The Hellenistic Background to the Pauline Allegorical Method in Galatians 4:21-31

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THE HELLENISTIC BACKGROUND TO THE PAULINE ALLEGORICAL METHOD IN GALATIANS 4:21–31

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The question of Hellenistic influence on the rhetoric and literary genre of the NT becomes crucial when examining the text of Gal 4:21–31. When Paul allegorized his treatment of the Sarah/Hagar narrative, was he utilizing a popular Hellenistic method as epitomized by Philo of Alexandria? Such a question is necessary in view of the observation made by R. P. C. Hanson and A. T. Hanson: “They (i.e., the early Church Fathers) inherited this tradition of allegorizing from Judaism before them, of course, and they found allegory used (but not to any good purpose) in the New Testament.”

One should not dismiss in such a cavalier manner Paul’s use of allegory, a form of argument that would carry weight with the Judaizers in Galatia. Furthermore, Paul’s allegorical exegesis was akin to that being used by contemporary rabbinc schools and Philo of Alexandria. I shall (1) show the Hellenistic use of allegory; (2) describe the style of rabbinic use of allegory in Palestinian Judaism; (3) trace the background of ἀλληγορία; and (4) identify the Pauline allegorical method in Galatians. By focusing on these concerns, I shall attempt to demonstrate that Paul’s allegorical exegesis falls within accepted OT hermeneutics practiced during the apostolic period.

From the fifth century to the twentieth century, Christian exegetes have been reluctant to accept Paul’s allegorical method at face value since they have believed the historicity of the original event was being violated in favor of a deeper spiritual meaning. Such reluctance is typified by Hanson, who is so appalled at the extreme abuses during the patristic and medieval ages that he concludes, “Paul was in fact using typology, not allegory.” Instead

2 Anthony T. Hanson, Studies in Paul’s Technique and Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 161.
of categorically rejecting the Pauline use of ἀλληγορία, I will make a distinction between typology and allegory.

Typology is the interpreting of an event belonging to the present or the recent past as the fulfillment of a similar situation recorded or prophesied in Scripture. The thing to take notice of regarding this definition is the significance of “fulfillment.” On the other hand, Allegory is the interpretation of an object or person or a number of objects or persons as in reality meaning some object or person of a later time, with no attempt to trace a relationship of “similar situation” between them.

Woollcombe takes this definition of “allegory” a step further when he says, “Allegorism is the search for a secondary and hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meaning of a narrative.”

Probably one of the biggest discussions centers around the motivation(s) behind Paul’s use of allegory in the Galatian text. Both Greek and Jewish allegorization have been utilized in the past to deal with insoluble problems or inadmissible traits attributed to the gods or God. Particularly with early Christian preachers, there was the dilemma of how to make the Christian message intelligible to the Hellenistic world. This clash with the Hellenistic mind-set forced the early Christians to define their faith in the philosophical categories and with rhetorical devices available to them.

The Hellenistic Use of Allegory

There are three basic theories regarding the source and origin of allegorism. Emile Brehier has constructed a case for its beginning with the Neo-Pythagoreans in Alexandria, who wanted to find hidden meanings and moral lessons from the practices and symbols being utilized in the mystery cults. E. Stein has posited that it is a natural phenomenon arising from the fact that a society has advanced beyond its “revered traditional writings” and has not yet come to interpret those texts in a historical-critical fashion. The third alternative, suggested by J. Tate, maintains that allegorical interpretation did not begin with the Greek grammarian Theagenes, as some have supposed, but rather with the philosopher Pherecydes of Syros, the first to use it in interpreting Homer. Following Pherecydes, many philosophers read

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their own doctrines into the myths and utilized those myths for their own purposes. Probably it is this practice that accounts for the origin of allegorical interpretation.

Greek allegory, in both positive and negative forms, had two distinct aims: (1) to unearth the deeper senses (ὑπόνοιαι) of the Homeric myths and (2) to defend the myths from allegations of immorality. In the second century BC, this allegorical method of interpretation was utilized in Hellenistic Jewish circles by Aristobulus. Between the time of Aristobulus and Philo, this method of interpreting Scripture became common. By the time of the latter, it was understood that Scripture should be interpreted to find its hidden, spiritual meaning, especially portions of the Jewish law that were being communicated to a Hellenistic audience.

The most important figure during this time, however, was Philo of Alexandria. He embodied the culmination of Hellenistic philosophy and at the same time represented the full development of Hellenistic Judaism. In the midst of Alexandrian culture, he was an inheritor of Stoic and Platonic ideas. From Stoicism he borrowed the stress on ethics and a devaluation of logic. From Platonism he borrowed the classic idea of dualism between the flesh and the spirit, the external and the internal. It is most likely from the Stoic influence that Philo found an affinity to allegorism, especially in dealing with the Torah and its ethical dimensions. His Hellenism, a blend of the Septuagintal text with the divergent Greek philosophies, became a rich synthesis of Stoicism, Platonism, and Judaism.

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8 Friedrich Büchsel, ἀλληγορέω, TDNT 1.260.
10 F. E. Peters, The Harvest of Hellenism (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) 302. J. Z. Lauterbach attempts to show that Philo’s predecessors comprise three separate sources that strongly influenced his allegorical exegesis. First, there is “Palestinian scriptural exegesis” practiced by a group of teachers of Scripture who grew up in Palestine prior to Philo. He claims their allegorical principles were adopted by Philo, who added them to his own principles of allegorical interpretation. However, Lauterbach has not convincingly demonstrated the existence of such a group of teachers prior to Philo’s time; therefore, one may speak realistically only of the last two sources influencing Philo: Septuagintal and Hellenistic. Alexandrian scriptural exegesis of the LXX paved the way for a type of allegorism. And last of all, there were the methods employed by the Hellenistic philosophers, rhetoricians, and religionists (“The Ancient Jewish Allegorists in the Talmud and the Midrash,”
Little is known about Philo's specific background and influences. He was an educated, cultured individual as well as a wealthy and respected citizen of Alexandria involved in civic and public affairs. The specific dates of his birth and death are not known, but it is generally thought that he was born around 20 BCE and died around AD 45. Apparently, he spent most of his life quietly in Alexandria writing philosophical treatises and biblical commentaries and allegories. Philo, a man of local and national prominence, was employed on an important mission on behalf of his fellow Alexandrians to the emperor. The Jewish community commissioned him to appear before the Emperor Gaius Caligula to protest the Roman prefect Flaccus's failure to quell the anti-Jewish riots that took place in Alexandria in AD 38.

Since Philo was a student of Greek philosophy who obviously obtained a liberal education under Greek tutors,¹¹ he knew little, if any, Hebrew. Even his allegories based on Hebraic etymologies show a very poor understanding of the discipline itself and the history of the Greek words he uses.

This background of Philo's educational, cultural, philosophical, and religious influences, helps one understand Greene's statement: "Philo represents a group of Hellenized Jews at Alexandria who, familiar with Middle Platonist techniques of allegorical and rhetorical exegesis, tried to work out the intellectual presuppositions of their faith."¹²

Trying to decipher how Philo worked out the presuppositions of his faith is complicated due to the nature of his theology. On the one hand, he was ingrained with legalistic, literalistic Judaism; on the other hand, he shows an intellectual and "spiritual mysticism."¹³

It is interesting that nowhere in his works does Philo ever expound his methodology of allegorism and its role in exegesis. His method can be discerned only by empirical observation. According to Runia, who has provided such an empirical study, Philo's methodology can be styled as "sequential exegesis" because there is a thematic unity that chains together his treatises. Within this empirical structure there are a "primary" and a "secondary" exegesis. Both primary and secondary exegeses follow four important procedures, the second of which is germane to a serious consideration of Philo's work: there is a brief paraphrase of the initial

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¹³ Buchsel, TDNT 1:262.
biblical text being dealt with "in which diverse exegetical techniques are used to "break open" the text." It is in the "breaking open" of the text that we find Philo employing his allegorical exegesis. Runia's work is significant because it illustrates the function of Alexandrian allegory: to "emancipate the meaning of the passage from its historical content and transmute it into a moral sentiment or a philosophical truth." This idea of "emancipating the meaning of a passage from its historical content" is crucial to understanding Alexandrian exegesis. The literal meaning of the text was not regarded as highly as the ethical and philosophical meaning. In fact, allegory was often utilized in order to free the text from its relation to history. With this approach it should come as no surprise that "Philo exhibits no typology of the Messianic expectation and none at all in eschatology." Because of this apparent aversion to history, Hellenistic allegorism and typology have often been charged with a lack of respect for the integrity of the text.

The culmination of this type of exegesis is seen in Philo's handling of the narratives in the Torah. He regarded them as "symbols of the soul's journey toward God." According to Philo, then,

The allegorical meaning of Scripture is, in effect, the spiritual journey of every man. The journey begins here where we are in the world which initially we understand the perception of our sense; we live within the "world of perception." The goal of our journey is to move beyond this world into the better world of thought, what Plato called "the world of concept."

The Rabbinic Use of Allegory

For a number of years there has been a raging debate over the difference between Hellenistic and Palestinian allegory. It is no longer feasible to maintain that each was so distinct that the Diaspora Jews would not have understood the teachings derived from the exegetical method of Palestinian Judaism. Although there were differences between Alexandrian Judaism and Palestinian Judaism, we must recognize that they were not as great as once

14 Ibid., 239.
15 Hanson, Allegory and Event, 82.
16 Ibid., 49, 53.
18 Danielou, Gospel Message, 197.
held by some scholars. Though this difference does not appear to be great, there are some distinct features that must be addressed.

Perhaps the greatest distinction between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism is that the former was Messianic in its philosophy and eschatological in its perspective, while the latter was Platonic and dualistic. Palestinian Judaism recognized two types of interpreters among the rabbis: “expounders of difficult matters” and “expounders of sealed-up matters.” Though allegory would seem to fall within the last category, rabbinic tradition ascribes to Hillel a set of seven “norms” for interpreting Scripture, and the practice of allegorizing is not found among those norms. This does not mean, however, that allegory was not practiced. On the contrary, rabbis would approach texts of Scripture knowing that it could have several meanings. These meanings were often thought of as being a natural part of the literal sense of Scripture, attesting to its dignity and applicability.20

Lately there has been a growing trend to recognize that there are midrashic traditions lying behind Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4. This type of exegesis was employed to update the written Torah and make it applicable to the present situation. But the midrashic traditions are very limited in their ability to shed light on Paul’s use of the Genesis narrative. In addition to the midrashic tradition, rabbinic use of allegory (and subsequently, Paul’s use of it) may have its roots in Jewish liturgy. Not many have seen fit to pursue this idea.21

One significant feature regarding rabbinic exegesis and allegorization tends to stand out. The Torah/Covenant material was viewed as being authoritative for all of life; therefore, it was legitimate to seek the deeper meaning of the text. A particular text could be allegorized if one perceived a “similar situation” during the time the original material was composed.22

In summary, the following characteristics have been isolated as representing Palestinian Judaism as opposed to Hellenistic Judaism:

1) Palestinian Judaism was Messianic in its philosophy and eschatological in its perspective.
2) The allegorists of Palestine seem to fall into the category known as “expounders of sealed-up matters.”
3) The rabbis would look for an “allegorical” sense of Scripture, even with their “literal” understanding of the text.

20 Buchsel, Friedrich, ἄλληγορέω, TDNT 1.263.
21 Hanson, Allegory, 498.
22 Ibid., 82.
4) Midrashic tradition employed allegorism in order to update the Torah.
5) The Torah/Covenant material was a favorite for allegorism because it was viewed as authoritative for all of life.
6) The object of Palestinian exegesis was to actually use the language of the text itself in order to describe the activity of God.23

Αλληγορέω and the Pauline Allegorical Method

The text of Galatians 4:24 begins with ἀνείπα ἐστιν ἀλληγοροῦμενα. The participle is in the plural form and can be translated, “These things are intended to convey a deeper meaning.”24 The verb itself means to “speak allegorically,”25 which indicates that the word has had a history of development. The word is of late Greek origin and actually came to replace in usage the word ὑπόνοια.26

It should be borne in mind that the word ἀλλεγορία was not extensively used until the Hellenistic period. Earlier writers used periphrases in which ὑπόνοια played the greatest part. When ἀλλεγορία did come into common use, it first referred to allegory as a mode of expression; i.e., it meant figurative language. Later on, it was used to denote allegory as a method of exegesis; i.e., it meant allegorical interpretation.27

Following Philo and other Hellenistic allegorists, the noun came to describe the “figurative interpretation of an authoritative text.”28 This meaning, coupled with the intention to convey a deeper meaning, becomes a crucial definition when seeking to understand Paul’s use of ἀλληγοροῦμενα. Barker has astutely observed that “there is surely some significance in the fact that the Apostle wrote ἀλληγοροῦμενα rather than ἀλλεγορία.”29 Actually, the distinction is between Paul’s use of a present passive (deponent) participle and a noun. It is the difference between his identification of the original narrative as an allegory and his actual practice of allegorizing the original event.

23 Woollcombe, “Biblical Origins,” 54: This is in contrast to Alexandrian exegesis, the object of which was “to free the spirit of the text from the shell of words in which it was encased.”
24 Hanson, Paul’s Technique, 94.
25 BAGD 39.
28 Hanson, Allegory, 39.
If the verbal form indicates some hermeneutical process that Paul consciously understood he himself was engaged in, what was that process? What does it actually mean to “allegorize” something?

Since ἀλληγορέω is a hapax legomenon, we have no parallel constructions in the NT or in the LXX by which one can ascertain some “normal” practice in the process of allegorizing. Non-canonical writers such as Philo, Josephus, Plutarch, and Heraklitos use the verb in several places, but we have no way of knowing if Paul was cognizant of their writings. It is clear from the context that Paul is not talking about just an allegorical process; rather he is interested in allegorical entities; that is, in his mind Sarah and Hagar really do stand for something that is vital to an expression of the Christian faith. Instead of its being an allegorical “utterance,” it is an allegorical “essence.” The historical beings of Hagar and Sarah take on the essence of the two covenants. It is this hermeneutical process of “taking on the essence of something” that Paul has in mind.30

With this meaning of ἀλληγορέω in mind, we should now examine the composition and context of Gal 4:21-31. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is an example of the “apologetic letter” genre. The epistolary framework identifies the text in question as being part of the body of the letter that is recognized as the “probatio.”31 The purpose of the probatio is to establish credibility for arguments being advanced. Paul concludes the probatio section with his allegory of Sarah and Hagar. It follows Paul’s admission of perplexity (4:20). He presents himself, not as one who with pride knows all of the truth. Instead, “through the allegory he lets the Galatians find the ‘truth’ for themselves, thus convincing themselves, and at the same time clearing themselves from the blame of being ἀνόητοι Γαλάται.”32

Structurally, it appears that Paul has waited for this precise moment in his letter to give the crowning point for his argument. And the advantages of using allegory at this point include at least the following: 1) It allows him to stay with the figure of Abraham; 2) apparently he is utilizing a style of exegesis that the Judaizers were fond of for establishing their own doctrines; 3) it allows him to summarize his main points by way of an acceptable illustration from the sacred history of Israel; 4) it allows him to utilize the tradition for an emotive appeal; and 5) it provides him a basis for saying

30 Ibid., 206, 7.
31 Ibid., 368.
something difficult that needed to be said, namely, that the Judaizers needed to be cast out.33

The function of the allegory focuses on the δύο διαθήκαι. Hagar and Ishmael stand to represent those who are under the bondage of the law. Hagar bore Ishmael κατὰ σάρκα, representing those things that happen apart from God’s promises. “Accordingly, Hagar-Ishmael stands as a symbol of all those who hope to achieve righteousness on the basis of their own works.”34

On the other hand, Sarah and Isaac represent the covenant of freedom. This is the second of the covenants represented. It is not just a historical covenant that is represented here; instead, the allegory of the two covenants represents the two different spheres of human existence. The condition of the mother is seen to represent the destiny of the son. The purpose of this allegory, then, is to advance Paul’s basic argument that “life lived under the law is slavery, life lived in response to God’s promised blessing in Christ is freedom.”35

Identifying the Pauline Allegorical Method

Understanding how Paul uses allegory in this argument against the Judaizers, how are we to identify the characteristics of his methodology? It is clear that Paul goes beyond the typical midrashic treatment of OT narratives. For over a century there has been the recognition that Paul’s allegorical method cannot be viewed simply in the subjective sense of speaking plainly about something.36 Even though this view was maintained because of his rabbinical training, it is rejected because of three foci that make his work distinctive: epistemology, view of history, and eschatology.

His epistemology is πίστις instead of γνώσις. In both Alexandrian and Palestinian exegesis there was a desire to know the will of God. In contrast to this, Paul emphasized human πίστις in response to divine grace that has made a new covenant possible. In reading the Greek text of Galatians, one is struck with the priority of πίστις, which occurs twenty-three times. In an autobiographical manner, Paul shares with his readers that at an earlier time in his life he tried to destroy that πίστις (1:23). Later on in his confrontation

33 James M. Boice, Galatians (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 10; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 482.
35 Ibid., 125.
with Cephas, Paul adamantly upheld the view that justification is by πίστις and not by works of the law (2:16). Referring to his own conversion experience, Paul says that he was crucified with Christ and the life he now lives is by πίστις in the son of God, who loved him and gave himself for Paul (2:20). Having made a contrast between πίστις and the law, Paul anticipates the Sarah/Hagar allegory as early as 3:7, where he says, “Therefore know that only those who are of πίστις are sons of Abraham.”

The second element of Paul’s allegorical methodology concerns his view of salvation-history. This approach has been called a “redemptive-historical reality of faith.” In the context of Gal 4:21–31, this approach is reflected in the word ἐλευθέρας. This usage explains precisely why he could reach back into Israel’s history and utilize a narrative that would communicate to his readers. The concept of “freedom” or “deliverance” or “liberation” was a part of Israel’s history.” Five times in this paragraph (Gal 4:21–31) Paul uses the word ἐλευθέρας to demonstrate this “redemptive-historical reality of faith.” Not enough attention has been directed toward Paul’s use of freedom as part of his methodology, but his salvation-history can be traced back to Abraham, who had two sons, the second born of a “free” woman (4:22) because of a promise (4:23). Thus the Jerusalem from above is also ἐλευθέρα (4:26) and stands ready to give birth to any who would come believing in the promise. With an appeal to γραφή, Paul quotes Gen 21:9, 10 as justification for casting out the Judaizers who have no part of the inheritance because only the children of the free woman are really ἐλευθέρας (4:30, 31).

The last feature of the Pauline allegorical method is his eschatology. It is not pessimistic; rather it is filled with hope that finds its culmination in the person and work of Christ. This element of eschatology, along with the emphasis on salvation-history, guards Paul from cutting completely loose from the original setting of the Genesis narrative. And Paul identifies the present Jerusalem with Hagar as Mt. Sinai in Arabia and reminds his readers that the eschatological promise rests in the Jerusalem above. In the application of the details of his allegory, Paul weaves together midrashic and legal aspects of the OT. “The result was an unmistakable homiletical pastoral hermeneutics which had been designed for a unique and—as Paul viewed it—limited mission to the Gentiles because of the imminence of the parousia.”

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Conclusion

This study has shown that Paul's allegorical treatment of Gal 4:21-31 (the Sarah/Hagar narrative of Genesis) contains both rabbinic and philonic characteristics, but at the same time is distinctly Pauline.

In what way was Paul's allegorical method similar to that of Philo and other Hellenistic writers? Paul recognized the legitimacy of a deeper meaning in Scripture. Also, he, as well as Philo, was "anxious to avoid the full application and literal understanding of the Torah in everyday life."39

In what way was Paul's allegorical method similar to Palestinian exegesis? There was an intentional authority conveyed in expounding the text. Paul shared the concern for describing the activity of God. Paul was Messianic in his philosophy and eschatological in his perspective, albeit Christological in focus. Also there was the freedom to advance an argument by allegorizing a Torah/covenant text in order to reach a deeper meaning.

In what way was Paul's allegorical methodology uniquely Pauline? His epistemology was grounded in πίστις instead of γνώσις. His view of history was a redemptive, salvation-history expressed in ἐλευθέρας that found its culmination in the Messiah Jesus. Finally, his eschatology was one of hope and promise expressed in the Jerusalem above. Interestingly, and probably not coincidentally, all three of these elements (faith, freedom, and hope) can be found in the Sarah/Hagar narrative.

Even though abuses of allegory have led biblical scholars to argue that allegorical interpretation should be regarded as a thing of the past,40 this should not be taken as carte blanche to reject Paul's careful application of it to his argument in Gal 4:21-31. In fact, I hope that this study has provided a solid foundation for appreciating the genre of allegory and that its rejection by contemporary biblical scholarship says more about present-day presuppositions than it does about its apostolic author.

39 Hanson, Paul's Technique, 205.
40 James Barr, The Bible in the Modern World (London: SCM Press, 1990) 172. This pronouncement by Barr is somewhat puzzling in view of an article he wrote earlier in which he maintained, "All valid understanding of a passage as having allegorical features must depend on contextual considerations within the linguistic semantics, the literary context, the cultural background and the historical setting. These are exactly what the tradition of modern scholarship has provided." James Barr, "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship," in JSOT 44 (1989) 16.