical descendants of Abraham. But although he was the first-born, Ishmael was disinherited because God said that his promise did not apply to him. Similarly, physical descent from Abraham and Isaac does not

<sup>44</sup> So also HANSON, *o. c.*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Gen 12.7; 13.15; 17.19; 24.7.

guarantee the Jews a part in the kingdom of God; God will give his inheritance to whomever he chooses.

The phrases 'children of the promise' (Gal 4.28; Rom 9.8) and 'born through promise' (Gal 4.23) may also be compared with the phrase 'the one according to the Spirit' (τὸν κατὰ πνεῦμα) (Gal 4.29). In Paul's usage 'promise' and 'Spirit' are often virtually synonymous. The most important promise God makes is to be the God of Abraham and of his descendants (Gen 17.7). When God gives his Spirit to someone, he shows that he is now that person's God (see Gal 3.2,5). The connection between the Spirit and the promise is also made in Gal 3.14: "In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (NRSV). The 'promise of the Spirit' here means the 'promised Spirit'.

Having now established that Christians are the true heirs of the promise of Abraham, Paul reflects on the treatment that the Galatian Christians have been subject to: "But just as that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also" (Gal 4.29, NRSV). In the same way as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so do the Jews persecute the Christians, as Paul himself can attest (Gal 1.13). When Paul writes that Ishmael persecuted Isaac, he is relying on a tradition preserved in the targums on Gen 21.9<sup>46</sup>. The passage in Genesis reads: "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac" (NRSV). The verb translated 'playing' (*m'ēsah ēq*) was understood as 'making fun' by later interpreters, perhaps to justify Sarah's rough treatment of Hagar and Ishmael (hence the translation 'mocking' in the NIV)<sup>47</sup>. Would the Gentile Galatians have understood this reference to a rabbinical tradition? I think so; even if they did not have access to the targums themselves, Paul states explicitly what it is he wishes to say. And the tradition is supported by Gen 16.12: the angel of the Lord says to Hagar regarding Ishmael, "He shall be a wild ass of a man with his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

<sup>46</sup> LONGENECKER, a. c., 217 refers to Tg. Ps.-J Gen 21.9-11; Tg. Onq Gen 21.9; t. Sota 6.6; Pesiq R 48.2; Pirge R. El. 30. Excerpts from some of these texts are given in LONGENECKER, *ibid.*, 200-205.

<sup>47</sup> LONGENECKER, *ibid.*, 201. Calvin accepts this interpretation: "There cannot then be a doubt that he maliciously endeavoured to provoke the child Isaac by reproachful language" (*Commentaires*, 143).

Paul asks the Galatians, "But what does the scripture say? Cast out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." (4.30, RSV). Paul is quoting Gen 21.10, but he changes the last words of the quote from "my son Isaac" to "the son of the free woman." Further, he ascribes these words to Scripture instead of to Sarah. The effect is of making this a divine imperative<sup>48</sup>. Thus, Paul is telling the Galatians to free themselves from the Mosaic law and to expel those who are trying to make them submit to it. In Barrett's opinion, "This is not... a call to the Gentile Christians... to rise up and expel their Jewish Christian brethren; it is rather a command of God to his (angelic) agents, and expresses what the fate of each party is to be"<sup>49</sup>. Barrett does not offer any support for this conclusion; I assume that it is simply an attempt to make Paul's words less jarring to the modern reader. I would question Barrett's characterization of the Judaizers as "Jewish Christian brethren"; I doubt Paul considered them true Christians at all. More likely he felt they were false brothers, like his opponents in Jerusalem (Gal 2.4). Dunn<sup>50</sup> suggests that Paul is using strong language for rhetorical effect; Paul does so elsewhere, most notably when he expresses his wish that the Judaizers would go castrate themselves (Gal 5.12). Still, judging by the tone of this letter, Paul did consider these people a real threat to the young congregation, and I think he was serious in his call to have them expelled.

In quoting Gen 21.10 Paul is not encouraging the Galatian believers to deprive Jews of their spiritual inheritance, to keep them from coming to know the promised Messiah. These Jews had already determined their own fate; they rejected Christ, the one to whom God's promise to Abraham referred (Gal 3.19). Hence, they are not inheritors of that promise. They are to be excluded from the body of Christ because they have already excluded themselves from it.

Paul wraps up his allegory by saying, "So, brethren, we are not children of the slave girl but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set you free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (4.31-5.1,

---

<sup>48</sup> HANSON, *o. c.*, 99. God does also endorse Sarah's command: "Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Gen 21.12, NIV).

<sup>49</sup> BARRETT, *a. c.*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> DUNN, *o. c.*, 97.

RSV)<sup>51</sup>. Paul has just urged the Galatians to expel the Judaizers; now he reminds them of the danger they face were they to give in to their opponents. Through Christ they have been set free, if they follow the urgings of the Judaizers and let themselves be circumcised, they will be held responsible to the law as a whole (c.F. 5.3). This is what Paul has been trying to say throughout this letter; it has been given further emphasis through this allegory.

## VI. ALLEGORY OR TYPOLOGY?

While the meaning of this passage is clear, several questions remain. These involve the generic classification of the passage. Should this be considered an allegory? If so, does this allegory constitute a legitimate argument or is it just a rhetorical embellishment? And does Paul's allegory of this text permit us to allegorize Biblical texts any way we want?

Paul introduces his interpretation of the passage by saying, ἄτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορέω (4.24). The interpretation of this phrase has been the subject of some debate. The verb ἀλληγορέω is used nowhere else in the NT, but it is attested in other literature from first century. An example from Plutarch follows (c50-c120AD):

"These men [i.e., the more philosophically minded of the Egyptians] are like the Greeks who say that Cronos is but a figurative name for Chronus (Time)<sup>52</sup>, Hera for Air, and that the birth of Hephaestus symbolizes the change of Air into Fire. And thus among the Egyptians such men say that Osiris is the Nile consorting with the earth, which is Isis, and the sea is Typhon..." (Plutarch, *Moralia [Isis and Osiris]* 363)<sup>53</sup>.

The verb ἀλληγορέω can mean "to explain or interpret figuratively or allegorically", "to speak or write figuratively or allegorically"<sup>54</sup>. Most commentators are of the opinion that in Gal 4.24 ἀλληγορέω has the former meaning.

<sup>51</sup> Gal. 5.1 has a pivotal role, concluding Paul's scriptural argument and introducing the practical application of his teaching. It is not considered part of the allegory of Hagar and Sarah, and I will not study it in detail.

<sup>52</sup> Ἐλληνες Κρόνον ἀλληγοροῦσι τὸν χρόνον.

<sup>53</sup> Translation by Frank Cole Babbitt 1957 (1936) Loeb Classical Library, Plutarch's *Moralia* V p. 76-79.

<sup>54</sup> The earliest occurrences of the verb ἀλληγορέω with the meaning "to interpret allegorically" are from the first century AD in PLUTARCH (c50-c120) (*Moralia* 363, quoted below) and Heraclitus (LIDDLE & SCOTT 1996.69). See also LONGENECKER, a. c., 209.

I have treated the terms 'allegorical' and 'figurative' as rough synonyms up to now. But it is an open question whether the kind of figurative interpretation Paul employs here should be considered allegory or typology. Typological exegesis is defined by Woollcombe as "the search for linkages between events, persons or things *within the historical framework of revelation*"<sup>55</sup>. Allegorical interpretation in contrast is "the search for a secondary or hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meaning of a narrative"<sup>56</sup>. The interpretation that Paul gives the story of Sarah and Hagar can hardly be considered its 'primary or obvious meaning,' and Woollcombe does refer to it as an allegory<sup>57</sup>.

Although a case can be made for considering Gal 4.21-31 an allegory, there are grounds for considering this an example of typological exegesis<sup>58</sup>. This is the view of the Antiochian theologians, who opposed the allegorical approach to Biblical interpretation as practiced by the Alexandrians. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c 350-428) writes regarding Paul's use of ἀλληγορέω: "he terms 'allegory' the comparison, by juxtaposition, of events which have already occurred with present events." John Chrysostom (c347-407) asserted that when Paul uses the word ἀλληγορούμενα he "inexactly called the type an allegory"<sup>59</sup>. Calvin agrees with Chrysostom. He writes, "As the house of Abraham was then a true Church, so it is beyond doubt that the principal and most memorable events which happened in it are so many types for us"<sup>60</sup>. Betz offers a similar view: "What [Paul] calls allegory is really a mixture of what we would call allegory and typology"<sup>61</sup>. After weighing the evidence on how to classify this passage Hanson concludes, "I would prefer to say that it is still typology, but there is a tendency to over-elaboration... which would verge into allegory if pursued further"<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> K. J. WOOLLCOMBE, "The Biblical origins and patristic development of typology", in G. W. H. LAMPE / K. J. WOOLLCOMBE, *Essays on Typology* (1956) 39-75, p. 40.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> WOOLLCOMBE, *o. c.*, 53.

<sup>59</sup> Καταχρηστικῶς τὸν τύπον ἀλληγορίαν ἐκάλεσεν. In - Ὑπομνήματα εἰς τὰς πρὸς Γαλάτας καὶ Ἐφέσιους. Quoted by KEPPLER, *a. c.*, 243. See also P. G. BARKER, "Allegory and typology in Galatians 4.21-31": *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 33 (1994) 199.

<sup>60</sup> CALVIN, *o. c.*, 136.

<sup>61</sup> BETZ, *o. c.*, 239.

<sup>62</sup> HANSON, *a. c.*, 101.



These Biblical scholars avoid calling Paul's treatment of Hagar and Sarah an allegory outright lest it be associated with more fanciful allegories, such as those produced in Alexandria both in Paul's time and later. Paul's restraint in his use of allegory becomes evident when we compare his treatment of the story of Hagar and Sarah with that of his contemporary Philo of Alexandria. An excerpt follows:

"Sarah, virtue, bears... the same relation to Hagar, education, as the mistress to the handmaid, or the lawful wife to the concubine, and so naturally the mind which aspires to study and to gain knowledge, the mind we call Abraham, will have Sarah, virtue, for his wife, and Hagar, the whole range of school culture, for his concubine." (Philo, *de Congressu Eruditionis Gratia*, 23)<sup>63</sup>.

Philo takes the allegorical interpretation much farther than Paul; the meanings he assigns the Biblical characters are completely arbitrary<sup>64</sup>. He could just as well find those meanings in any piece of pagan literature, as did the Greeks and Egyptians. Paul's allegory (if we call it that) is restrained in comparison. He works with categories and concepts he shares with the Old Testament; he is working within the framework of Biblical theology<sup>65</sup>. Paul does not question the historicity of the Biblical accounts. Paul does not deny that the Jews are physically descendants from Sarah; his point is that spiritually they are descendants of Hagar. For Paul the historical pattern is of importance; he does not reject the historicity of the account as the reading 'these things are written allegorically' would imply; he in fact affirms their historicity: "But just as the one born according to the flesh *at that time* (τότε) persecuted the one born according to the Spirit, in the same way is it now" (4.29). In Paul's view Scripture can have more than one meaning, simply because that was God's intent. The following Pauline passage supports this theory:

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church" (Eph 5.31-32, NRSV).

<sup>63</sup> English translation by F. H. Colson & G. H. Whitaker 1949.469 (Loeb Classical Library, Philo, vol 4).

<sup>64</sup> It may be tempting to find a literary connection between Philo calling Hagar παιδεία (education) and Paul calling the law (which he identifies with Hagar) παιδαγωγός (guardian, guide: 3.24) but this would be unwarranted. "There is no indication that Paul knows the Philonic allegory of Sarah and Hagar" (BETZ, *o. c.*, 239). I would suggest that both Philo and Paul are playing on words that are phonetically similar to παιδίσκη (slave woman).

<sup>65</sup> HANSON, *o. c.*, 103.

The meaning of this passage is debated. Clearly Paul (if he's the author) does not reject the primary meaning of Gen 2.24 (he in fact affirms it in the following verse). There is not complete agreement on the meaning of the word μυστήριον in this passage, but it would seem that in Paul's opinion the Scripture verse was intended to give a deeper meaning<sup>66</sup>. And as in our passage in Galatians, that deeper meaning is connected with the person of Christ. These deeper meanings of Scripture do not contradict the original ones.

Ultimately it does matter whether we call the allegory of Hagar and Sarah an example of analogical or typological exegesis; the question is whether Paul's conclusions are in accordance with what is revealed elsewhere in the Bible. Both John the Baptist and Jesus maintained that Abraham's true children are those who act the way he acted. John the Baptist told the unrepentant Pharisees, "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father'. I tell you, out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matt 3.9, NIV). Jesus redefined the children of Abraham in a similar manner:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin... I know that you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are ready to kill me... You do what you have heard from your father." "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did." (John 8.31-39, NIV).

Jesus grants that the Jews are Abraham's descendants, in a physical sense, but they are not his spiritual heirs. The Jews think they are free, but they are actually in slavery. Only by holding to Jesus word can they become true children of God. Thus Paul shares with Jesus not only the messages that the Jews are in slavery while the followers of Christ are free, but also the way in which he presents it – the Jews are physically the children of Abraham, but not spiritually. Paul's conclusions clearly agree with the words of Jesus, and are valid.

---

<sup>66</sup> For a summary of the debate see, for example, A. T. LINCOLN, *Ephesians* (1990) 381.

## VII. APPLICATION

If Paul's conclusion is judged valid, does this mean that later interpreters of Scripture are free to use his method? Several words of caution are required. First, one must bear in mind that Paul did not found his theology on an allegorical or typological interpretation of Scripture. He has already argued the Scriptural basis for his claims, and these claims are in accordance with Jesus' words. This is also Luther's position,

"Allegories do not strongly persuade in divinity, but as certain pictures they beautify and set out the matter. For if Paul had not proved the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of works by strong and pithy arguments, he should have little prevailed by this allegory." (Luther on Galatians IV.24)<sup>67</sup>.

Similarly Lampe writes regarding this passage, "It is a picturesque and valuable sermon illustration, designed for a limited purpose of apologetic; it does not advance or clinch his argument"<sup>68</sup>. In making an allegory of the story of Sarah and Hagar, Paul is able to repeat the points he has already made without boring his readers. By couching his points in allegory, Paul "lets the Galatians find the truth for themselves"<sup>69</sup>. He is also able to put more emotion into his argument than would otherwise have been possible. Following Paul's example, one could use typology in developing sermon illustrations, but not in developing a systematic theology.

Paul does not claim that his interpretation of Scripture renders the literal interpretation invalid. He does not deny the historicity of the Old Testament account. We should not allow allegory or typology to blind us to the primary meaning of a text. In connection with his commentary on the allegory of Hagar and Sarah, Calvin warns the readers of the dangers of looking for secondary meanings when none are to be found:

"Let us know then that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions,

---

<sup>67</sup> P. S. WATSON, ed, 1953, p. 417 (A commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians based on lectures delivered by Martin Luther at the Univeristy of Wittenberg in the year 1531 and first published in 1535. A revised and completed translation based on the Middleton edition of the English version of 1575. Reming H. Revell Co., Westwood, NJ).

<sup>68</sup> LAMPE, *o. c.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> BETZ, *o. c.*, 240.

those pretended expositions, which lead us away from the natural meaning." (Calvin 1948.1 36)

Finally, it should be kept in mind that Paul does not normally rely on allegory to make his points (another clear case is 1 Cor 9.9-10). He may have relied on allegory here in order to refute his opponents' questionable use of the same passage as Barrett suggested<sup>70</sup>. But this is not the most likely explanation. Paul's argument here is very similar to that used in Romans (9.6-9). This suggests to Woollcombe<sup>71</sup> that in Galatians Paul used the story of Isaac and Ishmael to illustrate the difference between children of promise and children of the flesh because he happened to find it a good illustration, not because he was forced to answer his opponents' use of the story. Further, Jesus himself had distinguished between Abraham's physical and spiritual descendants; the basis for the Isaac/Ishmael typology was already available to Paul. This does not mean that Paul's allegory in Galatians was entirely successful. Hanson compares Paul's application of the story in Galatians with that in Romans and concludes,

"it would have been much easier if Paul had contented himself with saying that Christians are sons of Sarah *κατὰ πνεῦμα* whereas unbelieving Jews are sons of Sarah *κατὰ σάρκα*, very much as he says in Rom 9.5 that the Messiah is from the Jews *κατὰ σάρκα*"

Hanson suggests that Paul recognized that in Galatians he had used "too elaborate" a typology<sup>72</sup>. He had tried to pack too much meaning into the text, making it difficult to understand. Paul did not repeat this mistake when he was writing his letter to the Romans. In his later letters Paul largely avoids complicated typologies; perhaps he realized how easily they could be misused.

I would take this lesson to heart. The sheer amount of literature that this passage has generated reveals the difficulties inherent in using allegories in theological discourse. Allegories can be used in theology, but only as illustrations, and even there they must be employed with caution and restraint.

---

<sup>70</sup> [Paul's] so – called allegorical treatment of Abraham and the two women was evoked not by a personal love of fantastic exegesis but by a reasoned case which it was necessary that he should answer" (BARRETT, a. c., 13).

<sup>71</sup> WOOLLCOMBE, a. c., 55.

<sup>72</sup> HANSON, a. c., 95.