SECOND THOUGHTS
Some Reflections on the Law in Galatians

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The aim of this brief article is to reflect upon Paul’s conception of the law as it is present in his letter to the Galatians. Although I have taught this letter during many years and published a number of studies on different texts, a settled certainty about Paul’s vision of the law has not yet been completely attained. Doubts and hesitations remain. This article intends to explain some of the major difficulties and, at the same time, to indicate my choices and preferences. The reflections are offered by way of second thoughts, if not retraction. Some content criticism, be it dangerous and delicate, will not be absent.

The division is thematic but also commanded by the text of Galatians. First, I will once again consider Gal 2:14b-21; the main topic will be the meaning of sin. A second part deals with 3:6-14 and will center its discussion on faith. In a third, part the whole of the letter is reflected upon in an attempt to follow Paul’s reasoning on the law.

I. Galatians 2:14b-21

Paul’s spoken reaction to Peter in Antioch comprises the whole of Gal 2:14b-21, although, of course, the Galatian situation some
seven years later influenced its composition at that time. The division into three unequal parts can be accepted: v. 14b (second person singular); vv. 15-17 (first person plural); and vv. 18-21 (first person singular). Not only are the persons significant, but also the content. It would seem that in vv. 15-17, Paul’s consideration becomes more general and that in v. 18 he refers to the Antioch incident.

**Reasoning in 2:15-17**

The first main point in vv. 15-17 can be rendered as follows: “Peter (Paul says), although we as Jews are not Gentile sinners, yet, knowing that a person is not justified by the works of the law, we too have come to believe in Christ Jesus and in this manner we realize that we too are sinners.” This reconstruction of Paul’s line of thought assumes that “sinners” and “sin” in these verses point to real sin in the full religious and moral sense of that terminology. This in turn implies that in v. 15, “Gentile sinners” is not meant as a simple characterization of non-Jews, which would take “sinners,” as it were, in a weakened sense and, moreover, that according to v. 17, Paul and Peter recognize that they have been “sinners” in their pre-conversion life; therefore, they too, like the Gentiles, were in need of justification by faith in Christ.

In v. 16, the expression “by works of the law” is repeated three times. One can hardly doubt that Paul refers to the works done in obedience to the law which are mentioned in 2:1-14, circumcision and the observance of the purity laws. Yet Paul most probably also has in mind the works not done. Because of those transgressions and omissions of the law, Paul and Peter, and all Jews, are real sinners who must be redeemed by Christ. In Rom 3:20, Paul repeats that no human being is justified by deeds prescribed by the law, that is, by works of the law, and in 3:9-18, he demonstrates how the Jews are not better off than the Greeks; they too, are under the power of sin. In 3:23, he writes: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Verse 17 contains a conditional period, most probably a rea lis. The if-clause, the protasis, provides the common ground accepted
by opponents and Paul alike. The opponents' attack that Paul must repel lies in the apodosis. In the rhetorical question "Is Christ then a servant of sin?" Paul points to Christ as an agent of sin not, I think, because through him those who believe no longer live like Jews. No, the insinuating question appears to refer to the kind of accusation that is found in Rom 3:8. Some people slander Paul by saying that he says, "Let us do evil so that good may come," or to his own reflection in 6:1, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" A Messiah or Christ who justifies by grace through faith, not by the works of the law, must have been represented as potentially increasing sin: "Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (Rom 6:15). The answer to this type of charge is everywhere: "By no means."

Reasoning in 2:18-21

What is the connection of v. 18 with v. 17? The Greek has the particle γάρ ("for"), but I have defended a soft caesura between the two verses because of the change of person and the shift in the reasoning in v. 18. In a similar approach, the New Standard Revised Version renders "but" rather than "for." Yet it could be that a motivating "for" is to be preferred after all. Paul reacts to the question "Is Christ then a servant of sin?" with "Certainly not" (v. 17). In v. 18, he continues: "For (not Christ but I would be such a servant, since) if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor." Yet in this proposal we have to clarify the train of thought by adding a clause. The "I" in v. 18 is Paul but even more Peter, since Peter is building up again the Jewish way of life. Paul says to Peter: by building up you are going to become once again a transgressor of the law, i.e., a sinner as we were before our belief in Christ (cf. Rom 3).

The first person singular is also present in vv. 19-20, but what Paul writes here indicates, most likely, that he is above all reflecting upon his own personal condition as a Christian. That he died through the law to the law can be explained only by his reference to Christ and the cross event. As is evident from 3:13, Christ is cursed as a "sinner" according to the law; it can be held that the law crucified him. So Christ redeemed us from sin and the law. Paul is in Christ
and was crucified with him: through the law Paul died to the law in order to live to God.

By means of "I do not nullify 'the grace of God'" (v. 21a) Paul refers to that specific act of the Son of God who loved Paul and gave himself for Paul (cf. v. 20). While Paul here is primarily referring to his own experience of Christ, other passages make clear that what he says applies to all Christians. In previous studies, I have been claiming that the "transgression" of v. 18b is identical with "nullification" of v. 21a. Paul would be saying: by building up once again the law, I transgress not the law but God's salvific ordinance; I nullify his grace manifested in Christ. Yet this interpretation cannot but remain uncertain and, according to many, it is too specious.

It is not all clear that the conditional sentence in v. 21bc is an irrealis. If verse 21bc contains an irrealis, a condition contrary to fact, the translation must be: "For if justification were through the law, then Christ would have died for nothing." But a verb is missing in the protasis and, more significantly, there is the absence of the particle ἀν in the apodosis. So the construction could be, as in v. 17ab, a realis or better, a "simple condition" (i.e., no more than the logical connection: if this, then that). In that case the literal translation is: "if justification through law, then Christ died in vain." We note the motivating or explicative γάρ ("for"). Believing that justification comes through the law effectively nullifies God's grace, i.e., it says that Christ's death is in vain, that it does not bring salvation.

In v. 16, at first the clause "no justification by works of the law" appears somewhat strange. But one can easily interpret "not by works of the law" as meaning: although some works of the law are done, others are not, and given the universal incomplete observance of the law, all Jews too are sinners. In v. 21bc, however, the assertion is even more radical. One is brought to assume that there is no justification even if one keeps the law; otherwise, Paul says, Christ died in vain. It is difficult to accept such a statement. In the final analysis, there can be no opposition between God's law and God's justification. Doing what God demands brings life. How then did Paul come to use such exaggerated, less than accurate language? The answer
may be found in his meeting with Christ. The Christ event as well as life in Christ puts the rest in the background. Paul appears to denigrate the law, at least to some extent.

II. Galatians 3:6-14

Gal 3:6 introduces the second member of a comparison: “Just as (καθως) Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” The content of the first member, not indicated as such (νοως), is given in 3:1-5. So 3:6 is linked with the preceding verses. What the believing Galatians experienced can be compared with what happened to Abraham. But the Christians’ relationship with Abraham is much more than that of a likeness or similarity.

Reasoning in 3:6-9

Those who believe are the descendants of Abraham; they are blessed in him. Those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. Abraham’s faith was in God and his promises. That of the Galatians, of course, in Christ. Although in 3:1, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ emphatically as the one who “was publicly exhibited as crucified before the eyes” of the Galatians (and in 3:2-5, refers to the Spirit three times), in vv. 6-12, faith becomes, as it were, less determined; for the time being Christ is no longer mentioned. The reader may be tempted to ask if “faith in God,” such as that of Abraham, is sufficient to be justified and blessed in Abraham.

The connection between vv. 9 and 10 is not clear logically speaking. Verse 10 begins with a motivating clause: “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.” How does this ground v. 9: “Those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed”? I have proposed a mental supplement after v. 9. Over against οἱ έκ πίστεως (“those out of faith,” that is, those whose life is determined by faith) one may have expected the opposite expression οἱ έκ νόμου (“those out of the law,” that is, those whose life is determined by the law) and, more importantly, the statement that the people of the law are not blessed. Verse 10 explains why those people cannot be blessed.
Reasoning in 3:10-12

In v. 10a Paul writes ὅσοι γαρ ἐξ ἐργῶν νόμου εἰσίν, ὑπὸ κατάραν εἰσίν. “All those who rely on (the observance of) the works of the law” sounds decidedly positive. They try to do what the law prescribes, yet they “are under a curse.” This last clause most probably means more than “they are only threatened by the law, not yet actually cursed.” Although “to be under the law” looks somewhat different and less harsh than the explicit “cursed,” the difference is not very great. To be under a curse signifies that one is under the power of a curse, is affected and ruled by curse. The ensuing v. 10b makes clear that this understanding is correct.

One could ask whether the statement of v. 10a is not paradoxical. This would be so in a reading without the γάρ-clause v. 10b: “For cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” This second clause indicates that, just as in 2:16, Paul’s thought is as follows: they rely on the law and do some works of the law, but other things written in the book of the law are not done and, therefore, they are cursed. “All” in the quotation from Deuteronomy can hardly be neglected. The people of the law are cursed because of their non-observance of the law.

Paul’s explanatory considerations in vv. 11-12 take the form of general principles. We are brought to remember the same movement in the radical assertions of 2:16. Righteousness rests on faith; the law does not rest on faith; thus the law cannot justify. Both contrast and parallelism between the citation in v. 11b (Hab 2:4) and that in v. 12b (Lev 18:5) must be noted. Two principles are contrasted: believing and doing. “The one who is righteous by faith” (ὁ δικαίος ἐκ πίστεως) is opposed to “whoever does the works of the law” (ὁ ποιήσας αὐτά); the two mentions of “will live” (ζήσεται in both clauses, in v. 12b emphasized by ἐν αὐτῶι) correspond with one another and have the same meaning. In v. 12b, Paul seems to assume that perfect obedience to the law would lead to “life,” i.e., to final salvation. So, if we ask why it is, according to v. 11a, evident that no one is justified by the law, the complete answer is not that faith alone justifies. In view of v. 10b and v. 12b, one must assume that Paul still
thinks of a *de facto* lack of observance. Of course, after the Christ event, keeping to the law, holding fast to the law, becomes absurd. Faith in Christ is the only way. As in 2:21bc, this idea appears to be also present in vv. 11-12. An attack on legalistic works-righteousness, however, cannot be detected.

**Reasoning in 3:13-14**

That according to Paul, Christ has become “a curse” for us must be understood in the sense that Christ has become “sin” (2 Cor 5:21) and because of that, condemned, crucified and, as “hanging on a tree,” cursed. The expression “for us” is to be taken in the sense of “to our advantage,” but the nuance “instead of us” can reasonably be postulated here in the argument of Paul.

In v. 13a, Paul employs the first person plural twice: Christ redeemed us; he has become a curse for us. The reasons for the inclusive sense, “us” meaning all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, are well known: in his letter Paul addresses the Galatians, the majority of whom are Gentile Christians; the formulaic character of v. 13a; and the fact that in v. 14b, “that we might receive” is most probably inclusive. Yet in vv. 10-13, Paul explicitly deals with the Jewish law; in v. 14a, he mentions the “Gentiles”; a widening to an inclusive horizon in v. 14b should not be considered as impossible; similar shifts can be found in 4:4-6, from Jewish-Christians (vv. 4-5a) to Gentile-Christians (v. 5b) to the inclusive all (v. 6). Therefore, the exclusive sense in v. 13a, “us” meaning the Israelites, should probably be preferred. The Messiah comes from/to Israel (cf. Rom 9:5); in between God and the Gentiles, there is the promise to Abraham and his offspring, who is Christ (cf. 3:16).

After the rather vague faith of Abraham and his descendants, the sudden christological emphasis in vv. 13-14 cannot be missed. Christian faith is believing in Christ who redeemed the Jews by becoming a curse in a vicarious way. The justification of Jews and Gentiles alike occurs by faith in Christ; the same applies to the blessing of Abraham and the promise of the Spirit.
III. The Law in Galatians

Paul writes his letter to the Galatians because they are so quickly deserting the one who has called them in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel (1:6). By their different gospel the opponents compel the Gentiles to live like Jews and observe the Jewish law. In his writing, Paul emphasizes that one is not justified by doing what the law prescribes but only by faith in Christ. The question arises: why is there no righteousness by works of the law (2:16) or why are all who rely on the works of the law under a curse (3:10a)? It would seem that Paul in Galatians provides various elements for an answer.

The Non-Observance of the Law

Paul is convinced that he himself and Peter (and all Jews) are sinners and, just as the Gentiles, in need of justification by believing in Christ Jesus. Most Jews strive for righteousness and try to fulfill the law. They certainly observe many commandments of the law. However, as Paul explains at great length in Rom 2-3, those Jews also transgress the law. In Gal 3:10b, he quotes Deut 27:26 that everyone who does not obey all the things written in the book of the law is cursed. “Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law” (Gal 6:13), although “every man who lets himself be circumcised... is obliged to obey the entire law” (5:3).

There are some statements which by themselves suggest that the law was never meant to justify and provide “life.” We read, as if it were self-evident, “Law does not rest on faith” (3:12a) and “If a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law” (3:21). Yet in 3:21, Paul has just affirmed that the law is certainly not against the promises (cf. Rom 7:12, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good”). Therefore, we can hardly believe that according to Paul—notwithstanding assertions to the contrary—the law in God’s plan of salvation was never meant to justify. The negative predicament is a matter of human fact, not a matter of divine principle. Paul’s ex-
plicit reasoning about the law is forced at several points and should be balanced by referring to his more positive statements about the law.

The Nature of the Law

Scripture clearly states that Abraham has been justified by believing in God, not by (a not yet existing) law. That law came four hundred thirty years later than the promise. Moreover, it was not directly given by God but was ordained through angels by a mediator. Law has been promulgated “because of transgressions” (3:19). Its purpose is to reveal God’s will so that people might recognize their transgressions. Paul perhaps also intends to say that law produces and increases the transgressions (cf. Rom 5:20).

Until Christ came, scripture had imprisoned all things under the power of sin (3:22); we, Jewish-Christians, were guarded under the law (3:23). “Therefore the law was our disciplinarian” (5:24); we were subject to his discipline. Before the coming of faith we were enslaved to the law as to the cosmic powers controlling the universe (the στοιχεία τοῦ κόσμου, 4:3 and cf. 4:9). We were under the law, children of the slave woman, citizens of the present Jerusalem, a mother who is in slavery with her children (4:21-31).

Paul further characterizes life under the law as life under a curse, since the law curses all who transgress its commandments. Life under the law and subject to the law is necessarily a life according to the flesh, not according to the Spirit (3:3-4 and 5:13, 16-18). It is a life which does not exclude sin (cf. 2:17; 3:22). Christ became “curse” (3:13) and “sin” (2 Cor 5:21) in order to save us who as sinners are cursed.

“For freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1a)

Through Christ we have become free children of the free woman, the Jerusalem above. The yoke of slavery from which we are set free is that of the law (5:1b). We are called to freedom and should not use that freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (5:13). For Paul, the Christ event is God’s new initiative that completely overshadows
the law. Christ died for our sins, i.e., for our transgressions of the law. From now on, even the positive striving to obey the law no longer makes sense. It implies seeking to establish our own righteousness by means of “works of the law” and, by this very fact, stumbling over the stumbling stone which is Christ (cf. Rom 9:30-10:4).

The Lord Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age” (1:4, cf. 2:20, Christ loved Paul and “handed himself over” for Paul). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13a). In the fullness of time, God sent his Son who redeemed those who were under the law so that all, Jews and Gentiles, might receive adoption as children (4:4-6). All are baptized in Christ and have clothed themselves with Christ. In Christ Jesus, all are children of God through faith, Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise (3:26-29).

At the end of the letter Paul writes: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). He carries “the marks of Jesus branded” on his body (6:17). That revolutionary encounter with Christ, that life in Christ, is the ultimate reason why, for Paul, righteousness is not, and cannot be, by the works of the law. With this in mind we are able to understand, interpret and even correct such polemical and radical statements as 3:21b, “If a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law.” Through faith in Christ, the Galatians—and all Christians—have become “a new creation” and “the Israel of God” (6:15 and 16).