

Paul's Use of Allegory in Galatians

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. 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." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Gal. 4:21-31 ESV)

Introduction

When children are caught disobeying their parents they will often try to defend themselves by justifying their bad behavior. A typical argument that many children use is: "But he did it too!"

Those who advocate using allegorical interpretation use a similar argument. They claim that the apostle Paul used allegorical interpretation in his letter to the Galatians. Therefore, if Paul used allegorical interpretation, then that justifies its use for us today.

But did Paul really use allegory as a method of interpretation?

Interpretation Versus Illustration

There is a difference between using allegory to illustrate a point and using allegory as a method of interpretation. Allegory is often used as a literary device in order to illustrate an idea or a principle. Using allegory as a literary device involves telling a story which



illustrates some kind of lesson that the author desires to communicate to his readers. A classic example of allegory being used as a literary device John Bunyan's story called *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this allegorical story, a fellow named "Christian" leaves the City of Destruction and travels towards the Celestial City, where God lives. Along the way he meets a fellow named "Faithful" who helps him on his way to the City. He also meets many other characters on his journey such as "Hypocrisy", "Mr. Worldly Wiseman", "Obstinate" and "Pliable." These opponents try to discourage him from reaching the Celestial City. Bunyan wrote this story as an allegorical illustration of the challenges of the Christian life.

However, using allegory as a literary device is much different than using allegory as a method of interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation assumes that the Bible has various levels of meaning. In order to explain the meaning of God's Word, allegorical interpretation focuses on a spiritual sense of meaning rather than the literal sense of meaning. Allegorical interpretation looks for a deeper, spiritual or symbolic meaning within the text of scripture.

This allegorical method of interpretation was quite prevalent among some of the post-apostolic church fathers. Origen's explanation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 is a typical example of how some of the church fathers used this method of interpretation. According to Origen's allegorical view, the man who is robbed is Adam, Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The priest is the Law, and the Levites are the Prophets. The Samaritan is Christ. The donkey is Christ's physical body, which bears the burden of the wounded man (the wounds are his sins), and the inn is the Church. The Samaritan's promise to return is a promise of the second coming of Christ. How anyone could read the story of the Good Samaritan and come up with this bizarre interpretation is beyond explanation.

Paul's Use of Allegory

When Paul wrote Galatians 4, was he using allegory as a literary device in order to illustrate his point? Or was he using allegory as a method of interpretation?

The English Standard Version says, "Now this may be interpreted allegorically" (Gal. 4:24). The translators of this version make it sound as though Paul was using allegory as

a method of interpretation. However, if you read the entire text it is obvious that Paul was using allegory as a literary device to illustrate his point. A comparison of other translations confirms this to be true.

- Which things are an allegory... (KJV)
- These things may be treated as an allegory... (NET)
- Which things are spoken allegorically... (LEB)
- These things are illustrations... (HCSB)
- These things may be taken figuratively... (NIV)

In this passage, Paul is discussing the contrast between grace and law, faith and works. In order to illustrate this contrast, he uses a common Old Testament story. Paul is not using an allegorical method of interpretation. Instead, he is using a literal, historical narrative which illustrate truths about law and grace. The story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah is historical. Paul is simply using elements in the story to explain abstract concepts such as law, grace, faith and works.

The “He Did It Too” Argument

According to Louw and Nida, the Greek word ἀλληγορέω means “to employ an analogy or likeness in communicating—‘to speak allegorically, to employ an analogy, to use a likeness.’”¹ Rather than meaning to use allegory as a method of interpretation as the ESV implies, it simply means to use an analogy or illustration.

Interestingly, this is the only occurrence of the word ἀλληγορέω in the New Testament. Yet those who justify using the allegorical method of interpretation would say that this single occurrence of the Greek term ἀλληγορέω gives them license to also allegorize scripture in attempting to explain away its plain meaning.

As we have seen, Paul’s use of allegory favors the idea of using it as a literary device to illustrate his point rather than as a method of interpretation. But let’s put that obvious fact to one side and assume for a moment that the ESV is correct in rendering ἀλληγορέω as

¹ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) 1996 : 390. Print.

meaning allegorical interpretation. Would this single occurrence in the New Testament of the word ἀλληγορέω be a precedent to justify allegorical interpretation?

Frederic William Farrar writes: "... the occurrence of one such allegory in the epistle of St. Paul no more sanctions the universal application of the method than a few New Testament ... quotations from Greek poets prove the divine authority of all Pagan literature."²

Farrar makes an excellent point. The apostle Paul quoted pagan poets and philosophers. He quoted Menander in the book of Acts and in 1 Corinthians. He quoted Epimenides in the book of Titus. However, he was not sanctioning their wisdom or inspiration. He was merely using them to make a point.

George Gilbert concurs with Farrar: "Since Paul explained one historical event of the Old Testament allegorically, it seems likely that he admitted the possibility of applying the principle of allegory elsewhere; but the fact that his letters show no other unmistakable illustration obviously suggests either that he did not feel himself competent to unfold the allegorical meaning of Scripture, or, what is more probably, that he was better satisfied on the whole to give his readers the plain primary sense of the text."³

When I misbehaved as a child, I would try the "he did it too" argument. It never worked. My parents would reply, "Just because he did it, does not mean that you have to do it also. If he jumped off a cliff, would you do that too?" The "he did it too" argument was not very effective in justifying my bad behavior.

Likewise, the "he did it too" argument as it pertains to Paul's use of allegory is certainly no justification for the allegorical method of interpretation.

There is a huge difference between the apostle Paul and today's interpreter of scripture. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit chose to use a historical story about real people from the Old Testament to illustrate a principle in the New Testament. As an author inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul's letter to the Galatians is part of the infallible canon of scripture. As believers reading God's Word today, we have the Holy Spirit as a teacher. But that does not mean

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), 7.

³ Ibid.

that we are infallible in our understanding of God's Word. As an interpreter of God's Word, we should not put ourselves in the position of the Holy Spirit. Even if Paul had used an allegorical method of interpretation—which is extremely doubtful—that does not justify using it as a valid method of interpretation today.

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