

“Why Therefore the Law?”

The Role of the Law in Galatians 3:19–20

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Abstract

In Gal 3:19a Paul asks, “Why therefore the law?” He does not drop the topic after his initial answer, “transgressions,” to turn to find the law inferior to the promise. Instead, he uses mediation, the angelic commanding of the law, and the statement that God is one to argue from the nature of the law as a two-sided covenant that the law held Israel accountable for transgressions. This purpose accords with the function of the law in chs. 2–3, gives rise to the question in 3:21, and leads to the analogy of the jailer and disciplinarian in 3:23–24.

1 Introduction

Paul argues in Gal 3 that the law does not bring the Spirit (3:1–5), does not impart the blessing of Abraham (3:6–9), does not justify (3:10–14), and cannot supplant the promise (3:15–18). The natural question then is, “What function does the law perform?” Paul asks this question in 3:19a, “Why then the law?”¹ (Τί οὖν ὁ νόμος;)

Paul’s initial answer is simply: “transgressions,” and this leaves the exegetical problem of discerning the role that angels and mediation, which appear unrelated to transgressions, play in his explanation. The contention of this article is that in Gal 3:19–20 Paul uses angels and mediation as evidence that the law placed obligations upon the Jews and set their punishment when they transgressed it. The text reads as follows:

¹⁹ Τί οὖν ὁ νόμος; τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν προσετέθη, ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπήγγελται, διαταγείς δι’ ἀγγέλων ἐν χειρὶ

¹ Quotes are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

μεσίτου. ²⁰ ὁ δὲ μεσίτης ἑνὸς οὐκ ἔστιν, ὁ δὲ θεὸς εἷς ἔστιν.

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. ²⁰ Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

2 The Origin of the Law

Most scholars understand Paul to ask in v. 19a: “Why then did God give the law?” J. L. Martyn and Martinus de Boer, however, understand Paul to affirm that angels gave the law without God’s sanction. De Boer (2011, 230) finds Paul’s question equivalent to “Why then did the angels add the law to the promise of God, having arranged this step by the hand of Moses?” Because Paul does not mention God when he says that the law was given through angels, both Martyn and de Boer understand God to be absent from the story (Martyn 1997, 353; de Boer 2011, 228). They find additional support in v. 20.

Since v. 20a says that the mediator was not “of one” (ἐνός), readers could understand the mediator to be not of one party or not of one individual, that is, that a mediator dealt only with a plurality of parties or that no party to the covenant was a single individual, respectively. Martyn (1997, 365) reads v. 20 to say that there is no mediator when either party to a transaction is an individual because individuals would act in their own behalf, and de Boer (2011, 227) sees in the same verse the assumption that a mediator is necessary only when the initiating party consists of a plurality.² Both Martyn and de Boer then find in v. 20 what is effectively a syllogism with an unstated conclusion: Moses was the mediator for a plurality (major premise), and God is one (minor premise); thus Moses was not God’s mediator (unstated conclusion), and the law itself is not from God (Martyn 1997, 365–366; de Boer 2011, 227–228). The two scholars argue in large part from silence, but in view of the conciseness of Paul’s writing, conjectures are virtually unavoidable. There are problems, however, with this viewpoint.

² Oepke (1967, 619) understands Paul to mean that a mediator “usually represents a plurality (or two pluralities).” De Boer (2011, 228 n. 330) cites 1 Tim 2:5 against the idea that both parties must be pluralities. *Contra* Martyn (1997, 365).

In Paul's time the use of a μεσίτης ("mediator") did not require two parties in need of mediation to be pluralities.³ Philo records, for example, that when Israel worshipped an idol in the wilderness, Moses "took the part of mediator and reconciler" (πράξεσιν οἷα μεσίτης καὶ διαλλακτής) begging God to forgive the sins of the people (Philo, *Mos.* 2.166).⁴ In *De somniis*, Philo writes of Israel addressing one of the angelic mediators (μεσιτῶν) to ask him to speak to them rather than God; that is, the people were asking an angel to mediate between them and God (Philo, *Somn.* 1.143). Similarly *T. Dan* 6.2 exhorts Israel to draw near to God and to the angel that intercedes for them because he is the mediator between God and people (ὅτι οὗτός ἐστι μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων). The NT assigns the role of mediator to Jesus in 1 Tim 2:5, "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind [εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων], Christ Jesus, himself human." In none of these cases is a covenant specified, but in each case God (a unity) is one party and either Israel or all humanity the other. Plutarch places a μεσίτης between two individual gods when he says that the Persians called Mithras Μεσίτης because he stood midway between Oromazes, the good god, and Areimanius, the evil god, although again there is no mention of a covenant (Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 46).

The term μεσίτης is also used of a mediator for a covenant when at least one party—sometimes the initiating party—is an individual. Hebrews 8:8 cites God saying that he would effect a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Verse 6 says of this covenant that "... he [Jesus] is the mediator of a better covenant ..." (κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης). Ignatius picks up the idea of mediated covenants with God as well: εἷς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς παλαιᾶς καὶ καινῆς διαθήκης· εἷς ὁ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων... (Ignatius, *Phld.* 5.3.2),⁵ that is, "For there is one God of the old and new covenant; there is one mediator between God and humankind ..." (own translation).⁶ The *Assumption of Moses* speaks of God choosing Moses as

³ A search on 3 March 2013 in the online database, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, brings up 49 occurrences of inflected forms of the word μεσίτης in Greek literature from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. A few of these are examined in the paragraphs that follow.

⁴ The English phrase is from Philo (Colson, LCL, 6:531).

⁵ My source for the text is *Patres Apostolici, Textum Recensuit, Adnotationibus Criticis Exegeticis Historicis Illustravit, Versionem Latinam Prolegomena Indices Addidit* 1901, 2:180.

⁶ Whether or not Ignatius has a particular scripture in mind, he, as a native speaker of Greek, does not appear to object to the use of μεσίτης when one party is an individual.

μεσίτης of the covenant of the law: Μωσῆς προσκαλεσάμενος Ἰησοῦν υἱὸν Ναυῆ καὶ διαλεγόμενος πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔφη . . . καὶ προεθέασατό με ὁ θεὸς πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου εἶναί με τῆς διαθήκης αὐτοῦ μεσίτην (*As. Mos. Fragmenta* frag. a, line 10). (“Moses called Joshua the son of Nun and holding conversation with him said, ‘. . . God chose me before the foundation of the world to be the mediator of his covenant’” [own paraphrase].) Diodorus Siculus (60–30 B.C.) uses μεσίτης to denote the person who mediated the marriage contract between two individuals, Medea and Jason (Diodorus Siculus 4.54; cf. 4.46). The word διαθήκη does not appear in the context, but a marriage contract is a covenant, and Diodorus uses μεσίτης in a context in which neither party to a particular covenant is a plurality.⁷ In the four examples above, at most one party is a plurality. Ignatius does not specify who initiated the old and new covenants, but the other three authors speak of a mediator of a covenant having God (a unity) or another individual as initiator. Both Paul and the Galatians would be familiar with the use of the word, and this use contradicts the understanding of both Martyn and de Boer.

Another problem with Martyn’s and de Boer’s view is their conclusion that Paul separates the law from God. Paul presumably stood by the divine origin of the law as a Pharisee, or he would not have advanced in Judaism as he did.⁸ He also believed in the divine origin of the law when he wrote in 1 Cor 9:9–10 that God was speaking in the law about the ox for the sake of the people (cf. Deut 25:4). If Paul denied that God gave the law in Gal 3, then he radically changed his position between writing Galatians and 1 Corinthians. Such an about-face manifests itself even within Galatians because he says in 5:14 that love of neighbour fulfils the law, thereby implying that it is good to fulfil a body of law of which God never approved. De Boer, however, sees Galatians as uniform in its stand against the law. He writes, “For Paul, at least in his letter to the Galatians, ‘God was absent at the genesis of the Sinaitic law’” (de Boer

⁷ Josephus offers another, but less certain, example of a μεσίτης between two individuals when he writes of Herod as a μεσίτης between Agrippa and his citizens. Josephus (*Ant.* 16.24) says of Herod: καὶ τῶν παρὰ Ἀγρίππα τισὶν ἐπιζητουμένων μεσίτης ἦν (“And he was a mediator with Agrippa for those who wanted it” [own translation]). It is likely that some of the people asking Herod to mediate for them with Agrippa were individuals as well as groups, but the text does not give specific examples.

⁸ Josephus (*Ant.* 15.136) appears to express a common Jewish view when he describes the law as coming δι’ ἀγγέλων παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ (“through angels from God”). In the context he compares the envoys carrying a message from one nation to another to the angels God sent to give Israel the law.

2011, 228). Both de Boer and Martyn concede that Paul speaks differently in Romans. De Boer (2011, 231) cites the important albeit negative function of the law in Romans: it brings knowledge of sin (3:20), registers sin's presence (5:14), increases its death grip on people (5:20), and effects condemnation (8:1). De Boer (2011, 229 n. 330) acknowledges that his understanding of Galatians is difficult to reconcile with Rom 7:12, 14, 22, 25; 8:7, and he does not attempt to do so. Martyn (1997, 365), similarly, notes that in Rom 7:22, 25; 8:7 Paul speaks of the law as "the Law of God." He, too, does not attempt to reconcile this line of thought with his interpretation of Galatians but simply states, "Galatians is another matter" (Martyn 1997, 365).⁹

In addition, in the view of both Martyn and de Boer, the Shema from Deut 6:4 plays a crucial role in Paul's argument against God as the originator of the law because the Shema attests that God is one. They conclude that God was not a party to the law because mediation required at least the initiating party to be a plurality. Thus, both Martyn and de Boer have Paul basing his argument on the very law he is trying to discredit. If Paul is contending that the giving of the law was something the angels "had no business doing" (de Boer 2011, 230), that God disapproved of their action, on what basis does Paul assume the truth of what the law says?

Furthermore, if the law had an illegitimate origin, why did anyone ever have to obey it? The law was a two-sided agreement between God and Israel, and God's responsibilities included bringing Israel into the promised land and defeating their enemies (e.g., Exod 23:28–31; 33:1–3; 34:11; Deut 4:38).¹⁰ If God were not a party to the giving of the law, then

⁹ Martyn is not entirely consistent in his portrayal of Paul's argument. Although he interprets v. 20 to say that God did not give the law, he supposes that Paul did not expect the Galatians fully to accept "a godless Law" (Martyn 1997, 358). He explains later that the law had two voices: one being the Abrahamic Law and the other the Sinaitic (Martyn 1997, 368–370). This does not resolve the inconsistency, however, because it was the Sinaitic law that Paul attributes to God in 1 Cor 9:9–10 and that he calls good in Rom 7:7–12. Furthermore, if Paul uses a syllogism to lead the Galatians to conclude that God did not give the law, how is it that he did not expect them to accept that conclusion? Martyn does not explain how Paul could argue that the Galatians should reject the law on the basis that it was not from God without accepting the notion that it was not from God.

¹⁰ A "two-sided" agreement or covenant signifies here a covenant for which both parties have obligations. A "one-sided" or unilateral covenant denotes a covenant, such as the Abrahamic promise, which assigns responsibilities to one party only.

he did not agree to his role in it; and it was therefore not binding upon Israel either. And if the law were not binding upon Israel, it could not curse them if they failed to observe it (cf. Gal 3:10). If Paul could argue against the law as a codicil to or replacement for the promise in 3:15–18 on the basis that the promise had been previously ratified, he could hardly miss the point that a two-sided agreement would not be in force at all if either party neglected to sign on in the first place. Neither Martyn nor de Boer addresses these issues.

Paul does not imply that angels gave the law without God, but that God gave the law through angels, as the Galatians, who wanted to turn to the law, would have supposed.

3 The Relationship of the Law to Transgressions

3.1 *Verse 19b: Because of transgressions*

Paul begins his answer in v. 19b: “It [the law] was added because of transgressions” (τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν προσετέθη).¹¹ Some scholars include sins of the Gentiles among the transgressions of v. 19 because they believe that in Gal 3 Paul regards Gentiles as well as Jews to have been subject to the law.¹² That Paul does not consider the Galatians to be under the law is clear, however, because he is trying to dissuade them from placing themselves under it. In 2:15–16 Paul associates only Jews with the law. In 4:21 he addresses the Galatians who “desire to be subject to the law” (ὕπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι), thus indicating again that he did not deem them to be under it by default. In 3:19–20 Paul speaks of a mediator of the law, a role Moses played between God and Israel in Exod 24:1–8. Gentiles were not among the people agreeing to abide by the law when

¹¹ To what was the law added (προσετέθη)? See Bruce (1982, 176); Dunn (2008, 53 n. 209); and Burton (1964, 188) for three different possibilities. Paul says in vv. 15 and 17 that it could not be added to (ἐπιδιατάσσεται, v. 15) or in any way change the covenant to Abraham. Perhaps the law was simply added to Israel in that it applied to them, but a decisive answer is beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of this article is to explore Paul’s account of the reason the law existed.

¹² For example, Lloyd Gaston (1987, 82) sees “us” who were redeemed from the curse of the law in 3:13 as Gentiles. Burton (1964, 169) and Matera (2007, 120) understand a Jewish “us.” Many commentators, however, include both Jews and Gentiles in “us,” e.g., Dunn (1993, 176); Bruce (1982, 167); Martyn (1997, 317); Mußner (1988, 234–235); Schlier (1971, 136–137); Oepke (1967, 107); and Longenecker (1990, 121).

Israel did, and Paul's reference to mediation is further evidence that he was aware of this. People in Paul's day did not associate Gentiles with the law, and Paul would need to state it clearly if he did. To examine the reasons scholars debate this issue is beyond the scope of this article because they derive their views from verses other than vv. 19–20 and because the basic exegesis of vv. 19–20 does not depend upon the identity of the transgressors. But it should be noted that to explain the role of Christ or of the law to the Galatians, Paul does not need to deal with Gentile sin—if the Galatians had not known that Gentiles were condemned for sin, they would not have considered turning to the law for justification.¹³ Gentiles would not have to be under the law for Paul to expose it as a problem for the Jews. Clarifying the purpose of the law—and the fact that the law had an end—is another step in the process of persuading the Galatians to abandon their current pursuit of it. Jews alone had been subject to the law, and Paul says in v. 19 that they were subject to it “because of transgressions” (τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν).

BDAG (χάριν 1078–1079) lists two meanings for χάριν: “indicating the goal” or “indicating the reason,” and in v. 19 these two broad definitions give rise to several interpretive possibilities for χάριν coupled with παράβασις (“transgression”). The majority view is that transgression is subsequent to law and that law produces or increases sin. This is the causal meaning of the phrase “because of transgressions”: the law *causes* transgression.¹⁴ E. D. Burton (1964, 188) says that παράβασις is a “violation of explicit law.” This point is well taken. Παράβασις appears in the NT only in Rom 2:23; 4:15; 5:14; Gal 3:9; 1 Tim 2:14; and Heb 2:2; 9:15; and it refers in each case to a violation of known law, whether written or understood. Romans 4:15 makes the point that where there is no law there is no transgression, and the NT uses παραβάτης only of people who disobey explicit law (Rom 2:25, 27; Gal 2:18; Jas 2:9, 11). This interpretation is problematic, however, for if Gal 3:19 said that the law causes people to sin, it would conflict with the role of the law as

¹³ Paul writes elsewhere about the curse of death and the bondage to decay on creation from Gen 2:16–17; 3:17–19, which applied to both Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Rom 5:12; 8:19–22; 1 Cor 15:51–57).

¹⁴ See, e.g., de Boer (2011, 230); Schreiner (2010, 241); Grindheim (2013, 102–103); Burton (1964, 188); Bruce (1982, 175); Barrett (1985, 33); Hübner (1984, 26); Martyn (1997, 354); Westerholm (1998, 178); and Riches (2000, 153–154).

disciplinarian in 3:24–25 since a disciplinarian functions to discourage misbehaviour.¹⁵

James Dunn, on the other hand, hears a positive ring to the preposition *χάριν*. He understands Paul to refer to the sacrificial system, which dealt with sin until Christ; and he, too, relies on Romans, but v. 3:25 (Dunn 2008, 270). Galatians, however, does not mention the sacrificial system, and a solution coming directly from the context is more likely to show Paul's intention.

Richard Longenecker (1990, 138) sees in *χάριν* the cognitive function to “bring about the knowledge of” or “point out” transgressions, which fits the idea of a disciplinarian (*παιδαγωγός*) in Gal 3:24–25.¹⁶ This is the telic sense of the phrase “because of transgressions”: the law's goal is to point out transgressions. Longenecker disagrees with the view that the law increases transgressions but asks instead why God would want to increase sin until Christ came (Longenecker 1990, 138). One could also ask, however, why God would want transgressions defined only until Christ came. John Riches (2000, 153 n. 39) argues further that if Paul wished to be understood thus, he must have written: *χάριν* the knowledge of transgressions.

Lastly, David Lull (1986) understands Paul to argue that the purpose of the law was to restrain transgressions rather than to penalise transgressors. He does observe that it punishes sin (Lull 1986, 485, 488), but his focus is on restraint, and it appears that he includes punishment because it encourages restraint. Lull also sees the transgressions of v. 19 as sins committed prior to the law (Lull 1986, 483, 487–488). This fits the view he proposes since the proliferation of transgressions before the law proves the need for a restraining force; but the original reader, as argued above, would likely have viewed “transgression” as subsequent to law. Although the law served both to restrain and to punish transgressions, the context speaks of cursing and condemnation rather than of decreasing the number of sins committed. Lull (1986, 497) ties the restraining function of the law to a similar function of the Spirit in 5:18, 24, which Paul does not address in the context of 3:19.

It is possible that the original readers, like readers today, did not understand v. 19b until they read further.¹⁷

¹⁵ See references to the literature about the *παιδαγωγός* in footnote 30.

¹⁶ See also Tsang (2005, 106, 108); and Mußner (1988, 245–246).

¹⁷ For a variety of views as to the purpose of the law, see Meyer (1873, 170–171); Callan (1977, 190–193); Bruce (1982, 175); and Wallace (1990, 239).

3.2 *Verse 19c: The time limit for the law*

Before proceeding with his explanation of the purpose of the law, Paul points out its temporary nature in v. 19c: the law was added “until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made” (ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπηγγέλται). Therefore, its purpose, at least with respect to transgressions, would have an end. There were differences of opinion in Paul’s day about the continued existence of the law. Longenecker (1990, 139) cites Jewish writers who saw the law as eternal.¹⁸ F. F. Bruce (1982, 176) cites works on the Jewish doctrine that the Messiah’s coming implies that the law is abrogated, apparently a minority view (cf. Lull 1986, 482). But Paul is not merely making a claim that the Galatians should believe without proof. He hinted that the law came to an end when he made his case in v. 13 that Christ redeemed the people who were under the law from its curse. People whom the law curses are not free from the curse as long as that law is in force over them. But the transitory nature of the law does little to pinpoint Paul’s meaning in v. 19b other than to rule out particular possibilities.

3.3 *Verses 19d–20: The mediator, angels, and oneness of God: The common view*

In 3:19d–20 the text reads, διαταγεῖς δι’ ἀγγέλων ἐν χειρὶ μεσίτου. ὁ δὲ μεσίτης ἐνὸς οὐκ ἔστιν, ὁ δὲ θεὸς εἷς ἐστίν, which can be rendered literally, “being commanded through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not of one, but God is one.” In vv. 19d–20 scholars no longer look back to the transgressions of v. 19b, but almost universally understand angels, mediation, and the oneness of God to demonstrate the inferiority of the law.¹⁹ Paul does not explain the angels; but v. 19d clearly relates them to the mediator; and it stands to reason that if one is written to show the inferiority of the law, the other likely supports it. Scholars commonly make this connection.²⁰

Because v. 19d relates the angels to the mediator and because v. 20 compares the mediator with God, vv. 19d–20 are usually explained

¹⁸ See also Tolmie (2005, 133); Schlier (1971, 246); and Mußner (1988, 246).

¹⁹ See Bruce (1982, 177); Burton (1964, 189); Schreiner (2010, 236); Mußner (1988, 247); Riesenfeld (1984, 408–409); George (1994, 256); Tolmie (2005, 131); Hietanen (2007, 129); and Asano (2005, 181). Martyn (1997, 346 n. 18) is among the few scholars who reject this view.

²⁰ See, e.g., Burton (1964, 189); Dunn (1993, 196); and George (1994, 256).

together. But how God being one in v. 20 relates to Paul's argument is a source of much contention despite the fact that most exegetes understand it to refer to the Shema of Deut 6:4.²¹ Some scholars along with Martyn and de Boer surmise that since the mediator is not of one in v. 20, he does not represent God but the plurality of the angels in v. 19.²² However, few scholars press the point to the conclusion that the law did not originate with God. Bruce (1982, 179), for example, reasons that if a mediator is not "of one" but God is "one," the mediator is not God's mediator; but in the end he finds the God of the Jews and Gentiles to be one and to provide one way of salvation for both.²³ Dunn (1993, 191) sees the point to be that "God does not need an intermediary" because v. 20 contrasts the law, which used intermediaries, with the covenant given directly by God. Heinrich Meyer (1873, 178) concludes that the one God gave both the law and the promises. Despite the multiplicity of opinions, the common thread is that v. 20b is based on the Shema and that it is included along with angels and Moses to underscore the idea that the law is inferior to the promise because God did not give it directly.

Hans Hübner (1984, 26) goes so far as to say that "it is practically uncontested that the intention of this pronouncement [that the law was ordered through angels by the hand of a mediator] is to emphasise the inferiority of the Law." Perhaps, however, this idea should be contested. Meyer (1873, 176) points out that if mediation or angels were signs of the inferiority of the law, the context must indicate it because the presence of angels is usually depicted as glorifying (e.g., Matt 24:31; 25:31; John 1:52; Acts 7:38, 53; and 1 Tim 3:16). D. F. Tolmie (2005, 131–132, 136) observes that if the inferiority of the law is Paul's point, there is a disconnect between his question and his answer. However, he adds that

²¹ See de Boer (2011, 228); Schreiner (2010, 243); Martyn (1997, 365); George (1994, 258); Longenecker (1990, 142); and Heckl (2003, 260). Burton (1964, 190) is one of the few scholars to take issue with this view. He says instead that "[t]o find here . . . a reference to the unchangeableness of God, is to go beyond the implication of the words or the context." But for Burton v. 20 is still part of the argument to depreciate the law (Burton 1964, 190–192).

²² See Schlier (1971, 161); Mußner (1988, 248); Riesenfeld (1984, 407); and Riches (2000, 154). The conclusion some scholars draw, that God had nothing to do with the giving the law, was discussed above.

²³ Schreiner (2010, 243) draws a similar conclusion. Betz (1979, 172–173), Callan (1977, 200) and Bachman (2008, 83) share in at least part of his thinking. *Contra* Bring (1968, 148–154), who says "of one" means "of Israel," and N. T. Wright (1992, 169), who says "of one" means "of one" seed.

Paul does not answer his own question, but instead creates the impression that he will answer it and then “reroute[s] the attention of the audience” by explaining the inferiority of the law (Tolmie 2005, 136).

Rather than explaining the inferiority of the law, however, Paul begins in vv. 19d–20 to clarify the answer he gave in v. 19b. Διαταγείς (“ordered”) in v. 19d is a participle modifying νόμος in v. 19a, the nearest masculine noun preceding it and the referent of the subject of v. 19b. The reader should therefore view it not as introducing a new topic or additional answer, which an independent verb might, but as a continuation of the answer Paul began. Furthermore, although the question in v. 21 about whether the law is against the promises could apply to matters other than purpose—since v. 19a directly inquires about the law’s purpose and since the stance of the law toward the promises directly relates to the law’s function and therefore to its purpose—it is most natural to see in v. 21 a continuation of the discussion Paul began in v. 19 on the purpose of the law. Paul’s explanation of his negative answer to the question reflects purpose as well. The NRSV translates, “For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law” (v. 21b). An accomplishment of the magnitude of conferring righteousness would hardly have been incidental to the purpose of the law had the law been able to do it. Verses 19d and 21 attest that Paul continues to explain the reason for the law after his initial statement in v. 19b.

Inferiority, however, the most common reason scholars attribute to Paul’s inclusion of angels and a mediator in vv. 19d–20, does not elicit the question about whether the law is against the promises in v. 21a and does not relate to the answer in v. 21b. Inferiority is not mentioned in the context, does not involve transgressions, and does not explain the existence of the law in v. 19. The law was not given in order to be inferior to the promise. The relative standing of the law to the promise does not account for its existence. For that Paul has a different explanation.

3.4 *Verses 19d-20: The mediator, angels, and oneness of God in relation to the purpose of the law*

In vv. 15–18 Paul contrasts the law with the ratified covenant of the promise to say that the law could not annul or change the terms of the promise. Although Paul does not explicitly label the law a covenant in ch. 3, one would expect him to compare covenant with covenant; and he does identify both the promise and the law as covenants in 4:24. Paul’s reference to a mediator in 3:19–20 is evidence that he has not strayed from

that topic after vv. 15–18. Instead he weaves together attributes of a covenant in order to clarify how the law relates to transgressions.

Daniel Wallace points out that the mediator of the law in v. 20 is the same as the one in v. 19 because the article with μεσίτης in v. 20 is anaphoric. Therefore, if μεσίτης is particular in v. 19, it is not generic in v. 20. He notes, however, that scholars usually take the anarthrous use of μεσίτης in v. 19 to refer specifically to Moses and that they read the articular use that immediately follows as generic (Wallace 1990, 244). This is a valid point. Perhaps Paul does not name the μεσίτης in v. 19 because his argument only needs Moses' *role* as μεσίτης. To use the generic function of a specific (although unnamed) μεσίτης in v. 19 allows Paul a generic use of the same noun in v. 20.

In v. 20 Paul identifies the aspect of mediation that is of interest to him. The first clause in v. 20, “a mediator is not of one,” is deduced from the definition of a mediator: mediation requires that there be (at least) two parties to a covenant.²⁴ In v. 20a a μεσίτης is not “of one” party. Mediation has no meaning without a plurality of parties. But then a covenant—mediated or not—has no meaning without a plurality of parties. A mediator functions to negotiate between the parties to set the terms of the covenant, and therefore the presence of a mediator implies that a plurality of parties has covenantal obligations.

By contrasting (δὲ) the mediator, who is not “of one,” with God, who is “one,” v. 20 ties the “one” in v. 20a to the “one” in v. 20b: the unity of God is not at issue. Instead the “oneness” in v. 20b relates to the idea of mediation, as it does in v. 20a. The law was mediated because it laid obligations upon both parties, and both had to agree to meet them. In noting that God is one, v. 20b picks up the idea from v. 18 that God gave the inheritance to Abraham by promise, that is, that God is the one party in the covenant to Abraham with obligations.²⁵ Mediation in vv. 19–20 thus points up the contrast between the promise, in which only God had covenantal commitments, and the law, which imposed responsibilities upon the Israelites as well.

²⁴ Burton (1964, 190–191) correctly argues that the plurality is not of persons constituting one of the parties, but of the parties themselves, that is, there must be at least two parties.

²⁵ Schreiner (2010, 243) follows Paul when he notes that “[m]ediating also implies a contrast between God and Israel. Therefore, the promises of the covenant were dependent on both parties fulfilling their responsibilities.” But he understands Paul's point to be the inferiority of the law (p. 242).

The idea of mutual covenantal obligations fits the context. A major theme in Galatians thus far has been the obligation of people under the law to keep its commandments. The law requires circumcision (2:3); it demands works (2:16); and it curses the people under it who do not continue to do everything written in it (3:10). In 4:21–5:3 Paul goes so far as to compare subjection to the law with slavery. That the law includes obligation on God's part is not the focus of the chapter, but the idea is implicit in 3:12: "Whoever does the works of the law will live [i.e., have life] by them."²⁶ In other words, if people do their part in keeping the law, then God will do his part in giving them life. The chapter emphasises instead the role of God in the Abrahamic covenant. In fact, in the immediate context Paul speaks of the Abrahamic covenant as a promise from God (3:16–18), and a promise by definition obligates the one who makes it. Verses 19–20 conform to the context by contrasting the two-sided covenant of the law with the unilateral work of God in the promise.

Paul connects angels with the mediator in v. 19 when he says that the law was commanded (διαταγείς) through angels by the hand of a mediator. The NRSV translates διαταγείς "ordained," and BDAG (διατάσσω 237) defines διατάσσω as "to put into proper order or relationship, make arrangements" or "to give (detailed) instructions as to what must be done, order." The idea that the law was ordered or commanded again points up Israel's responsibility to obey, to keep their covenantal commitments under it. Scholars typically find an angelic connection to the giving of the law in Deut 33:2–4 (LXX), which speaks of the Lord coming from Sinai with myriads of "holy ones" (MT ַּקִּדְּשִׁים) or "angels" (LXX ἄγγελοι).²⁷ Thus angels were present at the event. Exodus

²⁶ This interpretation takes the meaning of v. 12 at face value and fits the context of Paul's argument in vv. 6–14 on justification. At first glance, however, it may appear to contradict the idea in v. 21 that righteousness would have been by the law if there had been a law that could have given life. An adequate answer to this common objection would require a detailed exegesis of vv. 10–14. But it should be noted that the idea in v. 13 that Christ redeemed the Jews from the curse of the law implies that they needed redemption and therefore that they were under the law's curse, rather than its blessing. Verse 10 explains that it is failure to keep the law that brings the curse. In other words, the reason no law could give life in v. 21 is that no law could prevent sin. The theoretical notion in v. 12 that keeping God's laws would give eternal life necessarily holds, however, since it leaves no grounds for condemnation.

²⁷ See Dunn (1993, 190); Longenecker (1990, 139); de Boer (2011, 228); Martyn (1997, 357); and Schreiner (2010, 241).

23:20–23 adds to this a warning that the people were to obey the angel that would go before them because he would not pardon them if they did not.

In fact, nearly every occurrence of ἄγγελος in the LXX from Exodus to Deuteronomy after the angelic appearances to Moses in Exod 3:2 and 4:24 relates to enforcement of the terms of the law: angels led Israel into the land, thereby fulfilling the obligation of the Lord; and they punished Israel for their disobedience, thereby overseeing Israel's responsibility. First of all, Exod 14:19 and Num 20:16 recount the time before the giving of the law that an angel protected Israel as they left Egypt. In Exod 23:20–23, immediately after the commandments of 20:1–23:19, the Lord says that he would send an angel before Israel to guard them and to bring them into the land. The people were to obey the angel because he would not pardon them. Exodus 32:34 records the Lord again saying that his angel would go before them and adds that God would punish them for their sin. A few verses later, Exod 33:2 repeats that God would send an angel before Israel and adds that the purpose was to drive out the nations living in the land. Numbers 22:22–35 cites the particular example of an angel coming to Israel's aid by preventing Balaam from cursing them. Deuteronomy 33:2 documents the presence of angels at the giving of the law. The other appearances of ἄγγελος in Exodus to Deuteronomy occur in Num 20:14; 24:12, which refer to human messengers, and in Deut. 32:8, 43.

In the NT Acts 7 and Heb 2 also associate angels with the law. Stephen recounts the angel appearing to Moses (Acts 7:30), delivering Israel (7:35), and giving the law on Mt. Sinai (7:38). In 7:53 he speaks specifically of the law being commanded (διαταγὰς) by angels and of the people's disobedience to it. The author of Hebrews observes that every disobedience to a word spoken by angels received a just penalty (Heb 2:2). Angelic connection to the law did not speak of the inferiority of the law in either the OT or NT but added weight to the requirement to obey it. Paul highlights in Gal 3:19 that the law was commanded through angels, and his point is that the commandments were to be taken seriously.

The law as a covenant held the Jews accountable to obey everything in it, and it cursed those who violated it (Gal 3:10). Verses 19–20 pick up the same idea: the fact that the law was mediated by Moses and commanded through angels shows that it set requirements upon Israel that they were expected to meet. The verses following 3:19–20 continue the same theme. In v. 21 Paul asks whether the law opposes the promises of God and begins his answer with an emphatic denial. The question has the

flexibility to fit multiple positions.²⁸ Meyer (1873, 195) expresses the common kernel of many views when he says that the conclusion Paul's readers would likely draw from v. 20 is expressed in v. 21 and rejected: Paul denies that the law acts against the promise.²⁹ Because the promise was given in order to justify people and because the law holds some of these same people answerable for their transgressions, the law appears to have the goal of preventing the promised righteousness. Therefore the question in v. 21 would naturally follow from the interpretation of vv. 19–20 offered here.

Verses 23–24 also accord with accountability as the purpose of the law. In v. 23 Paul uses φρουρέω (“place under guard”) and συγκλείω (“imprison”) to say that the Jews had been imprisoned under the law: “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.” A law imprisons by setting restrictive commandments and punishing disobedience. Simply *stating* orders does not imprison. It is the punishing of infractions that makes commandments a prison because that is what compels compliance. Then in v. 24 ὥστε—because it indicates that Paul draws a conclusion—indicates also that Paul's use of παιδαγωγός (“disciplinarian”) is determined by the context.³⁰ The concept of the παιδαγωγός, in other words, is not a new element in Galatians but a summary of ideas Paul has already presented. It harmonizes with the view of vv. 19–20 in this article because a παιδαγωγός is like an imprisoning warden (cf. v. 23) in that he places requirements upon his charge and punishes disobedience. Thus the presence of angels and a mediator at the giving of the law argue for accountability under the law, and the context of ch. 3 lends support.

²⁸ See, for example, the positions of Mußner (1988, 251); Wright (1992, 126); Hays (2002, 178–179); and Bergmeier (2003, 39–40, 43).

²⁹ Martyn (1997, 358), on the other hand, sees in Paul's question and denial a sign that he perceives the law in genuine antimony to the promise. But Paul's strong denial that the law opposes the promise is evidence to the contrary.

³⁰ Tolmie (2005, 140–141) lists some characteristics of a παιδαγωγός Paul could convey, for example, temporariness, strictness, and harshness—as well as some functions he might have in view, for example, to protect, to supervise morals, to prepare for maturity and freedom, and to obscure the direct relationship between God and humankind. See Longenecker (1990, 146–148); and Lull (1986, 491–494) for ancient literature on the role of the παιδαγωγός. Lull (1986, 491–494) understands the παιδαγωγός to restrain the child from behaving foolishly, but Paul focuses on the law as punishing transgressions rather than reducing them.

4 Conclusion

Why then the law? Paul argued point by point in Gal 3:1–18 about what the law could not do, and he turns in v. 19 to examine what it did do. As scholars have shown, the law served multiple purposes, which in turn offer multiple answers to Paul's question. But few of the answers fit the context, and Paul argues in Gal 3:19–20 for a single idea: the law, as a two-sided covenant, placed obligations not only upon God but also upon the Jews and held them accountable when they transgressed its commandments. Mediation with respect to the law (v. 19) implied a plurality of parties (v. 20) with covenantal obligations defined by the law, and the angelic commanding of the law (v. 19) added weight to the accountability of the Jews to keep them. Such obligation and accountability made the law an imprisoning warden (v. 23), a disciplinarian (v. 24) ready with the rod for infractions. Continuing with the analogy of v. 24, Paul points out that the time of the disciplinarian is at an end (v. 25). It goes against God's timing to turn to the law.³¹

Verses 19–20 only begin to answer the question about the purpose of the law. Paul expands upon his answer in the verses following. But understanding the relationship transgressions, mediation, and the angels have to the law in vv. 19–20 is critical to interpreting Paul's argument in Gal 3:19–25.

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³¹ When speaking of the temporal nature of the law, Sigurd Grindheim (2013, 106) observes that the law still has the power to curse and condemn individuals (Gal 3:10; 5:2–3). But I would add that the law is no longer the means by which God chooses to deal with Israel as a national entity (cf. Gal 4:1–11).

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