



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? “CAST OUT THE SLAVE WOMAN AND HER SON ...”

- (Galatians 4:30 ESV) But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” [Quote in 4:30 from Genesis 21:10.]

4:30 This verse contains the punch line of the entire Hagar-Sarah analogy Paul had been working with since v. 21. Quoting again from the Genesis narrative (21:10), he adapted the words of Sarah concerning Ishmael to the conflicted situation in Galatia. “Cast out the slave woman and her son!” Paul was calling on his erstwhile disciples to free themselves from the grip of the Judaizers and to expel them from their midst. If C. K. Barrett’s analysis of this passage is correct, then very likely Paul was here casting back in the teeth of his opponents the very same directive they had previously issued against him. This grim imperative, “Cast out!” raises the issue of the limits of tolerable diversity within the Christian community. It is clear from Paul’s Corinthian correspondence that he was quite willing to tolerate considerable divergences of

opinion and even irregularities in order to preserve unfractured the unity of the church. But the false teachers of Galatia had transgressed those bounds. What they were advocating was a denial of the gospel itself. When this kind of heresy invades the church, there can be no question of compromise or concessions for the sake of a superficial harmony. Thus as F. F. Bruce has put it, “Whatever moral or legal problems may have been raised by Sarah’s demand in its historical setting, in Paul’s application it becomes the statement of a basic gospel truth: legal bondage and gospel freedom cannot coexist.” [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 347). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

When Paul quoted Sarah’s words, it was a not-too-subtle way of saying that the Galatians needed to drive the Judaizers and their legalism right out of the church. By trying to place Gentiles under the law, they proved that they themselves were actually slaves, spiritually speaking, and therefore had no part in God’s inheritance. If salvation comes by grace, then the church cannot

tolerate salvation by works. Freedom in Christ can be preserved only by abolishing bondage to the law. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 191). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

But why does Paul use allegory—why not express the truth more straightforwardly? He’s most likely using the same Old Testament story his opponents relied on, but turning their reading on its head. Their interpretation may have gone like this: “Jews derive their ancestry from Isaac, the son of the free woman (Sarah), and owner of the inheritance. Ishmael was the son of the slave woman (Hagar); he received no inheritance; he was essentially a Gentile. Jews received the liberating knowledge of the law; Gentiles are in bondage to ignorance. Jews are children of the covenant by birth; Gentiles can’t enjoy the blessings of the covenant naturally, but they could be adopted into the family by circumcision. By embracing the Mosaic law they can align themselves with the church of the circumcised in Jerusalem, the mother-church of true ‘Christ-followers.’” [Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). *Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians* (pp. 137–138). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]

The question still remains why Paul would choose to focus on these two women and their two sons in order to make his point in such a seemingly convoluted, roundabout way. The most plausible answer to this question has been provided by C. K. Barrett in his study “The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians.” Barrett supposes that Paul was here responding to an interpretation of the Hagar-Sarah story put forth by

his Judaizing opponents. The story of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, was a well-worn text in rabbinic exegesis and would have lent itself to supporting the Judaizers’ claim that only those who belonged physically to the family of Abraham had any share in the promise God made to him. To put it more starkly, the descendants of Isaac were the Jews; and those of Ishmael, the Gentiles. At Mount Sinai the Jews had received the enlightenment of the law while the Gentiles remained in the darkness of sin, alienated from the promises of God and the commonwealth of Israel. As Barrett puts it, “The seed of Abraham, understood physically, issued in legitimate and illegitimate children, the Galatians were urged to legitimize themselves.... Those who are not prepared to connect themselves to this community [the renewed people of God, that is, the church whose headquarters was at Jerusalem] by the approved means (circumcision) must be cast out; they cannot hope to inherit promises made to Abraham and his seed.” It is easy to see how this kind of argument would have carried considerable weight with the new believers of Galatia who were beginning to wonder whether simple faith in Jesus Christ was sufficient for inclusion in the true family of God. Paul, then, had to revisit the ancient story of Abraham’s two sons in order to show that, properly understood, it supported not the program of the Judaizers but rather his own doctrine of justification by faith alone. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 334). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]