

THE LEADING OF THE SPIRIT AND THE CURSE OF THE LAW

REASSESSING PAUL'S RESPONSE TO THE GALATIAN CRISIS¹

Todd A. Wilson

This study examines the rationale for Paul's four references to the Law in 5:13–6:10 in light of a fresh appraisal of the Galatian crisis. It contributes to the continuing debate over the relevance of this section of the letter for the rest of Galatians and for the situation in Galatia. In addition, this study offers a refined understanding of how Galatians functioned in its original setting: it argues that, with the letter, Paul confronts his apostatising converts with the stark choice between blessing and curse.

The thesis of this study is that Paul intended his four references to the Law in 5:13–6:10 as an affirmation of the sufficiency of the Spirit to enable the Galatians to fulfil the Law and thereby avoid its curse. This thesis is developed in two parts, the first consisting of three chapters, the second of two chapters.

Chapter 1 first locates this study within the broader context of Galatians scholarship and provides a description of the approach taken and an overview of the argument. After briefly addressing the state of the question of how 5:13–6:10 relates to the rest of the letter, a classic interpretive conundrum in Galatians studies, several rationales for Paul's references to the Law 5:13–6:10 are then considered: (1) Paul invokes the Law as an abiding standard of behaviour; (2) Paul shows that his Law-free gospel does not entail lawless living; (3) Paul wants to continue his polemic against the Law; and (4) Paul demonstrates the superfluity of the Law for ethics. This fourth approach, arguably the consensus view among scholars, is given more extended treatment because of its influence.

¹ Abstract of a thesis awarded a Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge, 2005, supervised by Professor Graham N. Stanton.

Part 1 ('The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia') begins with an exploration of the rhetoric of cursing in Galatians, where it is demonstrated that the curse of the Law is a more prominent, and indeed a more pervasive, feature of the letter than is generally assumed (ch. 2). This conclusion is based upon the following three observations: (1) Galatians is framed in terms of curse (1:8-9) and blessing (6:16); (2) one of the letter's leading paragraphs contains an unusually high concentration of curse terminology (3:10-14); and (3) Paul continues to refer to the curse of the Law throughout the remainder of the letter by means of the shorthand expression 'under Law' (3:23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18). This last observation is especially important for the argument of this chapter, as well as for the thesis as a whole, because it demonstrates that the motif of the curse of the Law extends even into the so-called ethical section of the letter, a possibility which has seldom received much attention.

This is then followed by two chapters that explore, from two complementary angles, the relevance of the curse of the Law for the Galatian crisis. Chapter 3 considers whether the threat of a curse played a part in the Agitators' appeal for circumcision. This chapter draws attention to several strands of evidence which suggest that the Agitators warned the Galatians of, or perhaps threatened them with, a curse for failing to be circumcised. First it argues that, while Paul does not explicitly accuse the Agitators of appealing to a curse, several indications point in that direction; and secondly, it suggests that the Agitators were probably appealing to several scriptural traditions which hold out a curse for failure to comply with the requirements of the covenant and the Law (Gen. 17:10-14; 12:3; Deut. 27:26).

Chapter 4 considers whether the threat of a curse played a part in the Galatians' attraction to circumcision. Largely on the basis of (under-utilised) epigraphic evidenced from central Anatolia, this chapter argues that the Galatians would have taken the threat of a curse very seriously indeed. It is further argued (albeit somewhat more tentatively) that the Galatians' encounter with suffering, both Paul's and their own, may have exacerbated their fears about the curse of the Law since, in a world dominated by the overseeing presence of the gods, suffering could easily be interpreted as an expression of divine vengeance and the working of a curse. It is also suggested that the Agitators may have further provoked the Galatians' anxieties about the threat of a curse by

interpreting the Galatians' suffering and Paul's own suffering as evidence of the fact that a curse had already overtaken them both.

Part 2 ('The Curse of the Law and the Purpose of Galatians') offers a close exegesis of Paul's four references to the Law in 5:13–6:10. Chapter 5 begins with Paul's two references to the fulfilment of the Law in 5:14 and 6:2, both of which, it is argued, are references to the Law of Moses and are highly relevant to the situation of crisis. This chapter seeks to show, however, that Paul is not (merely) warding off potential misunderstandings or (simply) affirming the ethical implications of justification by faith in relation to the Law. Instead, there is good reason to think that Paul uses the language of the fulfilment of the Law specifically to answer the threat of the curse of the Law and to assure the Galatians that love fulfils the Law and thereby avoids the Law's curse.

Chapter 6 then examines what is argued are two references to the curse of the Law in 5:18 and 5:23. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that these two references to the Law serve, not as confirmation of the superfluity of the Law for Christian living, but as affirmations of the sufficiency of the Spirit to keep one from coming under the curse of the Law. This exegetical conclusion is then bolstered by showing that Paul is heavily indebted to Old Testament wilderness narrative traditions in 5:16–24, which he uses to reinforce both his warning about the 'works of the flesh' (5:19–21) and his affirmation of the sufficiency of the Spirit (5:16–18, 22–23). Together, these two chapters demonstrate that 5:13–6:10 brings the letter to a climax by affirming that the Galatians will fulfil the Law and thereby avoid its curse if, and only if, they follow the leading of the Spirit.

The concluding chapter brings together the results of this study and explores a few implications. First, the curse of the Law is important not only earlier in the letter (3:10–14; 3:23–29; 4:1–7; 4:21–31), but it also continues to be a central concern for Paul in 5:13–6:10. Secondly, for Paul redemption from the curse of the Law is not a *fait accompli*: the cursing voice of the Law will only be silenced if the Galatians walk by the Spirit and resist the 'desire of the flesh' (5:16–18). Thirdly, in Galatians Paul places less emphasis upon the superfluity of the Law than is often assumed; rather, he focuses upon the Law's inability to mediate righteousness (2:15–21; 3:21; 5:5–6), its contrast with 'faith' (3:11–12), and its power to curse (1:8–9; 3:10, 13). Finally, this reading of Galatians, and in particular, Paul's polemic against the Law, may

have far-reaching implications for the question of Christian supersessionism: the idea that the church has displaced the Jews as the elect people of God.