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*Promise, Law, Faith:*  
*Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians*

**A Review Article**

Brandon Adams\*

*Promise, Law, Faith*<sup>1</sup> is the culmination of 30 years of reflection and teaching on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Author T. David Gordon boldly claims that "Paul's interpreters have not yet, in my judgment, correctly understood the Galatian letter" (13). He presents his interpretation as a *tertium quid* between the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and what he calls the Dominant Protestant interpretation, noting that "mine could be regarded as a 'third perspective on Paul'" (24-25). The Dominant Protestant (DP) interpretation approaches the letter from a systematic-theological perspective focusing on the *ordo salutis* and concludes that "Paul's 'problem' with the law was exclusively or primarily due to an alleged meritorious abuse thereof" (1). Gordon repeatedly refers to this as reading *between* the lines in Paul's letter rather than reading the lines themselves. While he affirms the DP understanding of the *ordo salutis* and justification by faith alone, Gordon commends the NPP for challenging the DP interpretation of Galatians, arguing from a more sociological perspective that "Paul's difficulty with the law is motivated largely, primarily, or even exclusively by the reality that the law segregated Jews from Gentiles" (2).

Both interpretations, however, fail to adjust their thinking to Paul's thoroughly covenant-historical thinking. Twentieth-century Pauline studies "profited greatly by complementing such [systematic] studies with biblical-theological or redemptive-historical considerations of a *historia salutis* nature" (3). Gordon sees himself carrying this approach a step further, focusing specifically on *historia testamentorum* – the history of God's various covenanting acts. Such an

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<sup>1</sup> T. David Gordon, *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2019).

approach recognizes Paul's use of three synecdoches to refer to three different covenants.

[F]or Paul in Galatians, "law" is ordinarily a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant-administration, an administration characterized by law-giving. And "promise" in the same letter is ordinarily a synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant-administration, a covenant characterized by promise-giving . . . Paul often uses a third synecdoche, "faith," to refer to the new covenant. He does so because it is a covenant characterized by faith in the dying-and-rising Christ . . . So, then, ordinarily when Paul speaks in Galatians of promise, law, and faith, he means the Abrahamic covenant (characterized by promise-giving), the Sinai covenant (characterized by law-giving), and the new covenant (characterized by faith in the dying-and-rising Christ); but we (mistakenly) hear him speaking of general theological categories/realities of God's pledges, God's moral demands, and our faith in such a God. (11)

Both NPP and DP's failure to recognize this leads to "monocovenantalism," referring instead to "the covenant" (NPP) or "the covenant of grace" (DP) in the singular, and thus misreading Galatians as a whole.

### Introductory and Historical Matters

Gordon clarifies that his volume is not a commentary on Galatians but an endeavor to explain the argument or thought of the letter (the forest, rather than the trees). The first chapter introduces key issues including *ὁ νόμος* ("the law" or "law") as a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant, covenant-historical argumentation, and the idea that "Paul does not argue *for* the doctrine of justification by faith in the letter; rather, he argues *from* the doctrine of justification by faith" (42). Gordon argues that debate over justification during the reformation period led Luther, Calvin, and others to mistakenly assume Paul's debate was the same as theirs. Justification by faith alone was not in dispute at Galatia, so Paul reasoned *from* it to resolve what was disputed: whether Gentiles must be circumcised. That is, the problem in Galatia was the *practice* of the Judaizers, not the *doctrine* or *theory* behind the practice.

Chapter 2 addresses historical questions pertinent to Galatians and biblical interpretation, to which Gordon is “self-consciously somewhat agnostic” (50). “What we ordinarily call ‘historical knowledge,’ therefore, is substantially speculative or theoretical” (48). Since the biblical text is “what we actually have before us” (48), it “should have veto power over all the theoretical constructs surrounding it” (48). Gordon appeals to the concept of the *analogy of Scripture* (without naming it).<sup>2</sup> If the meaning of any given passage in Scripture is ambiguous “that ambiguity can be resolved better by reference to what is less disputable [another passage] . . . than to what is merely suppositional and therefore more disputable [historical studies]” (50). While this would appear to be a criticism aimed at NPP, Gordon actually directs it against DP. He singles out Calvin for “reading between the lines some historical thing the lines themselves do not say” (50), specifically Calvin’s opinion that Paul “does not confine himself entirely to Ceremonies, but argues generally about Works, otherwise the whole discussion would be trifling.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout the volume, Gordon refers back to this statement from Calvin as the epitome of the DP error, which assumed “that Palestinian Judaism taught a meritorious theory of justification” (17–18). In reality, Gordon’s criticism on this point is against Calvin’s application of the *analogy of faith*.<sup>4</sup> It would seem Calvin’s understanding of the old covenant and its ceremonies informed his

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<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985, 2017), 25, defines the analogy of Scripture as follows: “[T]he interpretation of unclear, difficult, or ambiguous passages of Scripture with a collation, or gathering, of clear and unambiguous passages or ‘places’ (*loci*) that refer to the same teaching or event.”

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 25, defines the analogy of faith as follows: “[T]he use of a general sense of the meaning of Scripture, resting in Romans 12:6 and constructed from the clear or unambiguous *loci* (q.v. *locus*), as the basis for interpreting unclear or ambiguous texts. As distinct from the more basic *analogia Scripturae* (q.v.), the *analogia fidei* presupposes a sense of the theological meaning of Scripture. Sometimes the *analogia fidei* is understood to use a *regula fidei*, viz., a creedal form, typically the Apostles’ Creed, as a basis for interpretation.”

quoted statement, rather than extra-biblical historical studies of Second Temple Judaism.

On the DP reading, “Paul’s positive statements contain his true thinking about the law itself, as delivered at Sinai, and his negative statements about it express his thinking about a later meritorious/legalistic abuse of it in the first century” (52). Gordon agrees with E. P. Sanders that this was a caricature of Second Temple Judaism, which did emphasize the condition of obedience in some places but elsewhere emphasized God’s grace and mercy. He argues that his covenant-historical interpretation explains “why both E. P. Sanders and his opponents appear to be able, at times, to muster textual evidence for their point of view” (54): Second Temple Judaism was attempting to make sense of living under multiple different covenants, notably the Abrahamic (promissory) and Sinaitic (law). NPP, however, wrongly sees these covenants as one and is therefore unable to make sense of Second Temple Judaism.

### **The Argument of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians**

#### **1. Galatians 1-2**

Chapter 3 begins Gordon’s discussion of the text itself, covering Galatians 1-2. “Both the Pauline gospel and his apostolic authority to proclaim it came from Christ himself and not from any mere human agent or agents” (63) (such as other Jews or even Apostles). Paul is not trying to please men (unlike Peter). Judaism (Paul’s former life) refers not simply to “general faith in the God of Abraham and Moses, but zealous insistence on the Gentile-excluding dimensions of the Mosaic law” (68). Though Gordon does not believe the Galatian error is a doctrinal one, he does recognize that “nothing less than the gospel itself is at stake” (64) because if Gentiles have to become Jews, then the third Abrahamic promise to bless all nations in Abraham (the gospel) remains unfulfilled. The DP error was to understand “the gospel” too narrowly as referring to justification by faith alone (which was not at stake).

Many falsely assume that Judaizers were a well-known Jewish phenomenon or party and that they taught a false doctrine of justification. In reality, *ιουδαΐζειν* (“live like Jews”; Gal. 2:14, ESV) was

not a well-established term and may even have been coined by Paul himself. Gordon argues “that Paul does not say anything here about ‘believing like a Jew’ but about ‘living like a Jew’” (57), indicating that the problem was practical, not doctrinal. The word is used only once in the NT (Gal. 2:14) and only once in the LXX (Esth. 8:17) where a literal translation would read “*were circumcized and lived as Jews*” (58). The same is found in an intertestamental example from Theodotus.

In none of the examples is anything explicitly said about salvation, justification, or any other doctrinal matter at all. It appears to mean something like this: “Identify oneself as a Jew by performing the requisite marking ceremonies, to appease those Jews who would be scandalized otherwise.” (59)

Paul’s encounter with Peter was a separate, subsequent event from the Jerusalem Council. One reason for distinguishing the two events is that the Jerusalem Council was about “correcting doctrine” (Acts 15:1), whereas Paul’s encounter with Peter was about “correcting behavior.” “Peter’s behavior of withdrawing from them [Gentiles]—as though they were still unclean and/or ‘strangers to the covenants of promise’ (Eph. 2:12)—denied that Christ, Abraham’s single ‘seed’ (Gal. 3:16), had brought them blessedness” (88).

An important aspect of Gordon’s interpretation is properly distinguishing the “we” and the “you” throughout the letter. Galatians 2:15 (“We who are Jews by birth [φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι] and not Gentile sinners.”) clearly identifies the “we” as Jews (whether Christian or not), and 3:1 identifies “you” as Gentile Galatians. “What this [Jewish] heritage knew, according to Paul, was this: ‘that a person is not justified by works of the law’” (92). This was known to the Jews by the existence of the atonement system and by their history (exile). Gordon notes that this is “simply incompatible with the dominant Protestant approach, which for many generations claimed that first-century Palestinian Judaism (Ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι) commonly taught that people were justified by observing the Mosaic law” (94–95). He suggests this drove translations such as ESV/NRSV to “avoid/evade the matter” (92) by suggesting these Jews knew they were not justified by works of the law *in spite of* their Jewish heritage (“yet we

know"). Such a translation errs not simply on textual grounds, but rhetorical grounds as well. "If Paul were to assert as a commonplace (among those who were Jews by heritage) a belief that in fact was commonly disputed, his argument would lose all its force" (94).

Paul's statements on the doctrine of justification by faith alone in 2:15-17 "were largely reminders of what was already known. The Galatians would not have disputed Paul's fourfold denial that justification came through observing the law" (96).

Verses 18-21 are not autobiographical of Paul's personal experience, but rhetorical. "If I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor" (Gal. 2:18) refers not to Paul but to Peter re-establishing the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile by withdrawing from the Gentiles. "If Peter now regards the Kashrut laws as obligatory, then all of his previous violations of those laws count as transgressions" (103). "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (Gal. 2:19) refers to the fact that the Torah (book of the covenant) testifies that the Sinai covenant was temporary, "even parenthetical" (101) as Paul demonstrates in chapter 3.

Paul's reasoning is *covenant*-historical, not *personal*-historical . . . [I]t was not Paul's frustrated efforts at self-justification (Luther?) that caused him to die to the law... It was the law's own teaching about its temporary character that caused him to expect a day to arrive when its tutelage would end. If Torah teaches that God pledged to Abraham to bless all the nations/Gentiles through one of his descendants, then a later covenant (430 years later) that excludes Gentiles *must* be temporary. (102)

Life in Christ means death to Mosaic law. Christ and Mosaic law present two antithetical options. "If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21) and we must therefore set aside the grace of God. "Paul's reasoning here (as elsewhere in Galatians) is all or nothing: Either we observe *ὁ νόμος* in its entirety or not at all. We either live to Torah in its entirety or we die to Torah in its entirety" (103).



## **2. Galatians 3:1–5**

Paul shifts from the first-person plural (“we”) and the first-person singular (“I”) to the second-person plural (“you”) “distinguishing himself from the (predominately Gentile) Galatians and their behavior. The ‘you/we’ throughout Galatians 3 continues to distinguish the predominately Gentile Galatians from Jewish Christians, as at Ephesians 2” (105). Paul asks the Galatians why they would turn to the Sinai covenant. The Spirit they received was an eschatological gift, but the Sinai covenant “was associated, temporally, with sin and the flesh, with the pre-eschatological order” (107). They received this Spirit through faith, not through the Sinai covenant. “Paul effectively reminded the Galatians that they had already experienced the realities of the age to come. Why would they now live as though that moment had not dawned?” (107).

## **3. Galatians 3:6–9**

In verse 6, Abraham is introduced for the first time. “Paul begins his temporalizing/relativizing argument regarding the Sinai covenant, by establishing some of the realities of the covenant that antedated it” (109). First, he equates (“Just as”) the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit through hearing with faith with Abraham’s justification through hearing with faith. Therefore, with regards to the inheritance of justification, “Those who have faith (whether Jew or Gentile) are Abraham’s children” (110). And this very truth was preached to Abraham long ago when God told him, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” “[T]he particular ‘blessing’ pledged to the nations through Abraham was the justification that would come through the Christian ‘gospel’” (110).

## **4. Galatians 3:10–14**

Moving on to verse 10 (“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse”), Gordon laments as follows:

Most contemporary English translations obscure the parallel with the previous verse. The KJV was closer to preserving the parallel:

“They which be of faith [οἱ ἐκ πίστεως] are blessed with faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law [Ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου] are under the curse.” Those who are “of faith” are blessed with faithful Abraham; those who are “of the works of the law” live under threats of curse. (116)

These translations create significant problems for properly understanding Paul. Gordon says:

The translation suggests that some attitude or idea about the works of the law brings a curse, when Paul’s point is that the covenant administration in Deuteronomy 27 itself threatens twelve curses . . . It is not one’s posture, attitude, or idea about the law that places anyone “under a curse”: it is the Sinai covenant administration itself, as mediated to the Israelites through the hand of Moses and the Levites, that places Israel under a threat of curse. (118)

This is directly related to the DP interpretation, which argues that the curse stems from a misunderstanding of the law resulting in a legalistic pursuit thereof. But this is contrary to Paul’s purpose in this passage, which Gordon argues is to demonstrate five differences between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant—those who are characterized by faith compared to those who are characterized by works of the law; one includes the nations while the other excludes them; one blesses while the other curses; one justifies while the other does not; one is based on promise, the other on law.

Paul then quotes Leviticus 18:5 to prove that the Sinai covenant was not characterized by faith (“not of faith”). Rather, it promised blessing in the land of Canaan for obedience and threatened curse in the land for disobedience. This is in contrast to the Abrahamic covenant, which required only that Abraham believe.

Commenting on verse 13, Gordon maintains his view that “us” refers to Jewish Christians. He argues “the ‘curse’ referred to here is the curse previously spoken of: the threatened [temporal] curse sanction of the Sinai covenant, to which the twelve tribes of Israelites attached their ceremonial ‘Amen,’ and to which no Gentiles attached theirs” (125). Thus, the verse does not refer to the Gentiles’ redemption in Christ, nor to the Jews’ eternal redemption in Christ. Rather, it refers to the termination of the Sinai covenant by Christ’s

death delivering Jewish Christians from being under its threatened temporal curse. "While I affirm the theological truth of penal substitution, I do not believe Paul appeals to it here" (129). Gordon's explanation of how Christ being cursed (per Deut. 21:22-23) leads to the termination of the Sinai covenant is not lucid to me. If I have understood him correctly, he believes the curse-factor is actually irrelevant because "There was no provision in the Sinai administration for a representative human substitute to shed blood for others" (129). What did matter was that Christ's death actually inaugurated the new covenant because "there was provision in the Sinai administration for the shedding of blood to inaugurate a covenant" (129). This led to the termination of the Sinai covenant because of the fact "that one covenant is terminated when another is inaugurated" (129). Christ did not redeem Jewish Christians from the curse of the Sinai covenant by bearing that curse in their place. Rather, he redeemed Jewish Christians from the threatened curse of the Sinai covenant by dying (by means of a cursed execution) in order to inaugurate the non-threatening new covenant that would then terminate the Sinai covenant, delivering them from its threatened curse.

In verse 14, "Paul mentions two things that will attend the eschaton: Gentiles will receive the blessings [*sic*] pledged to Abraham, and the Jews will receive the promised Spirit" (130). Paul refers only to a single Abrahamic blessing even though the Abrahamic covenant included multiple. Gordon says, "Because Paul is referring here and throughout Galatians to the third pledge God made to Abraham: that through Abraham's seed, all nations/families of the earth would be 'blessed'" (130). The other two promises (to become numerous and to inherit a land) were previously fulfilled in Israel.

## 5. Galatians 3:15-18

In verse 15, Paul employs an *a fortiori* argument from human to divine covenants. If even human covenants cannot be annulled by subsequent covenants, then the Sinai covenant cannot annul the Abrahamic covenant. Paul then demonstrates (v. 16) that "The (third aspect of the) promise to Abraham will be fulfilled by one individual descendant of Abraham" (134). Paul's argument rests upon whether

the referenced seed in the Abrahamic promises was plural or singular. Both the Hebrew (לְוָרֶעֶךָ) and the LXX Greek (σπέρμα) are inconclusive, allowing either a plural or a singular meaning. Gordon explains that

Paul surely understood that the first pledge to Abraham's "seed" was manifestly corporate and numerous; Yahweh would make his "seed" as numerous as the sands of the sea or the stars of the sky. Paul probably understood the second pledge to be corporate and numerous also: that to this large group of descendants a great, arable land would be given (after all, a single descendant could hardly inhabit/cultivate or militarily defend such a large piece of real estate). But he understood the third pledge singularly, as finding its focus in one particular descendant of Abraham. (135)

Gordon argues that Paul likely interpreted the third promise in light of Genesis 3:15 and 4:25, in which "seed" has a singular understanding. However, he also argues (contrarily, it seems) that Paul suggested "not so much a 'singular' reading of τὸ σπέρματι, but a focal reading, a concentrated reading" (136), following Calvin's argument that the meaning of Abraham's "seed" progressively narrowed over time until it came to refer only to Christ. Surprisingly, Gordon does not reference C. John Collins' study of Genesis 3:15,<sup>5</sup> T. Desmond Alexander's subsequent study of Genesis 22:18,<sup>6</sup> nor Collins' concluding follow-up on Galatians 3:16,<sup>7</sup> which collectively demonstrate that the original grammar of Genesis 22:18 indicates a singular referent and that this is what Paul was referring to (which supports Gordon's interpretation better than the "focal" reading, which does not depend upon a distinction between the three Abrahamic promises).

We then arrive at a foundational section of the volume, what Gordon calls the whole letter in a nutshell. He notes that "Both

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Collins, "A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman's Seed Singular or Plural?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 48:1 (1997): 139-48.

<sup>6</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, "Further Observations on the Term 'Seed' in Genesis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48:2 (1997): 363-67.

<sup>7</sup> C. John Collins, "Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete was Paul?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 54:1 (2003): 75-86.

lexically and rhetorically, my reading of Galatians is profoundly influenced by” 3:17–18 (137).

Lexically, it is difficult to construe *ὁ νόμος* here as anything but the Sinai *covenant* itself, a covenant that was made at least 430 years after the previous covenant made with Abraham. My interpretation of the letter, then, suggests that this definition is the controlling definition elsewhere in the letter, unless some contextual consideration suggests otherwise. (137)

A key argument from Gordon is that no other suggested meaning of *ὁ νόμος* makes sense in this passage (and that meaning carries throughout the rest of the letter). In verse 17, *ὁ νόμος* cannot mean legalism (DP), God’s moral will (DP, WCF 19:1–2), nor identity markers (NPP). “What came 430 years after a ‘previously ratified *covenant*’ was another *covenant*” (138) that was different in kind from the promissory Abrahamic covenant. “The law, whose recipients live under the threatened curse sanction, cannot be the means of inheriting the blessings that were promised to Abraham without corrupting entirely what ‘promise’ means.” (140).

## 6. Galatians 3:19–22

Why then the *covenant* (v. 19)? “He is not asking (as we so often do) the general *theological* question of what all the law accomplishes” (142), therefore the answer is not “to reveal transgressions” nor “to restrain transgressions.” Rather, it was to preserve the Abrahamic lineage until the promised offspring would come by separating them from the Gentiles and threatening curses against intermarriage with the *am ha-aretz* (“peoples of the land,” Ezra 9:10–15; 10:1–5; Deut. 7). The Abrahamic covenant itself was insufficient to this end (Gen. 12:10–20; 16:1–4; 20:1–18). Apart from the Sinai covenant, Israel would have disappeared like other nations. There would be no record of an Abrahamic lineage, nor any memory of the promise God made him. This, of course, entails that the Sinai covenant was inherently temporary. It served a purpose only until the promised offspring had come. DP fails to account for this subservient role of the Sinai covenant.

If the Sinai covenant is different in kind from the Abrahamic covenant, then isn't it contrary to the Abrahamic covenant? No, "because it is not a different means of attaining the same thing" (151). "[T]he Sinai covenant was sub-eschatological. The 'life' available by that administration was only temporal life in the land of Canaan" (Deut. 16:20; 30:19) (152). In keeping with his opinion that  $\delta \nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$  means "*the law*" (Sinai covenant), Gordon suggests that "a law" in verse 21 should be "*the law*," resulting in "If the law that was given was able to make alive, then righteousness would be by the law" (151).<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Galatians 3:23–25

Thus far we have encountered Paul's use of "the promise" as synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant and "the law" as synecdoche for the Sinai covenant. In verse 23 we are introduced to "faith" as synecdoche for the new covenant (it does not refer to the human act). "The underlying covenant-historical structure to Paul's reasoning is, I suggest, promise-law-faith . . . [H]e earlier placed Sinai as '430 years after the promise'; here he places it 'before' and 'until' faith" (155).

Based on the use of  $\phi\rho\omicron\upsilon\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  in 1 Corinthians 11:32, Philippians 4:7, and 1 Peter 1:5, as well as in the LXX (Josh. 6:1; Jdg. 5:1), Gordon argues that verse 23 refers to the law preserving, guarding, or protecting Israel. "The Sinai covenant, like a reversal of Jericho's gates, would not allow the Jews outside (to intermarry with the Gentiles) nor the Gentiles inside (to intermarry with the Jews)" (157). This leads him to understand  $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\acute{o}\varsigma$  (guardian) in verse 24 as serving a bodyguard role (one of the many potential roles of the broad term), rather than an instructional or disciplinary role in the individual experience of a believer (convicting them of sin). "Whatever the law-as-pedagogue did, it did it only 'before' ( $\Pi\rho\delta$ ) or 'until' ( $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ ,  $3\times$ ) Christ, and does so 'no longer' ( $\omicron\upsilon\chi\acute{\epsilon}\tau\iota$ )" (159). Thus Paul can speak favorably of the Gentile-excluding law for this purpose, but once Christ has come Paul now views it unfavorably in the same way

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<sup>8</sup> Note that, with either translation, the implication is that "law" is something that can refer to more than just the Sinai covenant (either "*a law*" generally, or "*the law that was given*" implying the need to specify *which* law from a multitude).

that a guardian is looked upon favorably until a child has come of age, at which point it would be wrong for it to continue to act as a protective guardian.

## **8. Galatians 3:26–29**

In light of the temporary (and now ceased) role of the Sinai covenant, “you” (Galatian Gentiles) are all sons of God through faith (v. 26). Paul contrasts how the new covenant ceremony of baptism “unites all in a common reality” while the Sinai covenant ceremonies in various ways distinguished Jew from Greek, male from female (Lev. 12:2, 4, 8; 15:19), and slave from free (Lev. 19:20; 25:39; Exod. 21:2, 20–21). In fact, Gordon argues, Mosaic law distinguished these groups specifically with regards to circumcision. Gentiles were not circumcised. Neither were females. Slaves were required to be circumcised but free sojourners or resident aliens were not.

## **9. Galatians 4:1–7**

Chapter 4 continues and focuses the question of “Who will inherit the third reality pledged to Abraham and Sarah?” (165). Paul reiterates a similar point to 3:22–25. “[B]eing ὑπὸ νόμον was like a child being under special care and guardianship, which is necessary to the child’s minority circumstance but not necessary upon the age of majority” (167). However, he adds that such a child is like a slave in regard to the question of inheritance. “We” here refers to Jews (Gentiles were never “under the law”) who were kept from their inheritance (enslaved) by the elementary principles of the world until

the work of Christ manumitted them (ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ) therefrom. Only then, manumitted from the covenant that separated Jew from Gentile [by the inauguration of the new covenant which terminated the Sinai covenant], could they receive their full inheritance/adoption as mature sons . . . Gentile exclusion entailed Israelite servitude and minority. (168)

## 10. Galatians 4:8-11

Speaking now to the Galatian Gentiles, Paul questions why they would want to be enslaved by the (previously mentioned) elementary principles of the world, which refers “to either the same *reality* or the same redemptive-historical *moment* as the season in which Israel was ὑπὸ νόμον” (168). “Now that they have come to know God (and/or be known by God), why would they observe the very covenant that had excluded them for centuries?” (169).

## 11. Galatians 4:21-31

Paul’s allegory is not an argument *proved* from Genesis, but rather the summary of his argument *illustrated* by the Genesis narrative. He focuses on the distinction between slave and free, reiterating his argument “that life under the Sinai administration was/is a kind of bondage” (175), and the distinction of flesh and promise, reiterating the distinction between the Sinai covenant as dependent upon Israelite works and the Abrahamic covenant as dependent only on God’s pledge/promise. Because Paul chose the word “promise” and “promise” is a synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant, Paul is here comparing the Sinai covenant with the Abrahamic, not the new covenant. Furthermore,

“Abraham had two sons” is far more likely to be a reference to two covenant administrations made with his lineage than it is a reference to one covenant (Sinai) made with his lineage and another (the new) that is plainly not made with his lineage. (175)

That said, both the Abrahamic and the new covenant embrace all nations, are characterized by faith, and are free of any threatened curse sanctions. Furthermore, the new covenant is the fulfillment of what was pledged in the Abrahamic covenant. “If we ask, then, whether the ‘our mother’ of 4:26 is the figurative mother of members of the Abrahamic or the new covenant, the answer is probably ‘both.’” But Gordon is not quite certain.



Having said this, however, there is some good reason to think that the first-person plural here (“our mother”) refers to those who are members of the new covenant . . . It is also possible that the “then/now” comparison of verse 29 also suggests that the “free son” is intended to be the new covenant believers in Paul’s day. And the concluding statement in verse 31 surely suggests that it is new covenant believers who are represented by the free woman and the free child of the analogy . . . (179)

In the end, Gordon concludes that it is not necessary to make a determination because it is not critical to his covenant-historical approach to Galatians. “[W]hat is necessary for Paul is to designate the slave son as a child of Sinai” (178). Paul is referring to the Sinai covenant itself, not a misunderstanding of it. DP has characteristically misunderstood this point by thinking Paul has in mind a later perversion of the Sinai covenant, rather than the Sinai covenant delivered by the hand of Moses on Mount Sinai. “It is not two interpretations of that covenant he discusses, but ‘two covenants’ – one of which is specified to be the covenant made on Mount Sinai. The dominant Protestant approach has had enormous difficulty allowing Paul to speak for himself in Galatians” (176). DP “rests persistently on the notion that there is a right way and a wrong way to observe the Sinai covenant, and a right way and a wrong way to understand it” (177).

The dominant Protestant approach has routinely suggested that the reason the Sinai covenant produced children for bondage is because, as sinners, the Israelites either approached/understood the covenant the wrong way or failed to keep it because they were sinful. What the dominant Protestant approach has not explained is how/why/whether the same people did not also misunderstand the Abrahamic [or new] covenant. If the “bondage” associated with the Sinai covenant is due to human sinfulness or misunderstanding on the part of the Israelites, then why did not the same (alleged) sinfulness or misunderstanding produce bondage with the Abrahamic [or new] covenant? He refers to “two covenants” (*αὗται γάρ εἰσιν δύο διαθήκαι*), only one (*μία*) of which produces bondage. (177)

Gordon is uncertain precisely whether the slavery associated with the Sinai covenant refers to “separation from Gentiles, its curse sanctions, or merely the frustrated aspirations regarding the third pledge to Abraham that each of these entailed (or all three)” (176), though he leans towards threatened curse sanctions. “What is unmistakable here in chapter 4, however, is that Paul regards being ‘under the law’ (ὑπὸ νόμον, 4:21) as being enslaved” (176).

## 12. Galatians 5:1

Galatians 5:1 concludes the allegory with a command not to submit to a yoke of slavery, referring to the Sinai covenant and its threatening curse sanctions (cf. Acts 15:10). “The Sinai covenant, a burdensome yoke to those who lived under it, has disappeared with the appearance of the new covenant, and Paul commanded the Galatians to submit to it no more” (180).

## 13. Galatians 5:2-6

Being circumcised obligates one to keep all of the Mosaic laws. “[O]ne cannot elect to observe circumcision without electing to observe other regulations, including those that segregate Israel from the Gentiles more generally” (184). Gordon notes that translators add “who would be” in “you *who would be* justified by the law,” opining that it is probably not the best choice. Instead, he paraphrases:

All who wish to obey the law yourselves, and reap whatever temporal reward you may achieve thereby in the land of Canaan, go right ahead. But Christ has nothing to do with any of that—nothing to do with temporal prosperity for one nation in Canaan, and nothing to do with the obedience by which some degree thereof might be attained. (184)

The reason for Paul’s mutually exclusive distinction between Christ and the law/circumcision is because of the principle of substitution (Gal. 3:13). “Evade (if you can) the curse sanctions of Sinai by your own behavior, or evade the same through the substitutionary work of Christ. But you cannot do both; you must

choose" (185). Confusingly, Gordon explains this passage by appeal to penal substitution, even quoting 3:13, yet in his previous comments on 3:13 he denied it referred to penal substitution.

Because we "wait for the hope of righteousness," verse 5 implies that "justification is itself essentially an eschatological doctrine. To be acquitted/justified in the ultimate sense is to survive God's final act of judgment that inaugurates the eschaton" (185). Paul adds the qualifier "working through love" to "indicate that 'νόμος-free' does not mean 'ethics free' or 'licentious'" (186).

#### **14. Galatians 5:13–15**

"The 'freedom' Paul refers to here is the 'freedom' from the Sinai covenant that has been his concern in his use of the ἐλεύθ- group seven times (of the nine in Galatians) from 4:22 until here" (189). Yet Paul is not therefore a proponent of licentiousness. Gordon does not elaborate on Paul's quotation of Leviticus 19:8 but suggests Paul quotes it because his audience finds the text authoritative, not necessarily because he does.

#### **15. Galatians 5:16–24**

"Consistently with his reasoning in chapter 3, he places νόμος in the pre-eschatological era and πνεῦμα in the eschatological era: 'If (since) you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law'" (192). Paul tailors his recurring list of "works of the flesh" and "fruit of the Spirit" to address the divisive nature of the situation in Galatia.

#### **16. Galatians 6:1–5**

"The law of Christ" (τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) does not mean "the Mosaic law as interpreted by Christ," because "Paul can 'do ethics,' as it were, entirely without the Mosaic law." Paul more likely means "The important thing now is to live as followers of Christ, following the stipulations of his covenant; if we need a νόμον now, it is Christ's law" (196). In a footnote, Gordon mentions the distinction between "the law in the hand of Moses" view (which sees Paul citing portions of

the Decalogue because the Decalogue itself is obligatory to Christians) and “the law in the hand of Christ” view (which sees Paul quoting the Decalogue because it reflects the creational duty of the *imitatio Dei*). He says he embraces the latter view and quotes John Gill’s *The Law in the Hand of Christ: A Sermon Preached May 24, 1761, at Broad-Mead, in Bristol*.<sup>9</sup>

## 17. Galatians 6:11–16

Paul’s mention of “the Israel of God” is deliberate and surprising. “God of Israel” appears over one hundred times in the OT, but never “Israel of God.” Paul refers not to Abraham’s ethnic descendants but “to ‘Israel’ as the true inheritors of the promises made to Abraham (3:29; 4:28; and to the nations through his single descendant, 3:14, 16), to ‘Israel’ as the true people of God, and to ‘Israel’ as those who have the faith of Abraham (Gal. 3:7)” (202).

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that Gordon self-consciously identifies himself with the subservient covenant tradition, earlier citing Samuel Bolton. John Gill held to a form of the subservient covenant view as well. For an excellent analysis of the tradition, see Samuel D. Renihan *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptist Baptists (1642–1704)* (Oxford, UK: Regent’s Park College, 2018). Regarding the law of Moses, note Richard C. Barcellos *In Defense of the Decalogue* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress Publishing, 2001), 61, where he says: “Hearty agreement must be given when New Covenant theologians argue for the abolition of the Old Covenant. This is clearly the teaching of the Old and New Testaments (see Jeremiah 31:31–32; Second Corinthians 3; Galatians 3, 4; Ephesians 2:14–15; Hebrews 8–10). The whole law of Moses, as it functioned under the Old Covenant, has been abolished, including the Ten Commandments. Not one jot or tittle of the law of Moses functions as Old Covenant law anymore and to act as if it does constitutes redemptive-historical retreat and neo-Judaizing. However, to acknowledge that the law of Moses no longer functions as Old Covenant law is not to accept that it no longer functions; it simply no longer functions as Old Covenant law. This can be seen by the fact that the New Testament teaches both the abrogation of the law of the Old Covenant and its abiding moral validity under the New Covenant.” See also Richard C. Barcellos “John Owen and New Covenant Theology: Owen on the Old and New Covenants and the Functions of the Decalogue in Redemptive History in Historical and Contemporary Perspective,” in *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ*, ed. Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), 317. Compare with Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” trans. and ed. by E. Theodore Bachmann, *Luther’s Works: Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 161–174.

## Analysis

*Promise, Law, Faith* is an exciting volume simply because Gordon approaches the text of Galatians from a covenant theology perspective known historically as the subservient covenant tradition, which views the Sinai covenant neither as the Adamic covenant of works, nor the covenant of grace, but a distinct third covenant that was subservient to the covenant of grace. Gordon quotes Samuel Bolton as representative of his own view.

It was given by way of subserviency to the Gospel and a fuller revelation of the covenant of grace; it was temporary, and had respect to Canaan and God's blessing there, if and as Israel obeyed. It had no relation to heaven, for that was promised by another covenant which God made before He entered the subservient covenant. This is the opinion which I myself desire modestly to propound, for I have not been convinced that it is injurious to holiness or disagreeable to the mind of God in Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

The majority view of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries held that the Sinai covenant was the covenant of grace (in substance).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 99. Quoted in Gordon, 39, n. 25. Compare with Augustine, *A Work on the Proceedings of Pelagius*, trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Ernest Wallis, Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 189, where he says: "In that testament, however, which is properly called the Old, and was given on Mount Sinai, only earthly happiness is expressly promised . . . And these, indeed, are figures of the spiritual blessings which appertain to the New Testament."

<sup>11</sup> WCF 7.4–6. See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Jer. 31:31–32. "Now, as to the *new* covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself, he then who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham, and the Law was a confirmation of that covenant. As then the Law depended on that covenant which God made with his servant Abraham, it follows that God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant . . . These things no doubt sufficiently shew that God has never made any other covenant

This is foundational to what Gordon calls the DP reading of Galatians, which is anchored by the belief that Paul's negative statements about the law do not refer to the gracious Sinai covenant itself, but rather to a misunderstanding and abuse of Mosaic law. The Judaizers abstracted the law from its gracious covenant context, therefore Paul's statements are about the bare law itself apart from the Sinai covenant.

The 2016 Orthodox Presbyterian Church General Assembly report on republication commended this view as consistent with the Westminster Confession, while denying the subservient interpretation was. It commended the "misinterpretation principle" defined as "the notion that Paul, in texts such as Gal 3 and Rom. 10:4-5, is refuting a Jewish misinterpretation of the law (namely, that the Mosaic law contained a substantial republication of the covenant of works)."<sup>12</sup> It further clarified that "misinterpretive republication" refers to

the idea that the covenant of works is not actually republished in a substantial sense in the Mosaic covenant but is present only in the misunderstanding of those who opposed Paul's teaching of a substantially gracious Mosaic covenant. Hence, the language of contrast between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants rests in the minds of Paul's opponents, but not in Paul's actual theology.<sup>13</sup>

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than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses. This subject might be more fully handled; but it is enough briefly to shew, that the covenant which God made at first is perpetual."

<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Committee to Study Republication Presented to the Eighty-third (2016) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 91. Available at <https://www.opc.org/GA/republication.html>. Accessed 1 October 2020. The report is commendable notably for its accurate representation of the Westminster Confession's view and for recognizing the subservient covenant view was self-consciously distinct from it and mutually exclusive to it. That said, the Report does not adequately represent or engage with the subservient covenant view and it mistakenly claims Owen held that the Mosaic was in substance the covenant of works promising eternal life. Rather, Owen held to the subservient covenant view. See Renihan *From Shadow to Substance*, 195-223.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Committee to Study Republication*, 91. Note well: If in the texts in question the covenant of works "is present only in the misunderstanding of those who opposed Paul's teaching," then, as John Murray realized, "[i]n connection with the promise of life it does not appear justifiable to appeal, as frequently has been done, to the principle enunciated in certain texts (cf. Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12), 'This do and thou shalt live'." That is why Murray rejected the covenant *of works*. (It could be argued that he still held to an Adamic covenant but simply called it the

I believe the Westminster Confession's understanding of the Sinai covenant is incorrect, thus I welcome Gordon's contribution to understanding the letter of Galatians from a more biblical understanding of the covenants. However, I believe he has swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. I also believe his understanding of the covenants may be refined yet further to be even more biblical.

## 1. The tripartite Abrahamic covenant

Gordon's understanding of the Abrahamic, Sinai, and new covenants as three distinct covenants (rather than three phases or "administrations" of the same covenant) is an excellent starting place. He correctly notes:

Within the Hebrew Bible there are several covenants . . . Each of these covenants has its own integrity and its own purpose. They cannot and do not meld into one another regarding their parties, their stipulations, or their benefits. (54)<sup>14</sup>

Gordon very helpfully distributes the Abrahamic covenant into three distinct promises: to become numerous, to inherit the land of Canaan, and to bless all the nations of the world.<sup>15</sup> He also correctly recognizes

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"Adamic Administration," yet even then he precisely rejected the works component of such an arrangement. "Adam could claim the fulfilment of the promise if he stood the probation, but only on the basis of God's faithfulness, not on the basis of justice." See John Murray, "The Adamic Administration" in *Collected Writings*, vol. II (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 47–60.

<sup>14</sup> Insofar as the "substance" of a covenant refers to its Aristotelian essence, it is determined by the covenant's parties, stipulations and benefits. See *Report of the Committee to Study Republication*, 11. Note that the WCF conflates the Aristotelian substance/accidents distinction with the Pauline substance/shadows distinction at 7.6.

<sup>15</sup> Here I agree with Gordon and disagree with Nehemiah Coxe, who saw the third promise as part of the new covenant, properly speaking, and only mentioned or declared in the midst of the Covenant of Circumcision. Coxe believed that being the father of the Messiah (*historia salutis*) was a special privilege Abraham received as part of the new covenant, whereas I believe it was a promise of the Abrahamic Covenant itself. See Nehemiah Coxe, "A Discourse of the Covenants that God made with men before the Law," in *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ*, 72, 74, 75, 78, 80.

that the first two were fulfilled prior to Christ. Galatians 3:8 “expressly refers to the third (prior to Paul, unfulfilled) aspect of the tripartite pledge God made to Abraham, to bless the nations/Gentiles through him. The other two parts, becoming numerous and inheriting the land, had been fulfilled many years before.” (109). I do not believe, however, he draws the necessary conclusions from this distinction for his study of Galatians. His understanding of Paul’s use of synecdoche leads him to interpret “promise” as referring to the whole Abrahamic covenant, rather than just part of it and thus interpret Paul as “contrast[ing] the Abrahamic covenant with the Sinai covenant in five ways” (121). But if 3:8 “expressly refers to the third” promise, in distinction from the other two, then perhaps the same is true throughout the rest of the letter. Recall above that Gordon said in verse 14 “Paul is referring here *and throughout Galatians* to the third pledge God made to Abraham: that through Abraham’s seed, all nations/families of the earth would be ‘blessed’” (130, emphasis added). If this is the case, then in the same way that Gordon uses 3:17 as an interpretative foundation for understanding *ὁ νόμος* throughout the letter, perhaps 3:8 should serve as an interpretative foundation for understanding *ἐπαγγελίαν* (promise) throughout the letter.

Again in 3:16 Gordon recognizes that *ἐπαγγελίαν* refers not to the Abrahamic covenant as a whole, but to the third promise specifically. He argued that Paul understood the “seed” of the first two promises to be corporate, but the implications of this acknowledgment remain untapped by Gordon. Paul is not merely arguing that the third promise refers to a singular seed. He is arguing that it refers to a singular seed *in distinction from the other two Abrahamic promises*, which refer to a corporate seed. Paul is making an intra-Abrahamic argument. As mentioned above, Alexander argues that the grammar of Genesis 22:17b indicates that it should be translated “And your offspring will possess the gate of his (not ‘their’) enemies,” a reading that is confirmed by Psalm 72:17b. He concludes “the ‘seed’ mentioned in Genesis 22:17b-18a does not refer to all Abraham’s descendants, but rather to a single individual.”<sup>16</sup> Collins builds upon this, pointing out that Paul’s quotation in Galatians 3:8 is a composite of different Genesis texts, including 22:18, which makes perfect sense

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” 365.



of Paul's hitherto perplexing argumentation in Galatians 3:16. Paul is not making a typological or *sensus plenior* argument from the text of Genesis (which does not comport with his insistence on the grammar of the promise). "[W]e should give more room to the possibility that he saw things that are really there —things that we have not yet found."<sup>17</sup> John Brown actually made the same argument in 1853.

It is just as if he had said, 'In the passage I refer to, the word *seed* is used of an individual, just as when it is employed of Seth, Gen. iv. 25, where he is called "another seed," and said to be given in the room of Abel, whom Cain slew. In looking carefully at the promise recorded, Gen. xxii. 16–18, the phrase "*seed*" seems used with a different reference in the two parts of the promise—the first part of the 17th verse plainly referring to a class of descendants; the last clause and the 18th verse to an individual, and that individual is Christ.'<sup>18</sup>

Yet others have objected that Paul cannot be quoting Genesis 22:18 because that text does not contain καὶ ("and to") whereas Paul's quotation does ("and to your offspring").<sup>19</sup> Therefore Paul must be referring to Genesis 13:15 and/or 17:8, which Paul interprets typologically or spiritually. Collins argues this does not matter because Paul is merely alluding to 22:18 (and 3:8 is a composite). While this is somewhat true, I think a stronger point is that Paul is making an intra-Abrahamic argument contrasting the different promises by comparing the seed to whom they refer. Paul acknowledges that the first two promises, particularly the land promise, were made to Abraham's carnal offspring. "I will give *to you and your offspring* after you the land" (Gen. 17:8; 13:15). But 22:18 (the specific promise to which Paul has been referring since 3:8) "does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And

<sup>17</sup> Collins, "Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete was Paul?" 86.

<sup>18</sup> John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh/London/New York: William Oliphant and Sons, 1853), 144. I was directed to this reference by an anonymous Twitter account, challenging the view that Twitter is good for nothing.

<sup>19</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (1865; reprint, Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 142, says "καὶ must be part of the quotation. These considerations restrict the reference to Gen. xiii.15, xvii.8."

to your offspring" (Gal. 3:16). Thus, the promise to bless all nations in Abraham's offspring does *not* refer to the Jews, even though the promise of the land *did*, and therefore it is not a requirement that one *live like a Jew* in order to receive that promised blessing (unlike the land promise, which did require circumcision; Josh. 5:1-12; Gen. 17:14; Exod. 4:24-26). In other words, Paul is expounding upon the dichotomous nature of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this, it must be observed that with regard to the promises there are three, and only three, offspring of Abraham: his numerous carnal offspring, his singular, Messianic carnal offspring, and his spiritual offspring (all those united to Christ). The offspring of those united to Christ are not Abraham's offspring. None of the Abrahamic promises were to them.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon's tripartite division has been simplified by others into a bipartite division distinguished by the seed. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), XVI.16, says: "Now it is to be observed that two things are promised to Abraham, the one, that his seed should possess the land of Canaan, which is intimated when it is said, 'Go into a land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation;' but the other far more excellent, not about the carnal but the spiritual seed, through which he is the father, not of the one Israelite nation, but of all nations who follow the footprints of his faith, which was first promised in these words, 'And in thee shall all tribes of the earth be blessed.'" John Owen, "Exercitation 6. Oneness of the Church," *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Introduction*, vol. 17 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 2000), 177, says: "Two privileges did God grant unto Abraham, upon his separation to a special interest in the old promise and covenant . . . Answerably unto this twofold end of the separation of Abraham, there was a double seed allotted unto him; — a seed according to the flesh, separated to the bringing forth of the Messiah according unto the flesh; and a seed according to the promise, that is, such as by faith should have interest in the promise, or all the elect of God."

<sup>21</sup> Many mistakenly put themselves in the place of Abraham and claim that God promised to be a God to their offspring. They forget their place as Abraham's offspring, not Abraham himself. Genesis 17:7-8 refers to Abraham's offspring down through the generations, not just his immediate offspring. It was fulfilled when God redeemed Israel out of Egypt, gave them the land of Canaan, established the old covenant with them, and dwelt in their midst (Exod. 6:7; 19:4-6; 29:45; Deut. 4:32-40; 26:16-19; 29:10-13; Amos 3:1-2; Hos. 1:9). That is, the promise was sub-eschatological. Gordon notes this in another essay "Murray (and his followers) implicitly believe that the only *relation* God sustains to people is that of Redeemer (which, by my light, is not a relation but an office). I would argue, by contrast, that God was just as surely

## 2. The Abrahamic covenant vs. the Sinai covenant

If Paul is expounding upon the dichotomous nature of the Abrahamic covenant, then it does not seem appropriate to interpret Paul as comparing the Sinai covenant with the Abrahamic covenant *simpliciter*, as Gordon does. He offers the following table as a summary of Paul's comparison between the two covenants in Galatians 3:6–14.

<u>Abrahamic Covenant</u>	<u>Sinai Covenant</u>
"those who are characterized by faith"	"those who are characterized by works of the law"
Includes the nations	Excludes the nations
Blesses	Curses
Justifies	Justifies no one
Promise	Law

Let us examine each of these comparisons to see if they hold up.

## 3. Promise vs. law

The last comparison (promise vs. law) Gordon derives from 3:17–18, which he interprets to be a statement regarding the contradictory *natures* of the two covenants: promise inheritance vs. law inheritance.

ὁ νόμος is not and cannot be an alternative way of arriving at the blessings associated with the Abrahamic covenant . . . The specific reason the law does not annul/de-ratify the Abrahamic promise is that if it were an alternative means of arriving at that promise it would "make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the

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Israel's God when He *cursed* the nation as when He *blessed* it. His pledge to be Israel's God, via the terms of the Sinai administration, committed him to curse Israel for disobedience just as much as to bless her for obedience. In being Israel's God, he sustained the relation of covenant suzerain to her; he did not bless or curse any other nation for its covenant fidelity or infidelity. In this sense, he was *not* the God of other nations as he was the God of Israel" (T. David Gordon, "Reflections on Auburn Theology," in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson, Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 120).

law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise." The law, with over six hundred commands, cannot become the means to attaining that which was promised to Abraham without voiding its promissory nature altogether. The law, whose recipients live under the threatened curse sanction, cannot be the means of inheriting the blessings that were promised to Abraham without corrupting entirely what "promise" means . . . *Four times in three verses (3:16–18), Paul employs the language of "promise," because the Abrahamic covenant (which came 430 years earlier than the Sinai covenant) was and is essentially promissory.* (140, emphasis added)

Does Paul employ the language of "promise" because the type of covenant God made with Abraham was a promissory covenant? Or does Paul employ the language of "promise" because he is referring to a specific promise, the one mentioned in 3:8? Gordon notes that when νόμος is anarthrous, translators must choose to add either "a" or "the" (*a law, the law*). He argues (in verse 21 specifically) that νόμος should always be translated "the law" because Paul is referring specifically to the Sinai covenant, not to a general or abstract concept of law. I believe a similar situation occurs in verse 18 regarding the translation of ἐπαγγελίας. Most translations end verse 17 with a particular reference ("*the promise*"), yet they translate ἐπαγγελίας as a general reference in verse 18 ("*a promise*"), so as to suggest Paul is making a comparison between two different ways of inheriting something in general (inheriting something by promise is read as synonymous with inheriting something by grace, cf. Rom 4:4; 11:16).<sup>22</sup> I believe the NET translation makes more sense: "For if the inheritance is based on the law, it is no longer based on the promise, but God graciously gave it to Abraham through the promise."<sup>23</sup> Rather than making a general point about what type of covenant the Abrahamic is (after all, every covenant is based on promise, even a covenant of works<sup>24</sup>), Paul is reiterating the point he made in 2:21. If

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<sup>22</sup> See Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 23–24.

<sup>23</sup> NET Bible. <https://netbible.com/copyright/>. Accessed 1 October 2020.

<sup>24</sup> What matters is the specifics of the promise. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 8:1–10:39*, vol. 22 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 2000), 79–82, says: "[E]very covenant between God and man must be founded on and resolved into 'promises.'... It is

the inheritance is based on the law, it is no longer based on Christ, but God gave it to Abraham through *the promise of Christ* (3:8).<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Includes vs. excludes the nations

Gordon argues that the Abrahamic covenant includes the nations while the Sinai covenant excludes the nations. In light of the above distinctions, is that accurate? Did the first two Abrahamic promises include the nations? Was the land of Canaan promised to the nations or only to Abraham's carnal offspring? The fulfillment of the land promise entailed the expulsion of the Gentiles (Exod. 23:31; 33:1-2; Deut. 7:17-24; Acts 13:19). Thus, the inclusion and exclusion of the nations points to an Abrahamic dichotomy, rather than an Abrahamic contrast with the Sinai covenant because the first two Abrahamic promises exclude the nations while the third includes the nations.

#### 5. Blesses vs. curses

Is it true that the Abrahamic covenant blessed while the Sinai covenant cursed? Genesis 12:3 declares a curse upon all who oppose Abraham and his descendants, which specifically refers to the nations, Israel's enemies (Num. 24:8-9). It may be rightly pointed out that this curse was upon those *outside* of the Abrahamic covenant, but what of Genesis 17:14? There God declares that any member of the Abrahamic covenant who is not circumcised will be put to death, a curse Moses himself nearly came under (Exod. 4:27; see meaning of "cut off" in

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necessary from the nature of a covenant... And herein lies the great difference between the promises of the *covenant of works* and those of the *covenant of grace*... And this is the first thing that was to be declared, namely, that every divine covenant is established on promises." The covenant of works was based on a promise in that it "promised life upon the fulfilling [of the law]" (WCF/2LCF 19.1).

<sup>25</sup> In *The Commentary and Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. Gross Alexander, vol. 13 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 28, Chrysostom says: "It was promised Abraham that by his seed the heathen should be blessed; and his seed according to the flesh is Christ; four hundred and thirty years after came the Law; now, if the Law bestows the blessings even life and righteousness, that promise is annulled."

Lev. 23:29–30; Num. 15:30–36; Exod. 31:14–15). Surely this amounts to a *threatened* curse—the kind Gordon is at pains to attribute to the Sinai covenant. It is not accurate to say, “Abraham’s covenant threatened with no curses at all” (115). Thus, blessing and curse does not appear to distinguish the Abrahamic covenant from the Sinai covenant.

## 6. “Of faith” vs. “of works”

Paul says the Sinai covenant is “of works,” which Gordon understands to mean “If they would obey (i.e., do what he commanded), then God would bless them in the land of Canaan; and if they would not obey (do contrary to what he commanded), then God would curse them there” (124). This is in contrast to the inheritance of the third Abrahamic promise, which is “of faith.” But what of the other promises? Did Abraham’s offspring inherit the land of Canaan through faith apart from works of the law or through works of the law? Scripture is clear that obedience to the Sinai covenant was a condition of Israel’s entrance into the promised land (Exod. 19:5–8; 23:20–22; Deut. 4:1; 6:3, 17–18, 24–25; 7:12; 8:1–2; 11:8, 22–24; 29:13; Jer. 11:5). Israel entered into the Sinai covenant in the wilderness prior to entering the land. As Gordon notes in a prior essay “While the land was eventually given to the Israelites, the terms of the Sinai covenant delayed their inheritance by forty years . . .”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> T. David Gordon, “Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6–14,” in *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko, David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 247. See also Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 298, “On the other hand it also is true to say that Israel, though small and stubborn, is receiving the land through obedience. Moses has already drawn a connection between obedience and conquest of the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 4:1. ‘And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.’ Israel is to hear and to do the Lord’s commands ‘that’ the promised consequences might follow, namely life and possession of the land. Israel’s reception of the relative and temporal/temporary possession of life and land as a reward for relative fidelity to the law of the Lord foreshadows a covenantal principle of reciprocity that the apostle Paul will articulate in its eschatologized, absolutized form: ‘The one who does [God’s commands] shall live by them.’ (Gal 3:12).”

Israel did not inherit the promised land until the disobedient generation died in the wilderness and the second generation subsequently obeyed (Deut. 8:2).<sup>27</sup> Thus being “of works” or “of faith” does not distinguish the Abrahamic covenant from the Sinai covenant, though it does distinguish the different inheritances promised in the dichotomous Abrahamic covenant.

All of this brings us to the big elephant in the room: circumcision is Abrahamic. Gordon recognizes that circumcision separates Jew and Gentile. It did this from its inception, not 430 years later (Gen. 34:15). Circumcision is just as Abrahamic as it is Mosaic, which is why Scripture calls the Abrahamic covenant the covenant of circumcision (Acts 7:8). This alone negates the idea that Paul’s argument is to distinguish the Abrahamic covenant (*simpliciter*) from the Sinai covenant. Whatever incompatibility Paul finds between circumcision and the new covenant, he finds between the covenant of circumcision and the new covenant. The Sinai covenant did not change the meaning of circumcision.<sup>28</sup> The DP interpretation argues, at this point,

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<sup>27</sup> See Bryan D. Estelle, “Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14 in Biblical Theological Development: Entitlement to Heaven Foreclosed and Proffered,” in *The Law is Not of Faith*, 118, n. 45. “[I]n the context of the Old Testament itself, there is often the assumption that the law can be kept in some measure and indeed has been kept by certain generations, such as the generation of Joshua and Caleb.” Deut. 9:4–6 would appear to contradict this interpretation. That passage, however, is not directed specifically at the second generation, but at Israel collectively, inclusive of the first, disobedient generation (cp. Deut 3:26; 4:21). God was humbling the second generation, reminding them they were only spared their parents’ destruction by his mercy.

<sup>28</sup> Circumcision was not a sign or seal of Abraham’s (or anyone else’s) faith in the *ordo salutis*. As a sign, it dedicated all recipients to the service of Yahweh and obligated them to keep the whole law. See John D. Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum, Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 127–58 (note that Meade’s unwillingness to identify biblical-theological “heart circumcision” with systematic-theological “regeneration” such that individuals in the OT were regenerate but not circumcised of heart represents a primary difference between Progressive Covenantalism and 1689 Federalism). As a seal, it guaranteed that the Abrahamic promises (notably the third) would be fulfilled (*historia salutis*). The Appendix to the 2LCF quotes John Lightfoot’s translation of Rom. 4:11. “Circumcision is nothing, if we respect the time, for now it was without use, that end of it being especially fulfilled; for which it had been instituted: this end the Apostle declares in these words, Rom. 4.11 . But I fear that by most translations

that Paul is not addressing a proper understanding of circumcision, but a misunderstanding and misuse of circumcision. But Gordon (rightly) rejects that line of reasoning.

Likewise, the Sinai covenant did not change the condition of Israel's inheritance of the promised land (after all, once a covenant is ratified it cannot be annulled or voided). Circumcision obligated the one circumcised to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:3) even pre-Sinai to the extent that it was known. Recall that an offspring of Abraham would be cut off (killed) for trying to opt out of this obligation (Gen. 17:14; Exod. 4:24-26), and you begin to see why Peter says circumcision was a yoke "neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). The best way to understand the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant, I suggest, is that the latter served as an addendum to the former, elaborating upon the obedience required by Abraham's carnal offspring inherent in the original covenant of circumcision.

## 7. Justifies vs. does not justify

Gordon's final contrast between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant is that the former justifies while the latter does not. He

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they are not sufficiently suited to the end of circumcision, and the scope of the Apostle whilst something of their own is by them inserted . . . as if circumcision was given to Abraham for a Seal of that Righteousness which he had being yet uncircumcised, which we will not deny to be in some sense true, but we believe that circumcision had chiefly a far different respect. Give me leave thus to render the words; *And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the Righteousness of Faith, which was to be in the uncircumcision, Which was to be* (I say) *not which had been*, not that which Abraham had whilst he was yet uncircumcised; but that which his uncircumcised seed should have, that is the Gentiles, who in time to come should imitate the faith of Abraham." (The Appendix cites this as Hor. Hebrai, on the I Cor. 7. 19. p.42, 43.) Note also John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, 142, where he says: "God had, in the case of Abraham, showed that justification is by believing; He had, in the revelation made to Abraham, declared materially that justification by faith was to come upon the Gentiles. This arrangement was confirmed or ratified, both by circumcision, which the apostle tells us was 'the seal of justification by faith,' and by the solemn promise made to Abraham that, 'in him,' along with him, in the same way as he was, 'all nations should be blessed.'"



appears to assume this point based on Galatians 3:6, as it is not a point he demonstrates. Abraham was justified; therefore, the Abrahamic covenant justifies. This assumption, however, is negated by Gordon's (correct) understanding that "justification is itself essentially an eschatological doctrine. To be acquitted/justified in the ultimate sense is to survive God's final act of judgment that inaugurates the eschaton" (185). Gordon refers to "making alive" and "acquittal/righteousness" (3:21) as "two realities of the eschaton" (151). He recognizes that the promised Spirit, received by Jew and Gentile in Paul's day, is an eschatological gift. A key component of his covenant-historical interpretation, however, is that "The Sinai covenant (ὁ νόμος) governed God's visible people on earth *before* the eschatological age. It was associated, temporally, with sin and the flesh, with the pre-eschatological order" (107). He says, "The eschatological ('promised') Spirit will not come upon the Jews until that day when the eschatological blessings come to the Gentiles" (130). If "the Spirit is the active agent who produces faith in Jew and Gentile alike" (130), and that Spirit does not come until Christ, then how could anyone prior to Christ be saved? How could Abraham have received the future-promised Spirit through faith "just as" (3:6) the Galatian Gentiles did? How could Abraham be justified by the Abrahamic covenant if in the course of history the Abrahamic covenant is just as pre-eschatological as the Sinai covenant? One cannot say the Abrahamic covenant justified without rejecting the *historia testamentorum*. "Until and unless we think covenant-historically, we cannot think Paul's thoughts after him . . . His 'whens' (4:3, 3, 8), 'befores' (3:23), 'afters/nows' (3:17, 25; 4:9), and 'untils' (3:19) must become ours" (212). The eschatological gifts of the Spirit, faith, making alive, and justification can only come from an eschatological covenant and "the new covenant is profoundly and pervasively eschatological" (9). Wrestling with a similar dilemma in Hebrews 8:10, Calvin says, "There is yet no reason why God should not have extended the grace of the new covenant to the fathers. This is the true solution of the question."<sup>29</sup> Thus justification is not a contrast

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<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classica Ethereal Library), Heb. 8:10. Calvin likely gleaned this solution from Augustine who made many similar comments.

between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant, but between the new covenant and both the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants.<sup>30</sup>

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Augustine, *A Work on the Proceedings of Pelagius*, 189, says: “[T]he happy persons, who even in that early age [the Old Testament] were by the grace of God taught to understand the distinction now set forth, were thereby made the children of promise, and were accounted in the secret purpose of God as heirs of the New Testament; although they continued with perfect fitness to administer the Old Testament to the ancient people of God.” In Augustine, *A Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Ernest Wallis, Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), III.11–12, 406–07, he says: “These pertain to the new testament [covenant], are the children of promise, and are regenerated by God the Father and a free mother. Of this kind were all the righteous men of old, and Moses himself, the minister of the old testament, the heir of the new . . . Let us, therefore, choose whether to call the righteous men of old the children of the bondwoman or of the free. Be it far from us to say, of the bondwoman; therefore if of the free, they pertain to the new testament [covenant] in the Holy Spirit, whom, as making alive, the apostle opposes to the killing letter. For on what ground do they not belong to the grace of the new testament [covenant?].” See also Joshua N. Moon, *Jeremiah’s New Covenant: An Augustinian Reading* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011). John Frame recognizes this as well in John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013) 79–81, where he says: “Everyone who has ever been saved has been saved through the new covenant in Christ . . . [T]he efficacy of the New Covenant, unlike that of previous covenants, extends to God’s elect prior to Jesus’ atonement. When believers in the Old Testament experienced ‘circumcision of the heart,’ or when they were Jews ‘inwardly,’ they were partaking of the power of the New Covenant.” And Michael Horton says similar in Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 152, where he says: “There are clear passages indicating that ‘the forgiveness of sins’ is unique to the New Covenant (‘remember their sins no more’; Jer 31:34) . . . Kuyper seems to confirm this conclusion. He argued that the energies of the Spirit at Pentecost worked retroactively in the lives of OT saints.” See also Coxe, *A Discourse on the Divine Covenants*, 75, where he says: “The grace and blessings of the new covenant were given and ensured to Abraham for himself.”

<sup>30</sup> The Abrahamic covenant of circumcision does promise that the nations will be blessed (referring to justification by faith), but this promise is of a *historia salutis* nature, not an *ordo salutis* nature. It promises that *Abraham will be the father of the seed of the woman* who will one day bless the nations (by establishing the new covenant, which bestows the *ordo salutis* blessings of the Spirit and forgiveness of sins; Deut. 30:6; Heb. 8:6–13). See John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 8:1–10:39*, 90, where he says: “[T]his covenant with Abraham was with respect to other things [than the *ordo salutis* covenant of grace], especially the proceeding of the promised Seed from his loins.” See also John Owen, *The Oneness of the Church*, 177,

This helps resolve Gordon's dilemma of how to interpret Paul's allegory in Galatians 4:21–31. Is Paul comparing the Abrahamic and Sinai covenant, or the Sinai and new covenant? As Gordon noted, all the textual indicators point to Paul comparing Sinai to the new covenant. His reasons for considering it a comparison between the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants are those addressed above, as well as his opinion that "'Abraham had two sons' is far more likely to be a reference to two covenant administrations made with his lineage" (175). This seems an odd line of thought given that Paul's entire argument has been to demonstrate that those who are of faith (the new covenant) are Abraham's sons. Furthermore, Gordon is being overly literal in his reading of the allegory on this point (for example, Paul is not arguing that a covenant was made with Ishmael) and missing the typological significance Paul gives Isaac and Ishmael. As Günther H. Juncker notes, "As a child of promise whose birth was wholly dependent on the gracious activity of God, Isaac stands as a type of the 'children of promise,' namely, Jewish and Gentile believers."<sup>31</sup> Paul's point is to illustrate how the Abrahamic covenant gave birth to two different, subsequent covenants (Sinai and new). Commenting on this passage, Augustine notes, "This interpretation of the passage, handed down to us with apostolic authority, shows how we ought to understand the Scriptures of the two covenants – the old

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where he says: "[God promised Abraham] [t]hat according to the flesh he should be the father of the Messiah, the promised seed . . . In pursuit hereof were his posterity separated from the rest of the world, and preserved a peculiar people, that through them the promised Seed might be brought forth in the fullness of time, and be of them according unto the flesh, Romans 9:5." Because the Abrahamic covenant consisted only of *historia salutis* promises, it is now ended, having been fulfilled.

<sup>31</sup> Günther H. Juncker, "'Children of Promise': Spiritual Paternity and Patriarch Typology in Galatians and Romans," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 17:1 (2007): 135. Later he says: "This makes the Galatians passage with its considerably greater elaboration indispensable for a proper understanding of Rom 9:8," 149. See also Lee Irons, "Paul's Theology of Israel's Future: A Nonmillennial Interpretation of Romans 11," *Reformation and Revival* 06:2 (1997): 101–24. Note Augustine in *City of God*, IX.XV.2, on the multi-layered typology: "One portion of the earthly city became an image of the heavenly city . . . and this shadow of a city was also itself foreshadowed by another preceding figure. For Sarah's handmaid Agar, and her son, were an image of this image."

and the new.”<sup>32</sup> Once again, Paul is expounding upon the dichotomous nature of the Abrahamic covenant.

## 8. The law

Central to Gordon’s interpretation of Galatians is his belief that *ὁ νόμος* is a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant. I think this is basically true, but I also believe Gordon is unnecessarily wooden in his application of this concept. A synecdoche is a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole. Gordon himself notes that as a figure of speech, a synecdoche has two parts: the original semantic meaning of the word (its definition) and the referential meaning (what it is figuratively being applied to). Gordon acknowledges that *νόμος* is the ordinary Greek term for “law,” which we can define as a rule of action, a command. Paul uses the term figuratively “to *refer* to a covenant characterized by law-giving.” (166, n. 4). That is, the *definition* of *ὁ νόμος* is not “the Sinai covenant.” Yet in practice, Gordon seems to treat it as a definition rather than a figure of speech. For example, he seems unwilling to acknowledge the existence of something called “the moral law.” He affirms the general concept<sup>33</sup> but refers to it as “compliance with our created nature,” “creational realities,” (184) “the duty of love,” “creational imperative,” (186, n. 10) and “the creational duty of *imatio Dei*” (190, n. 21). He objects that “Westminster 19 made ‘law’ a universal reality, ‘by which he bound him [Adam] and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience’; whereas Paul understood *ὁ νόμος* to be a covenant that excluded all but the Israelites” (14). Gordon’s objection is simply that the Westminster Confession used the word “law” according to its definition (WCF 19.1 even refers to it as “a law”).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, IX.XV.2.

<sup>33</sup> “While the distinction between positive law and moral law may have been unknown to Paul, and a later development in Western philosophy, Paul evidently believed that while the Sinai legislation in its entirety disappeared with the covenant itself, some of its particular commands reflected the fundamental creational imperative to imitate (the loving) God by loving others” (186, n. 10).

<sup>34</sup> He makes no similar objection to the WCF using “promise” to refer to something other than the Abrahamic covenant (WCF 7.2, 5; 8.6; 14.2; 18.2; 19.1, 6) or

If “law” may only refer to the sub-eschatological Sinai covenant and its temporal life in the land of Canaan, then what becomes of the eschatological law and gospel distinction?<sup>35</sup> I’m afraid there will be no place to speak of the law and the gospel as two distinct ways of obtaining eternal life. What then becomes of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law? Given the way that Gordon has re-interpreted texts in Galatians that are normally understood as teaching the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement (3:13) and justification by the law (5:4), it seems he is on a slippery slope.

## 9. Correcting behavior or doctrine?

There is much in Gordon’s intriguing study that warrants careful consideration and even adoption (notably three Abrahamic promises, Sinai as subservient covenant of works for life in Canaan, and a distinction between the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new covenants understood according to the *historium testamentorum*). His overall argument, however, suffers from one serious deficiency. Presumably in an effort to avoid the DP view that Paul speaks only of a misunderstanding of the Sinai covenant, rather than the Sinai covenant itself, Gordon has disregarded a crucial aspect of what Paul was arguing against. The occasion of the Jerusalem Council was that “some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). Gordon’s only mention of this verse is a brief affirmation that the Jerusalem Council was about “correcting doctrine” (84). He says nothing at all about the specific doctrine being corrected—that people must be circumcised in order to be saved. Although he says, “Paul’s issue was virtually identical to the issue addressed at the Jerusalem Council” (42) and “The problem at Galatia is nearly identical to the problem at Acts 15” (227), he holds that when Paul addresses the problem of circumcision in Galatia it has nothing

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“faith” to refer to something other than the new covenant (WCF 3.6; 7.3, 5; 11.1–2; 14.1–3).

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Renihan helpfully refers to this as the *dogmatic* contrast between the law and the gospel and compares it to the contrast considered *historically* and *covenantally* as it developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See *From Shadow to Substance*, 18–66.

to do with being saved. In fact, it has nothing to do with doctrine at all. He goes to great lengths to argue that Paul was *only* correcting behavior in Galatia. Paul's mention of justification by faith alone was merely a rhetorical lever to argue against the errant practice of Jews separating from Gentiles unless they are circumcised.

Gordon argues that "Peter was 'fearing the circumcision party,' not 'fearing God'" (87); that is, he was not withdrawing from Gentiles in order to be justified before God. He argues that the Galatians were committing the same error. Thus, it was a dispute over behavior, not doctrine. "The doctrine of justification was not disputed at Galatia" (96). What Gordon seems to neglect is a third party in Paul's letter. Paul refers to Peter acting hypocritically (thus behavior out of step with his professed belief). He also refers to the Galatians as brothers (1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18). Yet a third party is referred to as "false brothers" (2:4) "who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (1:7; cf. 5:10). Note that these men are "preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received" (1:9). It is not "reading between the lines" to think that this third party is related to the false teachers of Acts 15:1. This would explain why Paul addresses the hypothetical "if righteousness comes through the law" in 2:21 – something Gordon does not seem to address. Likewise, Paul's comment in 5:4 about being justified by the law really makes little sense if justification by the law was not an issue in Galatia. Gordon argues that this refers to "a kind of 'sub-eschatological' justification" (184) for life in Canaan, which does not make sense if neither eschatological nor sub-eschatological justification was an issue for the Galatians. In sum, Gordon's claim that "there is no warrant for the common assertion that the Judaizers taught an erroneous view of justification" (86) falls flat, in my opinion.

## 10. The sub-eschatological law

As just noted, Gordon's insistence that "the law" refers to only the "sub-eschatological" Sinai covenant of works for temporal blessing and cursing leads him to misinterpret several key passages.<sup>36</sup> He paraphrases 5:4 as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Notably 3:13; 5:4.

All who wish to obey the law yourselves, and reap whatever temporal reward you may achieve thereby in the land of Canaan, go right ahead. But Christ has nothing to do with any of that—nothing to do with temporal prosperity for one nation in Canaan, and nothing to do with the obedience by which some degree thereof might be attained. (184)

He appears to be caught on the horns of an unspoken dilemma. The Sinai covenant itself is sub-eschatological. If one acknowledges that Paul is addressing eschatological inheritance through obedience to this law, then Paul must not be addressing the law itself, but rather a misunderstanding of the law (the DP reading). In order to avoid this conclusion, Gordon denies that Paul is addressing eschatological inheritance through obedience to this law.

I believe that Gordon's concerns regarding the DP "misinterpretation" reading are valid. I agree that "In Galatians (and I believe elsewhere), the problem of the law resides not in its misperception nor in its mispractice . . . The problem inheres in the covenant itself" (209).<sup>37</sup> However, I also believe that Paul is addressing eschatological justification through obedience to the Sinai covenant, even though that covenant itself was sub-eschatological.

The dilemma may be resolved by considering the typological nature of the Sinai covenant. Yes, the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28 were temporal, but they were typological of eschatological blessing and curse. Thus, as Bryan D. Estelle notes in his excellent essay on this point, by the time we get to Paul's letter

the promise of tenure in the land is over . . . Israel's disobedience has triggered the curse sanctions. Therefore, the new covenant context has essentially changed matters . . . The temporary had given way to permanence. What was prototypical has been eclipsed by what is antitypical . . . [T]he temporal life promised in the Mosaic

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<sup>37</sup> Compare with John Owen on Heb. 7:12 in *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 6:1–7:28*, vol. 21 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 2000), 525, where he says: "Wherefore the whole law of Moses, as given unto the Jews, whether as used or abused by them, was repugnant unto and inconsistent with the gospel . . ."

covenant portended and typified the greater “eternal life,” which seems the clear position argued by the apostle Paul.<sup>38</sup>

Gordon recognizes a similar situation with regards to the first Abrahamic promise of numerous offspring (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4). He acknowledges it refers to Abraham’s carnal offspring and that it was fulfilled prior to Christ, yet he also says that promise “appears to be glossed eschatologically by the author of Hebrews [11:12]... as does Rom. 4:17” (152, n. 78).<sup>39</sup>

Thus Paul really does interpret the Sinai covenant on its own terms (Lev. 18:5), but he does not limit its application to sub-eschatological life. The Sinai covenant was distinct from the broken Adamic covenant of works, yet they coincided on two points: the inheritance principle of works<sup>40</sup> and the moral law, allowing Paul to address issues pertaining to both, similar to how Jesus pointed the rich young ruler to Mosaic law when asked about eschatological life (Matt. 19:16–22). Importantly, Paul does not abstract the law of the Sinai covenant and make general comments about the law apart from it. He argues specifically about the Sinai covenant itself (thus many of Gordon’s excellent comments regarding Paul’s temporal reasoning are very helpful), but he does so with an eye towards the bigger picture the Sinai covenant typologically represented. In other words,

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<sup>38</sup> Estelle, “Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14 in Biblical Theological Development,” 136–37, 118.

<sup>39</sup> A good case could be made that the same is true of Paul’s quotation of Hab. 2:4 in Gal. 3:12. As Lightfoot *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, 138–39 notes: “In its original context the passage has reference to the temporal calamities inflicted by the Chaldean invasion. Here a spiritual meaning and general application are given to words referring primarily to special external incidents. Another portion of this same prophecy of Habakkuk (i. 5, comp. ii. 5) relating to the Chaldeans is similarly applied in a speech of St Paul, Acts xiii. 41.” See also Estelle, “Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14 in Biblical Theological Development,” 135, n. 11. Israel (narrowed down to Judah) failed to keep the Mosaic law and were thus faced with destruction at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. The Mosaic law could not save them; however, they would be spared if they believed Jeremiah’s prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar’s victory and surrendered themselves to him beforehand (Jer. 27:6–11).

<sup>40</sup> This is not to imply that the specific work required was the same in both (perfect, perpetual, personal, inward compared to outward and corporate, including ceremonial works of offering sacrifice). See n. 56 below.



“the law” may mean more than “Sinai covenant” but it does not mean less than “Sinai covenant.”

## 11. Galatians 3:10–12

Gordon is to be commended for recognizing that Paul’s quotations from the Sinai covenant in 3:10 and 3:12 are of the essence (substance) of the Sinai covenant. As mentioned previously, the common Reformed interpretation argues that Deuteronomy 27:26 and Leviticus 18:5 are not stipulations of the Sinai covenant. Rather, they are merely declarations (quotations) of another covenant—the broken Adamic covenant of works made with all mankind. A recent essay by Ben C. Dunson<sup>41</sup> (largely written against Gordon’s prior, more abbreviated essay on Galatians<sup>42</sup>) takes this approach. He argues that throughout Galatians, “the law” refers “narrowly (or strictly) simply as the commandments of God . . . abstracted from the gracious covenant in which it is embedded . . .”<sup>43</sup> That is, “the law” means something less than the Sinai covenant. His controlling assumption is that “the Mosaic covenant (especially in prefiguring Christ’s sacrifice through its own sacrificial system) is an administration of the covenant of grace, and as such, is not opposed to faith in any way whatsoever.”<sup>44</sup> Throughout the essay Dunson presents a false

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<sup>41</sup> Ben. C. Dunson, “‘The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith’: Galatians And The Republication Of The Covenant Of Works,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 79:2 (2017), 243–66.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon, “Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6–14,” 240–58.

<sup>43</sup> Dunson, “‘The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith,’” 262. He argues this is even the case when Paul specifically says “covenant.” “The Mosaic law (note: not *covenant*) is clearly distinguished from the Abrahamic covenant in 4:21–31,” 258.

<sup>44</sup> Dunson, “‘The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith,’” 266. Dunson’s logic is that the Mosaic covenant was in substance the covenant of grace because it typologically revealed Christ. Note, however, that he believes the Mosaic covenant also revealed the covenant of works, yet he does not believe it is the covenant of works in substance. To be consistent, the simple fact that a covenant reveals Christ cannot be determinative of its substance. This is precisely what the subservient covenant view argued. See Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 8:1–10:39*, 92–93, where he says: “If reconciliation and salvation by Christ were to be obtained not only under the old covenant, but by virtue thereof, then it must be the same for substance with the new. But this is not so; for no reconciliation with God nor

dichotomy: Paul is addressing the question of justification by works of the law, therefore he is not addressing the question of the essence of the Mosaic covenant. "Paul is writing about *individual* soteriology, not covenantal dispensations."<sup>45</sup> Gordon's careful attention to Paul's covenant-historical, temporal reasoning helps us recognize that Paul is in fact writing about covenantal dispensations (and how they relate to individual soteriology).

One fundamental problem with Dunson's reading of Galatians 3:12 is that it does not fit the original context of Leviticus 18:5. He claims that Paul

recognizes this principle of justification through obedience to be taught in the law itself, although again, only when viewed simply as a set of commands not situated within the broader framework of the Mosaic covenant. Put differently, 3:12 lays out the hypothetical grounds upon which a person could be justified . . .<sup>46</sup>

The problem with this is twofold: Leviticus 18:5 is not a command nor a set of commands. It is the statement of a principle concerning the reward due to obedience to commands<sup>47</sup> and it is situated very squarely within the broader framework of the Mosaic covenant (Lev. 20:22). As Estelle has noted, later prophets call upon Leviticus 18:5 in their covenant lawsuits against Israel precisely because it was a

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salvation could be obtained by virtue of the old covenant, or the administration of it, as our apostle disputes at large." See Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 198–213.

<sup>45</sup> Dunson, "'The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith,'" 265. After reading Dunson's essay, Gordon's insistence that Paul was dealing with wrong *behavior*, not wrong *doctrine*, makes more sense. Dunson argues that Paul is only dealing with a wrong understanding of the law. Gordon is correct to note that Paul's concern is with the practice of Gentiles being circumcised and the practice of Jewish believers segregating from Gentiles, regardless of whether the motivation is to be justified before God or not (i.e. Peter).

<sup>46</sup> Dunson, "'The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith,'" 251.

<sup>47</sup> Per WCF 7.1, a reward for obedience to the law comes only by way of covenant, not by bare law. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classica Ethereal Library), Gal. 3:17, says: "Paul took into account what was certainly true, that, except by a covenant with God, no reward is due to works. Admitting, then, that the law justifies, yet before the law men could not merit salvation by works, because there was no covenant."

stipulation of the Mosaic covenant that regulated their life in the land, thus not hypothetical (Ezek. 18:9; 20:11, 13; Neh. 9:29).<sup>48</sup>

Dunson's position appears to be that Leviticus 18:5 was a hypothetical restatement of the Adamic covenant of works and was given only to convict Israelites of their sin, driving them to the sacrificial system where they would find forgiveness in Christ.<sup>49</sup> The problem is that the sacrificial system did not offer forgiveness for many violations of the laws Leviticus 18:5 refers to and the statement was not hypothetical. Those who violated the laws (including various ceremonial laws) were to be put to death.<sup>50</sup> As Augustine notes on Leviticus 18:5,

Now those who were living by these works undoubtedly feared that if they did not do them, they would suffer stoning or crucifixion or something of this kind. Therefore *whoever does them*, he says, *shall live*

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<sup>48</sup> Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1-14 in Biblical Theological Development," 119-22.

<sup>49</sup> The OPC *Report of the Committee to Study Republication* refers to this as a declarative, administrative republication of the covenant of works (89-90).

<sup>50</sup> Heb. 10:28; Lev. 20; 24:14; Exod. 22:18-20; 31:14; 35:2; Num. 15:35; Deut. 13:5, 9; 17:5 (note very well 17:2, "transgresses His covenant"); 20:27; 22:21 (cf. 1 Cor. 5:13 and note well the difference). For a very good study of stoning as *cherem* punishment see Joel McDurmon, *A Consuming Fire: The Holy of Holies in Biblical Law* (Braselton, GA: Devoted Books, 2019). The sacrificial system itself operated according to Lev. 18:5, not contrary to it (Exod. 28:35; 43; 30:20-21, 30; Lev. 8:35; 10:1-2, 6, 9; 19:8; Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 18:3). Sin offerings were only able to be made for unintentional sins and mistakes (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27) as well as for ceremonial uncleanness (Lev. 15). Paul notes that the forgiveness of sins found in Christ was not found in the old covenant sacrificial system (Acts 13:38). By Christ "everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). Commenting on Heb. 9:13, Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 8:1-10:39*, 360, notes: "all the Levitical services and ordinances were in themselves carnal, and had carnal ends assigned unto them, and had only an obscure representation of things spiritual and eternal . . . [T]he ordinances of old, being carnal, had an efficacy unto their proper end, to purify the unclean as to the flesh . . . The rites and sacrifices of the law, by their own virtue, purified externally, and delivered only from temporary punishments." See also *The Committee to Study Republication*, 49, "By adding obedience to the ceremonial law to the essential condition of the covenant, the subservient covenant position gives Mosaic typology a fundamentally works-based character . . ."

by *them*, that is, shall have a reward: he will not be punished by having to undergo such a death.<sup>51</sup>

John Murray recognized that it was not possible to interpret Leviticus 18:5 as a hypothetical restatement of the covenant of works precisely because of its covenantal context.

[Lev. 18:5] does not appear in a context that deals with legal righteousness as opposed to that of faith. Lev. 18:5 is in a context in which the claims of God upon his redeemed and covenant people are being asserted and urged upon Israel... [It] refers not to the life accruing from doing in a legalistic framework but to the blessing attendant upon obedience in a redemptive and covenant relationship to God.<sup>52</sup>

This is precisely why he rejected the doctrine of the Adamic covenant *of works*.

In connection with the promise of life it does not appear justifiable to appeal, as frequently has been done, to the principle enunciated in certain texts (cf. Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12), 'This do and thou shalt live'. The principle asserted in these texts is the principle of equity, that righteousness is always followed by the corresponding award.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Eric Plumer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 159. Noteworthy for the question of sub-eschatological righteousness and temporal reward through obedience to the Sinai covenant, Augustine continues, "But nevertheless, as I have said, there really is a kind of earthly and carnal righteousness (so to speak), for even the Apostle himself calls it righteousness when he says in another passage: *according to the righteousness that is by the law, I was blameless* (Phil. 3:6)."

<sup>52</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vol. (1959; reprint, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), II:249.

<sup>53</sup> John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," in *Collected Writings*, vol. II (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 55. He continues: "From the promise of the Adamic administration we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward. The promise of confirmed integrity and blessedness was one annexed to an obedience that Adam owed and, therefore, was a promise of grace. All that Adam could have claimed on the basis of equity was justification and life as long as he perfectly obeyed, but not confirmation so as to insure indefectibility. Adam could

As chairman of the OPC Committee on Texts and Proof Texts from 1940–51, Murray added Leviticus 18:5 (and Matt. 19:17) as a proof text to WCF 19.6. “The promises of it [the law], in like manner, show them [believers] God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof . . .”<sup>54</sup>

Any attempt to understand Leviticus 18:5 and Paul’s quotation of it as an abstraction from the Sinai covenant (rather than a stipulation of the covenant itself) fails exegetically. Placing Leviticus 18:5 in the context of a Mosaic covenant of grace undermines the Adamic covenant of works and thus the eschatological law and gospel distinction.<sup>55</sup> Recognizing Leviticus 18:5 as a summary statement of a typological Sinai covenant of works for life in the land of Canaan<sup>56</sup> fits

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claim the fulfilment of the promise if he stood the probation, but only on the basis of God’s faithfulness, not on the basis of justice” (56).

<sup>54</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as adopted by The Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), viii–x, 91. The original Westminster Standards did not reference Lev. 18:5 anywhere. It did cite Gal. 3:10, 12 and Rom. 10:5 in 7.2, which Murray said was unjustified.

<sup>55</sup> Guy Waters recognizes Murray’s point regarding the redemptive context of Lev. 18:5, even going so far as to quote him on it. Yet he argues specifically for the confessional covenant of works from Rom. 10:5. He is not entirely clear how that is possible. He argues that the moral law itself continues to express “the connection between ‘obedience’ and ‘life’ expressed by the moral law in the covenant of works,” even when the moral law is given as a rule of life in the Mosaic covenant of grace. The problem is that Lev. 18:5 is not a command (moral law). It is a principle regarding how the moral law functions (“the connection between ‘obedience’ and ‘life’”). As such, it must be a principle that is equally true in the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, including the new covenant (which led Murray to reject the principle of the covenant of works and add Lev. 18:5 to WCF 19.6). Waters cannot maintain that Lev. 18:5 expresses the connection between obedience and life found in the covenant of works and that it also “refer[s] to the sanctificational works of a redeemed person within the covenant community . . .” See Guy Waters, “The Mosaic Covenant and the Covenant of Works: An Analysis of Romans 10:5,” in *The Law is Not of Faith*, 210–39.

<sup>56</sup> It is important to understand that the Sinai covenant operated upon the same principle as the Adamic covenant of works, but not the exact same conditions. The Adamic covenant required personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience while the Sinai covenant enforced outward and corporate obedience to the letter and allowed sub-eschatological atonement for various ceremonial sins. Abraham Booth, *An Essay on the Kingdom of Christ* (Sacramento, CA: Reformed Libertarian, 2015), loc. 440, 1090, says: “Jehova acknowledged all those for *his* people, and himself as *their* God, who

the original context, makes sense of Paul's citation, and upholds the law and gospel distinction necessary for the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

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performed an external obedience to his commands, even though in their hearts disaffected to him . . . Health and long life, riches, honours, and victory over their enemies, were promised by Jehovah to their external obedience. (Ex 25:25,26; 28:25-28; Lev 26:3-14; Deut 7:12-24; 8:7-9; 11:13-17; 28:3-13)." See John Erskine, "I. The Nature of the Sinai Covenant," *Theological Dissertations* (London: Dilly, 1765), 5, 47, where he says: "[God] appeared chiefly as a temporal prince, and therefore gave laws intended rather to direct the outward conduct, than to regulate the actings of the heart . . . obedience to the letter of the law, even when it did not flow from a principle of faith and love . . . He who yielded an external obedience to the law of Moses, was termed righteous, and had a claim in virtue of this his obedience to the land of Canaan, so that doing these things he lived by them (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 5:33). Hence, says Moses (Deut. 6:25)[.]" See also A. W. Pink, *The Divine Covenants* (Prisbrary Publishing, 2012), loc. 2415. And see Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible, with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References*, 6 vols. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Baldwin, 1822), 205, "The covenant which God made with Israel at Sinai required outward obedience to the letter of the law. . . The outward covenant was made with the nation, entitling them to outward advantages, upon the condition of outward national obedience." Thus, Dunson's objection that God could not make another covenant of works with fallen sinners is misplaced. Under the Noahic covenant, God gives fallen, unrepentant sinners outside of Christ rain and sun (Matt. 5:45). There is no principled reason why God could not suspend those same blessings (or even more superlative temporal blessings) upon condition of obedience to the Sinai law. See John Erskine, "I. The Nature of the Sinai Covenant," 15-16. Dunson quotes John Owen to explain how the Mosaic covenant declared the original Adamic covenant of works without re-making it with Israel. This is correct. But Owen also held to the subservient covenant view. See Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 8:1-10:39*, 83, 101, "The covenant of works had its promises, but they were all remunerative, respecting an antecedent obedience in us; (so were all those which were peculiar unto the covenant of Sinai) . . . [H]e moreover prescribed unto them laws, rules, and terms of obedience, whereon they should hold and enjoy that land, with all the privileges annexed unto the possession thereof." Finally, God's longsuffering mercy in withholding the full curse of the Sinai covenant from Israel was rooted in the Abrahamic promise to give them the land (Gen. 15:10-11; Exod. 32:14; Num. 14:20; Deut. 28:26; Jer. 7:33; Psalm 106:8, 23, 44-45). Once that was fulfilled completely under Solomon (1 Kings 4:20-25; 8:56), Israel was split in two and the 10 tribes were annihilated according to the Sinai curse. God remained longsuffering towards Judah until the promised seed of Abraham (which had been narrowed to David) was born. Once that happened, Judah was destroyed in AD 70 as the full curse of Sinai was unleashed upon them.

## 12. Galatians 2:19

I believe Gordon is probably correct that “through the law” in 2:19 refers to “the law’s own teaching about its temporary character” (102), which Lightfoot refers to as the “economical purpose” of the law.<sup>57</sup> Though I think it could possibly refer to the pedagogical use of the law.

## 13. Galatians 3:13

I disagree with Gordon’s claim that 3:13 does not refer to the Gentiles’ redemption in Christ, nor to the Jews’ eternal redemption in Christ, but rather to the Jews’ redemption from the temporal curse of Sinai through its abrogation. I don’t think his interpretation is possible. Per above, I believe this is best understood as Paul reasoning from the typological Sinai covenant curses to the eschatological curse Christ bore in our place (penal substitutionary atonement).

## 14. Galatians 3:19, 23

I believe that Gordon is correct to point out that whatever purpose of the law Paul refers to here, it served that purpose only until the new covenant (“faith” refers to the new covenant in the *historia salutis*, not the existential experience of faith in the *ordo salutis*). Thus, his argument that the verses refer to the preservation of the Abrahamic lineage is compelling. The law served the role of a protective guardian until the Jews came of age, which fits well with 4:2.

## 15. Galatians 3:26–27

I think Gordon is mistaken to read this as a comparison between old and new ceremonies (circumcision and baptism<sup>58</sup>). I suggest the

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<sup>57</sup> Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, 118.

<sup>58</sup> The ritual of baptism may not even be the immediate reference here. I believe Fred Karlson is correct that it would be much better to *translate* ἐβαπτισθητε (as “placed into, plunging, united to, or washed”) rather than simply transliterating it as “baptized” throughout the NT. He offers a possible translation of v. 27 as “For as many of you as have been *placed* into Christ have put on Christ.” Thus it would refer

distinction between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free refers not to how they related to circumcision, but how they related to inheritance. As Gordon notes, chapter 4 continues and focuses the question of “Who will inherit the third reality pledged to Abraham and Sarah?” (167). Free, Jewish males inherited the land of Canaan, while slaves, Greeks, and females did not (Num. 36). These distinctions do not apply to the eschatological inheritance of the new covenant.

### Conclusion

*Promise, Law, Faith* helpfully challenges the dominant Reformed reading of Galatians by insisting we must understand Paul’s temporal reasoning and his covenant distinctions. The belief that the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new covenant are all, in substance, the same covenant does not match Paul’s thought in his letter to the Galatians. “[W]e may say with entire confidence that ‘these are two covenants’ (Gal. 4:24) can never be responsibly construed as ‘these are one covenant’” (208).<sup>59</sup> Gordon’s recognition that Paul’s citation of Leviticus 18:5 describes the Sinai covenant of works itself, rather than a misunderstanding or abuse of it, is a crucial foundation for the eschatological law and gospel distinction, even though Gordon himself hinders this foundation by too rigidly limiting Paul’s analysis of the Sinai covenant to temporal blessing and curse. Gordon’s division of the Abrahamic covenant into three distinct promises made concerning different seed (carnal, national, corporate seed and singular, Messianic seed) is very helpful in making sense of Paul’s

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to identification or union with Christ (rather than to the ritual which symbolizes that union). Fred Karlson, “What is the Primary Meaning of Baptism? Some Translational Difficulties,” in *Northwest ETS Meeting, March 4, 2006*, notes: “The ceremony of water baptism surely signifies, among other things, the putting on of the garments of Christ’s righteousness. However, it introduces a theological difficulty if one equates the two [ceremony and union] by explicitly mentioning ‘water’ in Galatians 3:27.” This can be found at <https://bible.org/article/what-primary-meaning-baptism-some-translational-difficulties>. Accessed 2 October 20.

<sup>59</sup> As previously noted, Dunson does precisely that. In Dunson, “‘The Law Evidently Is Not Contrary To Faith,’” 258, he says: “The Mosaic law (note: not *covenant*) is clearly distinguished from the Abrahamic covenant in 4:21–31.”



argumentation in Galatians (even if Gordon himself does not draw out all of the necessary implications of this).

Gordon's denial that justification by faith alone was challenged by the Judaizers, combined with his insistence on the sub-eschatological nature of Paul's view of the Sinai covenant, however, leads him to misinterpret key passages that are foundational to the doctrine of justification by faith alone as well as penal substitutionary atonement. His doctrine of the moral law is also unnecessarily impaired by *defining* ὁ νόμος as the Sinai covenant. While I sympathize with Gordon's goals, I think more care must be taken in balancing biblical and systematic theology.<sup>60</sup> In my opinion, the covenant theology of the seventeenth-century particular Baptists<sup>61</sup> struck the right balance between biblical theology (including the *historia testamentorum*—compare WCF 7.5–6 which conflates the biblical covenants as one in substance with 2LBC 7.3) and systematic theology. However, much of that work has been polemical in nature, arguing against paedobaptism. The church would be greatly benefited from more work applying the Particular Baptist understanding of covenant theology to biblical studies. I am thankful for Gordon nudging us in that direction.

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<sup>60</sup> In a related manner, Gordon's zealotry for his position seems to lead him to carelessly overstate the deficiencies of those he disagrees with, such as his insistence that DP is "reading between the lines" while he is just "reading the lines," and his well-known comparison of John Murray to a drunk uncle who never wrote on Galatians because he couldn't make sense of it (Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6–14," 251 and "Reflections on Auburn Theology," 118).

<sup>61</sup> This view was not limited to the seventeenth century but continued into the early twentieth century. The view was obscured for a short time but has been rediscovered in recent years. It has come to be referred to popularly as "1689 Federalism." See Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*; Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013); and *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ*. The view is an elaboration upon the subservient covenant view, recognizing the new covenant alone as the covenant of grace (union with Christ) and all other post-fall covenants as distinct from but subservient to the new.