**THE ROLE OF THE LAW**

***19******What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. 20******A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.***

***21******Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. 22******But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin,******so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.***

**Galatians 3:19-22 (NIV)**

Paul has now demonstrated from scripture that the blessing of Abraham embraces the Gentiles by faith in Christ and not by works of Torah. But once he has established the link between faith, righteousness, the blessing of Abraham and the promise (of the Spirit), and at the same time has broken the link between the Law and any and all of these, he sees the need to explain what role the Law did have. Having established the link between doing the whole Law and the curse (if the *whole* Law is not done [vs.10-14]) and the temporary nature of the Law (vs.15,16), Paul turns now to explain why the Law was given at all. The Law itself is not a bad thing but it was never intended to replace or do the work of the promise.

This paragraph takes up two matters about the Law. First, why was the Law given at all, if the inheritance promised to Abraham was based on promise alone? Second, in light of the negatives relating to Torah up to this point, he raises the further question: ‘is Torah against the promise?’ To which he responds emphatically ‘no.’ If a life-giving Torah was possible, then righteousness would have come that way. The Law existed, rather, to hem in all people who are now under sin’s rule, with the ultimate goal that they might receive the promise by faith.

‘*What, then, was the purpose of the law?* *It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator’* (3:19). While ‘*What, then, was the purpose of the law?’* gets to the ultimate question about the Law, Paul’s point initially relates more to the Law’s existence. If the inheritance promised to Abraham has always been based on believing the promise, then why did God give Israel the Law at all?

Paul’s answer picks up on both the *temporary* role of the Law between the giving and the fulfillment of the promise. Relating to the reason for the Law, ‘*it was added because of transgressions’* and relating to its limited time, ‘*It was added …* *until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.’*

The Law ‘*was added because of transgressions’* (3:19). ‘*Because of’* can be understood in one of two ways. It can mean, firstly, that this was God’s way because of their sinfulness of ‘hemming His people in’ ‘*until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come’* (as in vs. 22-24); or, the Law was added to bring about (to bring out into the open) the peoples’ sinfulness, their transgressions, to lead them to Christ? In light of 3:23, the first was more likely in Paul’s mind.

*‘The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator’* (3:19). Paul present concern, based on what he has just said, is that the *promise* was made to Abraham, and so to Israel, directly by God Himself. This didn’t happen with the Law. It was ‘*put into effect*,*’* a verb in the passive voice that means it was ‘added.’ This ‘addition’ came by way of a two-fold mediation – angels and Moses – thus offering further evidence of its secondary character.

‘*A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one’* (3:20). There is no such thing as a mediator for one party. And since ‘*God is one*,’ and God gave the promise directly to Abraham, God’s ‘oneness’ adds support to the superiority of the promise over the Law. The Law, on the other hand, was mediated to Israel by way of Moses (and the angels). The ‘*God is one’* statement appeals to the core reality all Jewish faith, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’ (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; Ephesians 4:6). God’s ‘oneness,’ that the one God is the only God, (there are no others), serves as the grounding for Paul’s conviction that the one God’s promise to Abraham is not set aside by the Law (which came later to serve other purposes) and was mediated with angels through Moses.

‘*Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!* *For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law’* (3:21). Paul’s plural of ‘*promise of God’* to ‘*promises of God’* is most likely a recognition that God made His promise to Abraham on more than one occasion.

‘*Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!’* (3:21). This is rhetoric, designed to point out the absurdity of the suggestion. The question is a circuitous way of saying that even though the Law is related to the transgressions and not to the giving of life, it is not evil in itself. It was a good thing, but was never intended to bring life or to fulfil the promises to Abraham.

*‘For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law’* (3:21). As in 3:10-14, this statement is not related to the Galatians’ inability to keep the Law. The undeniable fact is that the Law cannot, because it was never intended to, give life to those who are dead in their sins.

Life/righteousness have come through Christ and the Spirit. The language reflects Ezekiel’s vision of the resurrection of God’s people from their death in exile, where twice Yahweh says ‘*I will give my Spirit ‘into you’ and you will live’* (Ezekiel 37:6 LXX literal). This is how the Law is both fulfilled and superseded. By speaking of the Law as unable to give life, Paul anticipates what the Spirit does and how this is what the Law could never do.

*‘For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law’* (3:21). Paul saw that the agitators were making the Law contradict the promises of God. Their teaching was:

keep the Law and you will gain ‘life.’ Paul saw their position as hypothetical. ‘Life’ was never promised through the Law nor could it ever come through the Law. ‘Life’ could only be imparted by the Spirit and life in the Spirit came through the promise which could only ever be accessed through faith. This is why the Law could not be thought of as standing in opposition to ‘*the promises of God*.’

‘*But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe’* (3:22). Paul now contrasts what the Law does do, (‘*declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin’*), with the promise, which comes through personal faith in Christ.

‘*But the Scripture declares …’* Paul’s consistent rule is that when he uses the singular noun ‘*Scripture’* with ‘the’ before it, he is referring to a single passage from the Old Testament (3:8; 4:30; Romans 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2). When he uses this word to refer to all of Israel’s Scripture, he uses the plural (‘Scriptures’). If Paul has a particular scripture in mind here (following his own rule), it is impossible to know what it is.

‘*But* *the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin.’* Understanding what Paul means by the Law’s ‘imprisonment’ can best be understood by his elaboration in the next few verses. Possibly he felt less comfortable with the metaphor quickly because he gradually changes it to the role of the ‘slave/pedagogue’ in the Greco-Roman household. With this in mind the concept is probably best understood as ‘being hemmed in’ so as not to run loose. A parallel might be the way ‘law’ might be used in a family setting to ‘hem in’ children until they are able to internalise the value of ‘law’ for themselves.

The NIV’s ‘*the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin’* should probably then be understood as a shorthand attempt to express the ultimate reason for the confinement: to ‘hem people in’ while they themselves are ‘under sin,’ under the dominion of sin. Paul is picturing all people (literally: ‘all things’) confined by the Law because they are under the sway of sin. Both Jew and Gentile alike (‘all things’ = all people) have sinned and come short of the glory God intended for humanity when they were created (Romans 2:1-3:23). Every person lives ‘under sin.’ The Law does not do away with this terrible reality. That’s not its purpose. The Law confines people, hems them in, during this period of their being ‘under sin.’ The point of the argument of Galatians is that only Christ and the Spirit are sufficient to do what the Law does not and cannot.

‘… *so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe’* (3:22b). The Law’s purpose for those under the sway of sin (all people everywhere, whether Jew or Gentile) was to keep them ‘confined’ (to keep them from ‘overt’ sin) until God’s promise to Abraham could be realised through the Seed (Christ).

‘*What was* *promised’* goes back to the initial argument in 3:7-9 (enlarged in 3:14-18). The word twice repeated ‘given’ (‘*being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe’*) contrasts what could not be given by any form of law (3:21) while ‘*through faith in Jesus Christ’* takes us back to Paul’s dialogue with Peter in 2:16 (based on faith for those who believe).

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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