

Heirs or Slaves?

Galatians 4:1-5:1

Introduction

In this section Paul picks up on the image of “heir” that he began in the previous section. The comments here are very similar to the previous verses, but there are some significant new elements.

The End Of Slavery: 4:1-5a

Paul used an analogy from the Greco-Roman world to make his point. As with all analogies, there are limits as to how far to take the analogy. Look for generalities. If an heir was a minor when the father died, he/she did not have control of the estate or his/her own person. The words “guardians” and “trustees” are most likely not to be understood as speaking of different people with different functions, but are probably intended to be synonyms of each other and synonyms of the disciplinarian of 3:24. The statement that the heirs (minors) are no better than slaves is an exaggeration for they would eventually inherit the estate and have total freedom over their lives. A slave would have that only in unusual circumstances. During their time of childhood, another person would be responsible for the estate, make legal decisions, and see to the upbringing of the heir. Heirs lived under the rules of another person just like a slave until a date set by the father. Everyone in such a circumstance would long to be mature and free from the guardian. Jews were heirs of the promise, but until Christ came (3:23-24) they would not fully receive what God had intended for them.

There is debate as to whether the “we” and “you” in this text speaks exclusively of Jewish Christians, inclusively of Jew and Gentile Christians, or a combination. It is not easy to know for sure when transitions occur between Jews and Gentiles. Surely verse 5a exclusively speaks of Jews and verse 8 is exclusively Gentiles. However the particulars work out, it seems evident that in this text Paul places both Jews and Gentiles in the same category of being held in slavery until the coming of the Son of God.

Another problem of this text is the meaning of “elemental spirits.” Hayes (pg. 282) and Dunn (pg. 212) give the best interpretation of this phrase. They propose that the most common meaning in Paul’s day was the elemental substances (earth, air, fire, and water; as well as sun, moon, and stars) from which the cosmos is composed. This may be similar to the “cosmic powers” and “spiritual forces” of Ephesians 6:4. It was commonly believed among Jews that there were cosmic and primal forces that had determinative power over humans. The Hellenistic influence of the 1st and 2nd centuries B.C. had a great deal to do with this. It was believed that Abraham was an astrologer and through his contemplation of the celestial realm found God (Philo *On Abraham* 69-70; Wisdom 13:1-5; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.155-56). The affect of this belief could be seen on the floor of synagogues where astrological symbols were placed and on the temple curtain during the days of Jesus where there were the signs of the zodiac. During this time, factions within Judaism developed over whether a solar or lunar calendar should be used to determine the time for festivals. The Qumran community separated themselves from the temple and went out into the desert because they did not believe in the calendar used by the temple. They believed the current Jewish festivals and other seasonal activities were being held at the wrong time and therefore, not being performed in harmony with the angels in heaven who were operating under the correct calendar. Engaging in Jewish feasts at the wrong time was just as bad as observing Gentile feasts (Jubilees 6:32-35). Paul’s statements may have more to do with the contemporary use of the Jewish calendar than the intent of the scriptures. Here is how Hayes describes J. L. Martyn’s application of this interpretation to the Galatia issue.

“The rival missionaries in Galatia may have sought to convince the Galatians that their worship of pagan divinities was an ill-informed worship of the natural elements that ought to point them to a truer form of religion exemplified by Abraham, who moved through the contemplation of the heavenly bodies to discern the God who made and ordered them. ... The point of the Missionaries’ evangelistic strategy, then, would be to persuade the Galatians that the Law provided the true understanding of the natural world and the heavenly bodies and, therefore, regulated the calendar of human religious observance in a manner that enabled correct celebration of holy feasts at the proper times; hence, Paul’s disparaging reference to observing “special days, and months and seasons and years” (v. 10).

Paul saw what his opponents were doing with the law as a return to a condition of slavery. As will be seen later, Paul believed his opponents were teaching the Gentiles to observe the Jewish calendar and were taking them back to the “weak and beggarly” elements they had escaped from in Christ.

But God had an appointed time in which he would break into the cosmos and bring redemption from the enslavement that both Jews and Gentiles were under. This doing was God’s alone and it was done through Jesus. Jesus shared in the human experience being born of a woman and being under the law. As expressed earlier (3:13-14), Jesus redeemed those under the law by taking the curse of the law upon him. He had to be born under the law to accomplish this goal.

The End of Enslavement for Gentiles: 4:5b-11

It might need to be stated that the translators are responsible for the punctuation as well as sentence and paragraph breakdowns in our translations. Therefore, understanding how things are to be broken down can be tricky. “Those under the law” in 5a has to refer to Jewish Christians. Those described as having received “adoption” refers to Gentiles (5b). Jews are never considered adopted children. The NIV “that we might receive the full rights of sons” is misleading and shows an interpretation that believes 5b speaks of Jews. The word in Greek is a word rightly translated “adoption.” The “we” in verse 5b shows Paul’s common plight with the Gentiles as being one who also needed to be rescued from slavery. The big concern in Galatians is the status of Gentile Christians. Can they be children of God apart from the observance of the law? Here they are said to be adopted children which may be the same as Paul’s statement in Romans 11:17-24 when he referred to the Gentiles as branches grafted into the natural Jewish tree. Although adopted, they are non-the-less children and heirs.

As stated in chapter 3, the presence of the Spirit in the Gentile Christians is confirmation of their status with God. Quoting Hayes (pg. 285), “Paul’s point is that the Spirit is a powerful presence in the hearts of the Galatians enabling or impelling them to cry out to the Father of Jesus Christ as their own Father.” This relationship with God does not come by the observance of Jewish identity markers. It came to Gentiles when they were united with Christ and received the Spirit.

It was bad enough that the Galatians had in the past not known God (a typical way for Jews to refer to Gentiles) and as a result had been enslaved by “beings that by nature are not gods.” These beings probably refer to forces that once held power over the Galatians, but things had changed. Through Paul’s preaching, without being instructed in Jewish identity markers, Gentiles had come to know God. It is important to note Paul’s inserted phrase “rather to be known by God.” He was very careful not to give any indication that people can save themselves or initiate their salvation. It is God who first reaches out and makes the relationship possible. In Amos 3:2 God stated, “You (Israel) only have I known of all the families of the earth.” Galatia Christians had become known by God as had Israel in the past. Yet, they were leaning toward turning back to something (Jewish identity markers) that would again enslave them. The word “turn” is used to describe repentance (1 Thess. 1:9). What the Galatians were doing would be a reverse conversion into slavery.

The “elemental spirits” they had turned back to were ‘weak and beggarly.’ Paul placed the Jewish identity markers in the same category as Jews saw idols. Wisdom 13:8-19 states, “For health he appeals to a thing that is weak; for life he prays to a thing that is dead; ... he asks strength of a thing whose hands have no strength.” Why would anyone who had known God want to go back to such a thing?

These “elemental spirits” were talked about in the previous section. In addition to what was stated earlier, notice what Dunn (pg. 228) says. “Of particular relevance for us here is the evident integration of ‘Torah piety’ and ‘calendar piety’ achieved within such Jewish groups, and the importance of the heavenly bodies in determining the right dates for such Torah observances.” Not only had such observances been used to separate Jews from Gentiles, they had for years divided Jews. This may have been why Paul connected the “elemental spirits” with being under the law. The opponents were doing the same thing within Christianity that had been done within Judaism. The last phrase literally reads, “I am afraid for you, lest somehow I have labored in vain for you.”

Paul's Appeal: 4:12-20

Paul's frustration with what was happening in Galatia can be seen in these texts. How Paul had become like them may refer to his willingness to eat and worship with them without the Torah observances the opponents were promoting (1 Cor. 9:21). The irony is that the Gentiles were embracing Torah observances, the very things that rebuilt the wall of separation that angered them.

Paul then appealed to the relationship he had with the Galatians when he was among them. It is unclear as to what the "weakness in the flesh" is about. A common thought is a physical illness. It could just as easily be scars or injuries from persecution. This would fit with the "marks of Jesus" in 6:17. The weakness could have caused the Galatians to scorn (a phrase used concerning Jesus: Mark 9:12; Luke 23:11) or despise (literally: "spit on" which could be taken literally or metaphorically) Paul. In the ancient world it was thought that spitting three times could ward off the "evil eye" or demonic influences. However, the Galatians had welcomed Paul as a heavenly messenger from God. They had previously spoken words of blessing upon Paul but now they were criticizing him and treating him as an enemy. The Gentiles' willingness to tear out their eyes probably does not have anything to do with Paul's weakness. Rather, it is an idiom much like our "You would give your right arm for me."

The word in verse 17 translated "zealous" (NIV) or "make much of" (NRSV) can speak of a romantic courtship or it can speak of religious zeal. By using this word to speak of the opponent's courtship of the Galatians, Paul is also making a point about their misguided zeal for the Law. The way in which the opponents were courting the Galatia Christians was by withdrawing (shutting them out) from them with their exclusive Torah observances as Peter had done (2:11). This was in hopes that as the Gentiles saw their zeal for the law they would in turn be drawn to join the Jewish Christians by accepting circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws. While it is flattering to have someone be zealous for you, it is only good when the purpose is good. Paul did not consider the motives of the opponents to be good.

It was common for Paul to speak of his relationship with churches as a parent/child relationship. Women who have given birth can relate to the image Paul depicted in describing the hurt he felt over the Galatians embracing of a different

gospel. Hayes cites Beverly Gaventa's observance that "birth pangs" was a Jewish and Christian image for the suffering that goes along with God's eschatological action of bringing a new age into being (1 Enoch 62:4; 4 Ezra 4:2; Mark 13:8). She goes on to state, "Paul's anguish ... reflects the anguish of the whole created order as it awaits the fulfillment of God's action in Jesus Christ." In other words, "birth pangs" would have been a powerful word for the Jewish Christians. As the image relates to a specific group of people like the Galatians, Paul's anguish was that they take on the character of Jesus.

Paul longed to be able to be with them in person. "Change my tone" could mean change my tone of voice or could mean be able to speak to you in person. He did not want them to lose what they had in Christ.

Introduction: 4:21-5:1

This is Paul's final main argument from the OT promoting a law-free gospel for Gentiles. Paul had already made the point that being "under the law" was a state of confinement from which anyone should logically want to be freed (3:21; 4:5).

This verse literally reads, "Do you not hear the law?" Throughout the OT listening and obeying the law are synonymous. The Jewish Christians may have heard this, as Hayes says, like an ironic echo of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 ("Hear O, Israel ..."). If his opponents were to listen to the law, Paul believed they should draw a different conclusion. For Paul, his opponents had just not considered the whole of scripture. They had looked to Genesis 17 for being a child of Abraham based on circumcision and to Leviticus 18:5 for life based on keeping law. But they had not considered Genesis 15:6 (trust in the faithfulness of God) or Genesis 12:3 (God's gracious choosing prior to circumcision). Although they had looked to Genesis 17 for their position concerning circumcision, they had not looked at the whole story of Abraham.

Another interesting point is that law for Paul meant more than the law given by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Here he included the narrative of Abraham as law. In 1 Corinthians 14:21 he included the prophets when his quote from Isaiah was stated as being from the law. That might be surprising to people today because law is most often thought of

as the Mosaic code given at Sinai, but to the Jew of Paul's day Torah included all the OT, other Jewish writings, and oral traditions.

The Story: 4:22-23

In this section, Paul focused on the Abraham narrative (Gen. 16-21) because that is most likely the text the opponents were using. Abraham had two sons whose beginnings could not have been more distinctive from a theological perspective. Ten years after the original promise in Genesis 12 that God would create a great nation through Abraham's seed, Abraham remained childless. His response to the situation was very human. He decided he would help God by having a son (Ishmael) through his slave-girl Hagar. This was a very common practice in a day when having children and in particular male children was such a major part of the culture. It would not be for another 15 years that Abraham and Sarah would have the promised child, Isaac. The birth of Ishmael was purely from human effort (according to the flesh). It did not involve a powerful act on the part of God. On the other hand, Isaac's birth came about as a result of God's promise, which was made possible by God giving life to the lifeless womb of Sarah. Isaac was born only because God was keeping his promise of Genesis 12. The theological distinction is between one born according to the flesh and the other according to the promise. The NIV does not translate verse 23 properly. It reads "born in the *ordinary way*." Paul is making a point of "flesh" verses "promises" which will come up again in the text.

Another important aspect of the text is that the phrase "was born" is in the perfect tense. The point is that the effect of these two births from a theological perspective is an ongoing thing. The Gentile Christians relationship with God came through a promise just as Isaac's birth was through a promise. The opponents were more than likely preaching that Gentiles who had not been circumcised were illegitimate sons like Ishmael. Paul's position is the opposite of his opponents. Gentile Christians are fully children of God like Isaac, based on promise not circumcision.

The Allegory: 4:24-27

Allegory was a common way of interpreting stories among Gentiles and interpreting scripture among Jews. Stories were often seen as having significance beyond the literal sense. The Jews had used allegory to interpret the story of Hagar/Sarah and Ishmael/Isaac. Paul just gave it a different look. In his emphasis on slavery and freedom, the slave-girl Hagar is symbolic of the covenant at Sinai, which had already been described in terms of slavery (4:1-11). The free woman (and true wife Sarah) is symbolic of the covenant of promise.

The two covenants being discussed here are not the OT and NT. While it is true that the covenant of promise was fulfilled in Jesus and described more fully in the NT, it is not a covenant separate and apart from the OT. In fact Paul believed the OT law first announced and taught the covenant of promise. The Jewish Christians just did not understand this.

Paul had used the metaphor of child bearing in 3:19. Here he drew a contrast between his gospel and the gospel of the Jewish Christians. Paul saw the Jewish Christians as teaching a gospel of slavery that gave birth to children of slavery while the true gospel of Christ gave birth to free children. There are a number of suggestions given for why Paul specifically mentioned "Arabia." There is no explanation that really answers the question. Anything mentioned is just a guess. Hayes (pg. 303) points out that the word translated "corresponds" is a key to this text. It is a military term that means, "to stand in line with something." In this text Paul is making a list of opposites.

Slave	Free
Hagar	Sarah
Flesh	Promise/gift
Mt. Sinai	
Present Jerusalem	Jerusalem above

The mention of the present Jerusalem probably has reference to one or both of two things. Longnecker (pg. 213) states that Paul used two spellings for Jerusalem. One is used when speaking of a geographical place. The other which was also used in

Hebraic and LXX texts to speak of Jerusalem's sacred significance. Here, Longnecker suggest, the latter is used. Jerusalem is the place where the teachings of food laws and circumcision continued to be propagated in the temple. Jerusalem is also the place from whence the opponents came bringing this perverted gospel. It is a place that is still bound by the elemental spirits. Hayes (pg. 303-4) presents another interesting possibility. At the time of the writing, Jerusalem was under the thumb of the Romans as a curse that began in the days of Babylon. Israel was put in slavery as a result of not keeping the law. Hayes goes on to state that there was a Roman garrison adjacent to the temple as a reminder of their cursed state. This would go back to the "curse" conversation of chapter 3. The temple and its teaching of Jewish identity markers remain under a curse of domination by a pagan nation.

"Jerusalem above" comes from a common eschatological theme in Jewish writings (Isaiah 54; Ezekiel 40-48; 2 Esdras 7:26; 10:25-27; 1 Enoch 90:28-29) in which Jerusalem is pictured in a glorious future state. The metaphor of "mother" is found in Psalm 86:5 (LXX) and 2 Esdras 10:7. Jerusalem is at times seen as a barren woman that will be blessed by God with many children. Paul's thoughts here come from this theme.

The only place Sarah is mentioned outside Genesis is in Isaiah 51:1-3. In Isaiah 54:1 (Gal. 4:27) Jerusalem (in exile) is the barren woman (Sarah). God would again give life to this childless couple and Zion would be comforted and blessed. There would be rejoicing at the birth of children. Included in this rebirth of Israel would be the gathering of the nations (Gentiles) (Isa. 51:4-5; 52:10; 54:2-3). This is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

The Application: 4:28-5:1

The Gentile Christians (as well as Jews) are true children of the promise in the "line" or "pattern" of Isaac. This is more than a mere analogy. Like Ishmael's persecution of Isaac, the Gentile Christians were being persecuted by the Jewish Christians who were excluding them from fellowship if they were not circumcised. But someone might reply, "There is no record in Genesis that Ishmael persecuted Isaac." According to Hayes (pg. 305), Jewish exegetical tradition of Genesis 21:9 was that

Ishmael's "playing with" Isaac was "sort of a malicious activity, such as mocking, idolatry, or child molestation." This tradition allowed Paul to portray the Jewish Christians as persecutors within the tradition of the Isaac/Ishmael story. In contrast to the children "born according to the flesh," Paul, for the first time described the Gentile Christians as "born according to the Spirit."

Paul then took the words of Sarah (Gen. 21:10) who called upon Abraham to throw out Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah's words became scripture's words to the Gentile Christians to throw out their persecutors, those who are trying to put them in slavery. Paul did not say throw out the OT. He said, look to the OT for a deeper understanding of what you have in Christ.

This section ends with Paul returning to the theme of Galatians; Christ has set us free. The Galatians are called on to not dishonor the purpose of Christ by embracing the elemental spirits. Like an army standing against its enemy, they are to stand firm as well against their enemy. A yoke can be seen as a source of stability and guidance (Matt. 11:29-30). This is the sense in which the opponents saw their use of law. But to Paul, their teachings were placing an unnecessary burden upon the Gentile Christians. The burden of rituals that have nothing to do with what it means to be Christian. Rituals that destroy the equality and unity that Christ's death was to create.

Conclusion

Jewish law, with a focus on identity markers, was a guardian that in a real sense enslaved the Jews. God's promise looked toward a time when Jesus would fulfill God's promises through his death and resurrection, and true freedom would be realized in Christ. What God did in Christ also made Gentiles adopted children that made them full heirs of the promise.

Formerly, Gentiles were enslaved to their idolatry. Through Paul's gospel, Gentiles had come to know God, or more rightly understood, had come to be known by God through God's pursuit of them. If Gentile Christians were to embrace Jewish identity markers, it would be like their going back to their idolatry. If that were to happen, Paul's work among them would have been wasted.

Paul reminded the Gentiles of how they had welcomed him and his message. The Jewish Christians may be reaching out to the Gentiles but the Jews intent was to (unknowingly) enslave the Gentiles again. The Jews own scripture taught this. The Jewish identity markers Paul's opponents promoted made people children of the slave woman. The identity markers do not make people children of the free woman and the promised son. The Jews from Jerusalem were not bringing a blessing to the Gentiles but were bringing persecution just as Jews believed Ishmael persecuted Isaac. The only path to freedom in Christ would be to throw out the Jews from Jerusalem.

There are things Christians must stand for that divide people. For example, there can be no real relationship with people who deny Jesus is the Christ. On the other hand, we need to be cautious as to what we put in the list of things we stand for that would create division. As with Paul's opponents, too often people rigidly stand for things that are based on tradition, opinions, or prejudices rather than truth. Knowing the difference requires humility and the mind of Christ that only comes through the Spirit. These are the things we must pursue.

Points to Be Made:

1. Paul's opponents should motivate us to approach scripture with humble openness to God's will.
2. The gospel breaks down barriers between people. Be cautious about teaching things that divide people. These teachings may not be the will of God.
3. Caution needs to be taken that we do not teach things that diminish the all-sufficiency of Christ.
4. Even people who openly appear religious and devoted to God can lead us down the wrong path.