

Abraham Drafted to Team Galatians

Paul writes his letter to the Galatians during a transitional period for Christianity. Christianity has not yet become independent of Judaism, but is moving farther away from the observances of Jewish laws. This issue proves to be a point of intense controversy, and Paul takes a side against following Jewish law. In his letter, Paul attempts to explain to the Galatians how Gentiles are blessed through Jesus and why there is no need for them to adopt the code of Moses. Specifically in verse three, Paul makes a critical offensive move for his cause by aligning himself and his views with an important central figure—Abraham. Proving to be a powerful rhetorician, Paul effectively employs language, spins quotations, aims at logic, and provides answers to position Abraham in a way that supports his views.

It is likely at such a confusing and controversial time for Christianity that Paul himself did not really know how the Jesus movement should fit in with the previous laws of Judaism. It seems Paul knew he had to make some statement on this controversy, but was not completely sure what it should be. He does offer a number of opinions on the subject, but few of them are grounded in tangible evidence. However, it is evident in Galatians 3 that Paul knows how to present a persuasive argument. It doesn't matter so much what claim he makes, just that he makes it wholeheartedly.

In this way, Paul lays the foundation for his alignment with Abraham even before he mentions the story of Abraham through his effective use of language. Paul immediately begins verse three by accusing the Galatians: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1). The first half of this address runs the risk of

overly offending the listeners and having them dismiss the rest of Paul's address.

However, Paul cleverly adds the second part which plays off the basic human dislike for being tricked. Now the people are not only eager to listen to Paul and find out how they have been fooled, but also eager to believe Paul's words. So even before the story of Abraham is discussed, Paul has set the stage for the Galatians to accept his version of it.

Paul's confident language serves to further the agreeability of what he has to say. The passage is full of small and easily overlooked phrases that prove to be incredibly powerful in the context. He strategically employs such phrases as "so you see" (3:7), "for it is written" (3:10), and "it is evident" (3:11) to create an air of assurance that seems impossible to disagree with. As one point Paul asks, "Is the law then opposed to the promises of God?" and then answers himself by exclaiming, "Certainly not!" (3:21). Not only is Paul certain of what he is saying, but also adds an exclamation point for added emphasis on this point.

Interspersed with these strong words of suggestion are pointed rhetorical questions; Paul uses these to engage his reader in accepting his claims. By having no stated answer it would seem that the questions were open for discussion, however, on the contrary, these questions leave no room for dispute. For example, Paul asks, "...does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?" (3:5). The clear answer Paul is aiming for with this leading question is that God provides the spirit to the people through faith and not through the Jewish laws.

This answer helps the Galatians believe in Paul's words because Paul has twisted his rhetoric in a way that makes the answer obvious. The readers of this letter

are made to feel like complete fools if they do not side with Paul. The Galatians would also readily acknowledge the answer to this rhetorical question, though, because Paul makes the answer the easy choice. The Galatians want to receive the Spirit, and it is much easier to receive it by believing than by numerous difficult and extensive Jewish laws.

After expertly priming the Galatians to heed his words, Paul introduces the story of Abraham. In an interesting reinterpretation of the Abraham story, Paul positions Abraham to play on his team. It is confusing that Paul chooses to focus on the importance of Abraham since Abraham is prominent in the Jewish tradition, but, while it is curious, it is something that may not have seemed so at the time. It is also possible that while Paul was attempting to break away from the church in Jerusalem, he did not have a full conception of what that would mean. The text is silent on many of these holes in Paul's reasoning.

One way Paul uses Abraham to promote his views is by putting a new spin on previous quotations from the Bible. Paul uses an earlier quote to explain that "just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' ... those who believe are the descendants of Abraham" (3:6-7). This is only one of many places Paul could be accused of espousing false or skewed logic with his reinterpretation of quotes. It cannot logically be assumed that everyone who believes in God is the descendant of Abraham just because Abraham believed. In this example, Paul delves further into questionable logic by explaining that "those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed" (3:9). He gives little support for any of these claims, but instead relies on his overbearing rhetoric to cover up flaws in reasoning.

Another place that Paul spins an earlier Biblical quotation to serve his purposes is when he quotes, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,” and then interprets Jesus’ cross as a tree. He explains that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of Spirit through faith” (3:13-14). Now Paul is stretching his reasoning to not only align Abraham with his promotion of faith and not Jewish law, but also extend this affiliation through Abraham all the way to Jesus himself. In essence, Paul is forming an undoubtedly powerful team of players to support his offensive move against the Christians who uphold Jewish laws.

There are points in this third verse where Paul also directly aims at logic, whether valid or faulty logic, to promote his views by using Abraham. Paul makes an analogy between a person’s will and God’s promise to Abraham—just as a will cannot be later added to or annulled neither can God’s covenant be added to with laws. He is appealing to the Galatians sense of logic by stating the irrelevance of the Moses code. “My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise” (3:17). This is a clever move by Paul since he does not claim that these laws do not exist (it is clear they have had a long history), but only that they came after Abraham and no longer serve a purpose now that the people have been delivered through Jesus Christ.

After laying the foundation for and giving his reinterpretation of the Abraham story, Paul smartly gives his answers for the inevitable questions surrounding his interpretation. Paul offers an explanation for how the Jewish laws fit with the Christian faith, and, like he has throughout the letter, he pronounces this with utter certainty:

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith” (3:23-24). In this way, Paul explains away the Jewish laws by telling the Galatians why they are no longer necessary.

Paul also expertly answers the inevitable question about how the Gentiles fit into this whole picture of Abraham and Jesus, and how all the differing traditions can come together. His main way of doing this is by eliminating the differences that spawn controversy. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:28-29). This seems to be the final push for the success of Paul’s words. Obviously the Galatians would be thrilled to hear that they are Abraham’s offspring and that this is made possible through their belief in Jesus Christ.

Throughout his letter, Paul is addressing a willing audience. They want to believe his words and he ensures that they do by promoting his cause through Abraham. Paul proves to be a master rhetorician as he plays with language and logic to champion faith in Jesus over the belief in the Moses code. As his writing progresses, Paul’s argument only gains momentum; it is hard to remember if there is any other way to understand the Bible. The recipients of this letter may have started out “foolish,” but they end almost as “heirs” to God.