THE LAW HAS GIVEN SARAH NO CHILDREN
(GAL. 4:21-30)

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I. Introduction

Paul's* appeal in Gal. 4:21-31† to the story of Abraham's two wives has proven enigmatic to interpreters in a number of respects. First, its position after Paul's personal address to the Galatians (4:12-20) has struck certain commentators as a bit odd. As a material argument from Scripture, the paragraph appears to belong with 3:6-18.‡ Second, the form of the passage has been difficult to pin down. Do we have, as Paul says, an allegory,§ something nearer to typology,¶ or a combination of both?¶¶ Third, what is the point of the discussion? Verse 31, with its διό, suggests perhaps that the identification of the Gentile Galatians as children of the free

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† It will be argued below that the section finishes off in fact with v 30.

‡ A. Oepke is especially harsh: "Der folgende mühsam wieder von vorn anfangende Schriftbeweis hätte seinen gegebenen Platz in Kap. 3 gehabt. Er ist dem Apostel wohl erst nachträglich eingefallen." See Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater, 4th ed., edited and enlarged by J. Rohde (ThHK 9; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1979) 147.


¶ Oepke, Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater, 148; F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982) 217; already Chrysostom, who explains that here Paul misuses the word ἀλληγορία, applying it to what is really typology.

woman (Sarah), hence as Abraham's true children, comprises the thrust of the passage. But v 28, which expresses the same thought as v 31, is neither introduced as a conclusion from what precedes (note the simply continuative δέ) nor explicitly grounded by what follows (v 29, ἀλλ'...). Oepke seeks to overcome the first difficulty by treating the δέ in v 28 as "metabatisch," while Lagrange rejects the very idea that v 28 (or v 31) contains the main point of the passage, regarding it instead as a point of departure for what follows. And Bonnard suggests that here "Paul n'argumente plus, il déclare."

This last statement raises a further question. To what extent does the passage as a whole constitute an argument? It will not suffice in this connection to observe simply the apparent arbitrariness of allegorical exegesis, as if the persuasive appeal of allegorical interpretation were somehow past finding out. We should not forget that in antiquity allegorizing was employed most typically to bring a revered tradition in line with accepted views (especially the "modern" world view or a particular philosophy). This means that the interpreter would make points via allegorical exegesis with which his audience was already in sympathy. Thus, the later Greeks and Romans rehabilitate Homer for a new day, and in a similar fashion Hellenistic Jews build a bridge between the Pentateuch and (popular) Greek philosophy. Moreover, on those points where the allegorist anticipates resistance, he is always ready with warrants for his exegetical judgments. It is characteristic of Philo, for example, that he argues for his allegorical interpretation,

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6 Der Brief an die Galater, 152.
11 This is the main thrust of Irmgard Christiansen's investigation, Die Technik der allegorischen Auslegungswissenschaft bei Philon von Alexandrien (BGBH 7; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1969). As Christiansen herself puts it: "Wie die vorliegende Arbeit zeigen will, geht Philon in seinen allegorischen Auslegungen streng logisch vor. Das Verhältnis, das zwischen Bibeltext und allegorischer Auslegung besteht, ist logisch begründet" (27).