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THE EXISTENCE OF THE COVENANT BEFORE AND AFTER CHRIST

IN GALATIANS 3.15-18:

A CONVERSATION WITH JAMES D. G. DUNN AND J. LOUIS MARTYN

A THESIS

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by

Danielle Nussberger

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Appendix E: Approval Page


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The Existence of the Covenant Before and After Christ in Galatians 3.15-18:

A Conversation with James D. G. Dunn and J. Louis Martyn

by Danielle Nussberger

Introduction

The issue of ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ in Paul’s letters is three-fold: 1) How is Paul in ‘continuity’ and/or ‘discontinuity’ with the Jewish tradition that is the source of his Christian identity? 2) How is God’s revelation in Christ ‘continuous’ and/or ‘discontinuous’ with the history of divine revelation to the Israelite people? and 3) How is the Christian community/church as people of God ‘continuous’ and/or ‘discontinuous’ with Israel as people of God? Examining all three of these issues is essential if we are to make some sense out of ‘who we are’ in terms of ‘who we have been’ and ‘who God is’ in terms of ‘who He has been’. It is difficult to find a more appropriate source for this examination than Paul’s letter to the Galatians; for this document bears witness to the struggle within the early Christian community to make way for new understandings of God and His relationship to a people that He chooses, now Gentile just as much as Jew.

James D. G. Dunn faces the issue of ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ in Paul’s letters by focusing on how Paul’s very mind-set is ‘continuous’ with his Jewish tradition and yet at the same time ‘discontinuous’. Paul has thought of God’s relationship to his people, or covenant, in terms of ‘covenantal nomism’ and reshapes the notion according to his encounter with Christ. In responding directly to Dunn, J. Louis Martyn disagrees with him and argues that Paul rids himself of the category of ‘covenantal nomism’ since his only concern is with the present action in Christ; so much so that the covenantal relationship is just now beginning, rather than being maintained and renewed.
The stances taken by Dunn and Martyn have considerable repercussions for discussions concerning ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ in terms of divine revelation to Israel as God’s people and divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. If Dunn is correct, Paul’s espousal of ‘covenantal nomism’ can be a key starting point for Jewish/Christian dialogue. Paul would not be an enemy of Israel who denies the existence of a faith-filled people that has nourished his own religious identity in its infancy, but rather someone who has sprouted from the root of the same tree. On the other hand, if Martyn is correct, Galatians 3.15-18 with its seeming disjunction between the people of God being formed in Genesis and Exodus and the people of God created in Christ, becomes highly problematic. Questions such as the following would have to be raised: “How can Paul be denying the election of Israel as God’s chosen one? How can Paul negate the rich tradition of Israel fraught with revelations from God from the time of Abraham, to Moses and onward?” Of course these questions and others only come to birth if, in fact, Paul is saying what Martyn claims. Entering the conversation between Dunn and Martyn, the following study begins by questioning/evaluating their views concerning Paul’s understanding of covenant in his letter to the Galatians, and ultimately yields a new interpretation of Gal. 3.15-18 that will address the issues of ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’.

James D. G. Dunn: On a ‘Shared Understanding’ of Covenantal People

Dunn’s perspective on ‘covenant’ in Paul’s letter to the Galatians must be critically examined if we are to begin to understand what was at stake the minute this word would have
been pronounced in the presence of the ‘Jewish-Christian’ of Paul’s day, including Paul himself. For in Gal. 1:13 Paul reminds us, “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism”, and especially in verse 14, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” Dunn presupposes that there are some ‘shared understandings’ between Paul and his opponents, by virtue of their common identification with Jewish first principles which are taken for granted beneath the surface of the text. In order for us to ‘stand in’ during the heated exchange that is taking place in the letter as Paul responds to his opponents’ position, we must become privy to the heart of their disagreement.

In order to give an explicit label to the implicit *a priori* qualification of what ‘covenant’ meant to Paul and to the “many among his people of the same age” (Gal. 1:14), Dunn grabs on to Sanders’ terminology of *covenantal nomism*. This refers to the conviction that the covenant or relationship with God is both initiated and maintained on the basis of grace with a continued

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1It is necessary to recognize that using the term, ‘Christian’ with respect to the earliest believers in Christ is in fact anachronistic. Yet, it is seemingly the only way to express the idea that these are Jews who a) accept Jesus as their Messiah (Dunn will consistently use the phrase ‘Messiah Jesus’ as the object of ‘Jewish-Christian’ belief. Refer to his “The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism”. Pauline Theology Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon. Ed. Jouette M. Bassler. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991., especially pages 129 and 141.) and b) by nature, ground their faith in Jesus’ identity and significance, in the inextricable roots of their Jewishness—with Paul and his opponents both operating on this level in extremely different ways (Paul retaining Jewish categories of thought as prefigurations of his new faith-matrix, and the opponents holding on to Jewish praxis).

2The fact that the debate is obviously polemical, with Paul becoming utterly frustrated and indignant (“I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!-5.12), lends itself to this being a kind of ‘family quarrel’, where Paul cannot believe that his own Jewish-Christian ‘brothers’ could be so far off the mark in their comprehension of what has happened now in Christ (if 2.15-21 is taken as Paul’s accurate description of the Jewish conversion experience).
observance of law or *nomos* being the sign or seal of the covenant:

Fundamental to Judaism’s sense of identity was the conviction that God had made a special *covenant* with the patriarchs, the central feature of which was the choice of Israel to be God’s peculiar people, and had given the *law* as an integral part of the covenant both to show Israel how to live within that covenant and to make it possible for them to do so. Thus in the phrase “covenental nomism,” the former word emphasizes God’s prevenient grace, and the latter cannot and should not be confused with legalism or any idea of “earning” salvation.³

The strength of Dunn’s insight here is that ‘works of law’ are not synonymous with the Jewish individual’s own effort to remain in relationship with God, but rather a source of communal self-understanding which seeks to answer the question: Who are we as God’s people? What are we to ‘do’ (activity) in order to express our ‘being’ (state)? In the process of identity formation, being and acting are fundamentally one and the same. God himself consecrates Abraham as his covenantal partner (state of being) when he commands him and those with him (as well as future generations) to be circumcised (joint communal action) (Gen. 17.9-14). God himself consecrates the Israelites as his covenantal partner on Mount Sinai (state of being) when he enjoins them to accept and do his commands (joint communal action) (Ex. 24.1-8). God defines his people’s ‘being’ by giving them what they are to ‘do’. This is implied by Dunn when he cites Deut. 4.1: “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”

³Ibid. 126.
However, Dunn quickly changes his emphasis of covenational nomism from an identity based on the God/community connection, to an identity that results from the in-group/out-group opposition. The content of covenational nomism ('works of law') becomes a 'sign' or proclamation of identity by demarcation. His use of the language of limits and boundaries makes covenational nomism into a sociological concept that expresses the Israelite arrangement of reality based on the categorization/grouping of 'members' and 'non-members'. According to this conception, the identity of the people of God can only be recognized and stabilized in opposition to that which it is not. By establishing their separateness/difference, the Israelite nation can recognize and find strength in its own individuality:

...covenental nomism was so tightly bound up with a sense of national or ethnic identity that the law became coterminous with Israel, marking out the Jews in their distinctiveness as God's people and in their distinctiveness from others (Gentiles=not God's people)...This "social function of the law" [emphasis added]

I believe to be important for our fuller understanding of the mind-set with which Paul is engaging in Galatians.

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4 This is especially true of a people in crisis, under the constant subjugation of powerful, ruling nations who threaten Israel's destruction (hence, Dunn's citations of Ezra 9-10; 1 Macc. 1.60-63; 2 Macc. 2:21 etc.). The 'works' of circumcision and the food laws, by their very distinctiveness, are witnesses of rebellion against oppression.

5 Ibid. 128. This topic is addressed more fully in Dunn's Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990. "Once we realize that the social identity of a group depends to a large extent on the distinctiveness of its practices and beliefs, it also becomes evident that the corollary of 'identity' is 'boundary', that self-definition involves self-differentiation" (72). Though this particular discussion is in an effort to understand who the Pharisees were as a group, Dunn's use of it in our context is in reference to the entire people of God as a group entity.
Dunn wants us now to proceed to the Galatians text where the “social function of the law” is operative from the very beginning in Paul’s relating of the Jerusalem conference and the Antioch incident. The issue to be decided upon at the Jerusalem conference was how to treat the Gentile who accepts the gospel and chooses to be included in the people of God. It is not an issue of whether or not a gospel to the Gentiles is legitimate (that is taken for granted), but whether or not it should be accompanied by the rite of circumcision (Jerusalem) and the purity laws governing table fellowship (Antioch). The Jerusalem leaders allow for the concession of the absence of circumcision, but their interference in Antioch indicates that they have not truly relinquished the boundaries enforced by covenantal nomism. The Gentiles who do not follow the food laws are still sinners outside the pale of ‘people of God’ and must be treated as such by those who are faithful adherers to their Jewish-Christian identity. If Gentiles want to be included, then they are to adopt the characteristic law observance that has always been the sign of distinction for God’s people.

In 2.15-21, where the categories of ‘Jews by nature’ and ‘Gentile sinners’ are explicitly stated, Dunn sees Paul grappling with the ‘shared understanding’ he has with his Jewish-Christian counterparts. He is forced to confront his opponents’ adamant preservation of covenantal nomism: their belief that ‘works of law’ must accompany faith in Jesus Messiah. Paul struggles with their interpretation because of his own conversion experience in which “God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles” (1.15-16). In Paul’s own personal relationship with God wherein God appoints Paul as His agent to the Gentiles, and in God’s personal relationship with the Galatian communities themselves, Gentiles are being called (1.6) in their
present state (outside covenantal nomism). Therefore, Paul points to faith as the definitive mark of the people of God, an identity that is consistent with God’s original expression of the relationship.⁶

According to Dunn, the idea of going back to the covenantal relationship in its originality is the crux of Paul’s reevaluation of covenantal nomism, “The expression of life in the covenant should be consistent with its beginning.” This includes the initiation of the Galatians’ own covenantal relationship in the grace of Christ (1.6), in the Spirit, and the hearing of faith (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως) (3.1-5). Paul finds confirmation of the in-breaking of God’s presence in the Galatians’ lives in the manner he has witnessed in three ways: firstly, in Abraham’s belief as righteousness (Gen. 15.6), and secondly in the blessing of the Gentiles (πάντα τὰ ἐθνη) that the scripture pre-gospeled at the moment of Abraham’s own blessing (προευηγγελίσατο-аorist) (Gen. 12.3). Ultimately, Paul discovers its conclusive warrant in the promises made to Abraham and the Singular Seed (καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου) who is Christ (Gen. 13.15; 17.8). When the Gentile Galatians were baptized in Christ and clothed themselves with Christ (3.27), they became Christ’s, by virtue of which they are included in Abraham’s seed, God having intended them to belong to him through their connection with the Singular Seed from the moment the Abrahamic covenant was established. It has become clear to Paul that the ‘sign’ or ‘mark’ of covenantal inclusion is not ‘works of law’ but the ‘putting on’ of Christ himself, the ‘reception of faith’ indicated by the phrase ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως. The law loses its function as a boundary line between the peoples, so that the plan of God to make both Jews and Gentiles constitutive of the people of God can be recovered. From this point of view, Paul is rescuing God’s authentic definition of his

corporate covenantal partner that the subsequent addition of ‘works of law’ had eclipsed (3.17-18).

The relevance of Dunn’s theme of ‘originality’ is well attested by the Galatians’ text, and must be appropriated in our exegesis of Gal. 3.15-18. However, the simplification of the Jewish understanding of the relationship between covenant and law to one of covenantal nomism as social construct of group distinction, does serious injustice to the ‘shared understandings’ of Paul and his Jewish-Christian counterparts. We need to recapture the Jewish notion of identity formation based on the God/community connection rather than the in-group/out-group opposition highlighted by Dunn. God himself reveals who his people are to be by giving them the responsibility of a communal undertaking, both in the case of Abraham as representative of his descendants (circumcision) and Moses as spokesman for the newly liberated Israelite nation (Sinai legislation). ‘Covenantal nomism’ marks Israel with a theological identity in which God defines and the people are to pattern themselves in accordance with that definition; identity that comes from the dissonance between Israel and the surrounding nations is of secondary consequence.

Now we can come close to the great dilemma that Paul and his opponents are facing. God has revealed himself to Abraham, to Moses and the people; and scripture paints glaring portraits of God that are difficult to miss: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from this people; he has broken my covenant” (Gen. 17.14). “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Ex. 19.5). “When God finished
speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant (testimony),
tables of stone, written with the finger of God” (Ex. 31.18). And Moses speaks at God’s behest,
“So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your
God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and
with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I
am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (Deut. 10.12-13). Also, “You shall love
the LORD your God, therefore, and keep his charge, his decrees, his ordinances, and his
commandments always” (Deut. 11.1).

God’s self-revelation throughout the exodus event and its aftermath is upheld by Ex. 3.6
as consistent with the image of God portrayed in Genesis: “I am the God of your father, the God
of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”. In the wake of God’s new and profound
self-revelation in Christ, the Jewish-Christian position asserts: “Should it not also be consistent
with our previous experience of God as it is written in scripture? Yes, we believe in Jesus
Messiah, accepting that Gentiles do the same, and as ‘people of God’ we are still defined
according to the terms that God dictated in the past. Our state of being God’s people is still
bound up in our joint communal action of ‘works of law’. God and his divine dispensation has
not changed.”

As Dunn’s discussion of Paul’s search for the ‘original expression’ of the covenantal
relationship aptly points out, Paul has a ‘shared understanding’ with his opponents of the
continuity of God’s self-revelation and of God’s constituting the nature and character of his
people. This God/community connection has been experienced so strongly in the Galatian
communities’ reception of God’s grace and spirit without a command for law observance, that
Paul is assured of its genuineness. The question for us in our exegesis of Gal. 3.15-18 becomes: How does Paul already find continuity between the past and present constructions of the covenantal community, in the face of the opponents’ belief that they must enforce a continuity that is presently being sacrificed?

J. Louis Martyn: No Covenantal People of God Prior to Christ?

In response to Dunn’s “Theology of Galatians”, J. Louis Martyn writes, “Events in Galatia: Modified Covenantal Nomism Versus God’s Invasion of the Cosmos in the Singular Gospel”. The purpose of this article as well as a subsequent one entitled, “Covenant, Christ, and Church in Galatians” is to question the role of covenantal theology in Paul’s thought world as he writes Galatians.

Martyn begins his critique of Dunn by suggesting that the mind-set of covenantal nomism belongs to the ‘Teachers’ (whom we have been naming ‘opponents’) only and not to Paul: “...Paul, while determined to make contact with the Galatians’ current interests, is equally determined not to get caught in the Teachers’ frame of reference.” It is the Teachers who have come to Galatia as missionaries promoting their own pedagogical scheme that includes the three dimensions of 1) covenantal nomism which consists in the connection of Law and covenant as early as Abraham and the command for circumcision; 2) heilsgeschichte or the one continuous

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9 “Covenant, Christ and Church in Galatians.” 147.
line of God's people from Abraham onward now reaching its focal point in the Messiah who makes it possible to include the Gentiles; and 3) transference into the people of God or the idea that in Jesus, the Gentiles have been given the invitation to become members of the 'already-existent people of God', an acceptance of which entails observance of the law.

Paul distinguishes himself from the Teachers in that he presents a gospel of grace, of spirit, and of faith, with the main referent being God's own action in the present. From the first chapter of the letter onward, its original hearers would have been bombarded with a list of what God has done vis-a-vis them (the 'them' being the people of God just initiated of which the Galatians are a part) and no one else: God the Father who raised Christ from the dead (1.1), the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself up for our sins to set us free from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father (1.4), the one who called you in the grace of Christ (1.6), the gospel proclaimed to Paul through a revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of Jesus Christ (1.12), the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (2.20), the God who has supplied the Spirit (3.5), Christ who redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (3.13), and Christ in whom you are all children of God through faith (3.26). This is just a sampling of what leads Martyn to conclude that Christ is the main actor in Paul's letter to the Galatians; 'Christ' is the only mind-set that Paul has. Therefore, there is no 'shared understanding' in which both Paul and his opponents operate: "The Teachers' fundamental issue is covenantal nomism, if you like; Paul's is evangelical, cosmic, history-creating christology."\(^{10}\)

We can conclude then, that as Martyn blatantly separates the positions of Paul and the Teachers by not allowing them to be operating on the basis of a 'shared understanding', he would

\(^{10}\)Ibid. 165
discard our own formulation of a shared covenantal nomism in terms of ‘the God/community connection that must remain continuous though different”\textsuperscript{11}. It would not even be the case for Martyn that Paul succumbs to this understanding of covenantal nomism by arguing on its grounds, attempting to show that God has preserved his previous self-revelation to his covenantal people in the present revelation of Christ. This is the sole concern of the Teachers to which their emphases on covenantal nomism, heilsgeschichte, and transference into the people of God belong. Martyn argues that to try and make Paul relate to these categories that the Teachers have proffered would only lead to confusion: “Specifically, to define the theology of Galatians as an argumentative response involves running the risk of confusing the Teachers’ definition of the issues and their frame of reference with Paul’s definition of the issues and his frame of reference”\textsuperscript{12}.

The most poignant example that Martyn gives concerning the disparity between the Teachers’ plea for ‘continuity’ and Paul’s assertion of a radical ‘discontinuity’ is his reading of Gal. 3.15-18. The initial verse with its κατὰ ἀνθρωπον, or human treatment of covenant (διαθήκη) as will and testament, is meant to dissociate the Galatians from the ‘covenant theology’ they have been receiving from the Teachers. Paul is here appealing to their common experience by creating an analogy that illustrates the inviolability of a will that has been ratified by the testator. Martyn emphasizes that in verse 16, Paul shows God to be the testator, and his will to be the promise to Abraham and the Singular Seed. The law, coming four hundred and thirty years after the promise, has no business changing the terms of a covenant that God already established:

\textsuperscript{11}Cf. above, pp. 2, 6.

\textsuperscript{12}aEvents in Galatia.” 163.
When the Galatians had heard and reheard the whole of Gal 3:15-18, they will have sensed that, by first referring to *diatheke* as a human being's last will, Paul prepares the way for one of his most daring and far-reaching exegetical moves: a) he declares a divorce between God's covenant and the Law of Sinai, so that b) when he re-theologizes the term "covenant," he can attach it exclusively to the promise God made to Abraham.\(^\text{13}\)

Furthermore, when Paul insists that the will cannot be amended, he must not be referring to the testator's power to change it. The prerogative of the testator is to be assumed. It is 'others' who have no authority to amend, including the angels of vs. 19-20 who have introduced the law. God is hereby separated from the law, so that his relationship to Abraham remains the only source necessary for a complete understanding of covenant. It is in this pulling apart of God from the law, and thereby the law from the covenant, which leads Martyn to believe that Paul has no intention of salvaging any 'shared understanding' of covenantal nomism. We cannot assume that Paul is struggling with a framework of God's successive revelations of himself to his covenant people, from Abraham to Moses to Christ, attempting to reconcile one with the other. The law is discarded as being an improper assessment of the identity of God's people in relation to their God, so that Paul need not explain how the community is to harmonize both instances of God's interaction (law on Mt. Sinai and Christ). The only connection Paul makes is between Abraham and Christ in vs. 16. This verse becomes the focus of Martyn's exegetical questioning.

Martyn is asking himself: "When Paul says that God's promise is to Abraham and to his seed in the singular, who is Christ, what implications does this have for 'people of Israel' as we

\(^{13}\)Covenant, Christ and Church in Galatians." 143.
understand it?” This historical, corporate body of the people of Israel or ‘seeds’ is not the inheritor of the promise, but rather Christ is. Martyn calls this the punctiliar promise which comes to fruition at one specific point in time, in one man who is Jesus: “In Gal 3:16 he [Paul] denies the Teachers’ linear, heilsgeschichtlich picture of a covenantal people, affirming instead the punctiliar portrait of the covenantal person, Christ.”14 This is why there is no attempt on Paul’s part to bring together both a) the people of God who are identified by the God who gave law and b) the people of God who are identified by the God who comes in Christ. There is only one event which creates the people of God: the Christ-event.

Covenant as an ‘everlasting relationship’ which grows and changes, but is always maintained and renewed, demanding continuity on the part of God and his people, is not uppermost in Paul’s mind. In fact, Martyn would go as far as to say that according to Gal. 3.15-18, a covenantal people growing and changing according to a God-given identity from Abraham, to Moses and onward... is non-existent.15 Rather, for Paul, the only thing that need be reckoned with is the present reality of God’s action in Christ, an action that changes everything. The relationship with God in Christ is definitive, earth shattering, first and foremost in historical importance: “...Paul’s theological point of departure is not a modified edition of covenantal nomism but rather the apocalypse of Christ and the power of that apocalypse to create history.”16

Martyn’s emphasis on the phrase, “the power of that apocalypse to create history,” is not accidental; and it should surprise and shock us. Create history? Christ’s action on God’s behalf is

14Ibid. 146.

15“Events in Galatia.” 172.

16Ibid. 164.
what has created the historical people of God, at the pointed ‘moment’ of his death and resurrection, in the ‘now’ of the lives of Paul and the Galatian converts. Our exegesis of 3.15-18 must address Martyn’s position and raise the issue: Is Paul really claiming that it is creation ex nihilo, a people of God in Christ created out of no relationship to the people of God we find established in Israel’s scriptures? Or, is Paul emphasizing the transformative nature of God’s covenantal people, an identity that must always be reassessed in light of God’s present interaction with that people? Does Gal. 6.15, “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”, refer to a fresh understanding of what it means to be ‘people of God’, with emphasis placed on the ‘new’ rather than the ‘creation’?

Gal. 3.15-18: Is There a ‘Was’ and ‘Is’ to God’s Covenantal People?

Concluding our analysis of Dunn, we postulated that Paul and his opponents did have a ‘shared understanding’ in terms of a ‘God/community connection’. For Paul’s opponents, the God of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants created the identity of His covenantal partner by giving them His commands: the command to Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised and the official, codified demands that are the law. The covenantal community comprehends who it ‘is’ (state of being) as God’s people by relating to God in the manner which he himself has prescribed (action). This identity-molding interaction between God and his people must continue, combining the observance of law with God’s newest involvement in the action of Christ.

For Paul, the covenantal community formed by God in past and present does indeed “comprehend who it ‘is’ (state of being) as God’s people by relating to God in the manner which he himself has prescribed (action).” The “identity-molding interaction between God and his
people” has continued, but must be entirely conceived of in terms of God’s newest involvement in the action of Christ. What God now prescribes is ‘the hearing of faith’ and it finds its validation in God’s past affirmation of Abraham’s faith in Gen. 15.6. This question can be posed to Gal. 3.15-18: How does Paul already find continuity between the past and present constructions of the covenantal community, in the face of the opponents’ belief that they must enforce a continuity that is presently being sacrificed?

However, Martyn finds fault with our question, in that it presupposes the existence of an already-made people of God prior to the Christ-event. If Paul has concluded that the people of God has just now been made by God in Christ (in the very manner that it had been promised to Abraham), then there is no task of developing an identity of ‘people of God’ that takes into account God’s interaction with his people at different points in history. And so we ask: Is Paul really claiming that it is creation ex nihilo, a people of God in Christ created out of no relationship to the people of God we find established in Israel’s scriptures? Or, is Paul emphasizing the transformative nature of God’s covenantal people, an identity that must always be reassessed in light of God’s present interaction with that people?

The Context of Gal. 3.15-18

Paul begins Chapter 3 by bombarding the Galatians with a quick list of four questions concerning their initial experience of the gospel which consisted of Jesus Christ crucified. Twice they are asked whether they received (3.2) (ἐλάβετε-aorist indicating a completed past action,
i.e. they did receive the spirit at a precise moment in their lives) and are now still receiving\textsuperscript{17} (3.5) the spirit through/by means of works of law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου) or through/by means of ‘a hearing of faith’ (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). In the second instance (3.5), the works of law and hearing of faith are possible responses to the one who is supplying (ὁ ἐπιχορηγῶν-present indicative participle indicating continuous action) the spirit and who is working/enacting (ἐργάζεσθαι-present indicative participle indicating continuous action) ‘powerful deeds in you’\textsuperscript{18}. Here Paul indicates the need for continuity in the Galatians’ own experience. If they received the spirit through a faithful hearing of the gospel as it was vividly brought to them (‘publicly portrayed before your very eyes’), which they did, then they should be continuing to do so as God continues to give to/act

\textsuperscript{17} Though the verb is omitted in vs. 5, one would assume it to be present indicative in order to correspond with God’s present action of ‘supplying’ and ‘enacting’.

\textsuperscript{18} In his commentary on Galatians, Burton also points out the connection between vs. 2 and 5. However, he keeps the action of God in the participles ἐπιχορηγῶν and ἐργάζομαι of vs. 5 in the aorist past (“he that supplied...and wrought”): “This sentence in effect repeats the question of vs. 2, and, like that, is doubtless to be understood as referring to the experiences of the Galatians in connection with and shortly after their conversion” (151). Our interpretation of present indicative has precedents in Lightfoot (“he that supplieth...and worketh” p. 136), Dunn (“he who supplies...and works” p. 157-158), and Williams (“Did [emphasis added] you receive” (vs. 2) and “God bestows and works” (vs. 5)-pgs. 83, 85).

Unlike Burton, who sees Paul as referring to the past in both verses, Dunn expresses Paul’s idea of continuance between past and present: “The point, which the Galatians seem to have forgotten, is that their reception of the Spirit was not simply a single event in the past, but had been the beginning of a continuing relationship with God sustained by him through the Spirit” (157-58). Williams also states, “His [Paul’s] purpose is to force them to confront the most undeniable feature of their personal history as believers” (83). This ‘historical consciousness’ of Paul that we point out in terms of his relating of past in vs. 2 and present in vs. 5 in the Galatians’ own experience, is critical because it gives credence to a like ‘historical consciousness’ in terms of the continuity of the covenantal relationship: as God has been consistent in his relationship with the Galatians (and the implication is that they should be consistent in their response), so too has God been consistent in his relationship with his people. Paul is consistent in his own understanding of the faithfulness of God, both in the course of Israelite history and in the course of His relationship with the Galatians.
among them. Since God is remaining with them in such a ‘powerful’ way, then their response of ‘faith-filled hearing’ must be what he is asking of them. These five verses are a succinct description of the God/community connection as Paul and the Galatian converts are witnessing it, in which the community’s identity is defined by the response that God’s own action has elicited (faith).

To be grounded in one’s own experience is one thing, but what do the scriptures have to say? Paul begins his answer to this question in vs. 6 by quoting Gen.15.6: “Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” The Galatian experience is verified by the scripture’s own rendering of Abraham’s initial experience. Paul echoes this very sentiment when he once again encourages his Galatian ‘hearers’ in vs. 7 to: “Know (second person plural present imperative-Know!) then that the ones who are from faith (ἐκ πίστεως), these are sons of Abraham.”

For Paul, the scripture is personified as a living witness who ‘speaks’ in favor of the present God/community connection, having foreseen that God is justifying (δικαιοῦσαι-present indicative of continuous action) the nations (Gentiles) through faith (ἐκ πίστεως), and ‘pre-gospeled’ to Abraham that “all the nations will be blessed in you” (vs. 8). Richard Hays’

\(^{19}\) \(γίνοσκετε\) can be either second person plural present indicative or second person plural imperative, the second of the two being chosen above because of the fact the Paul is hitting home in a more forceful way one of the main points of chapter 3 in its entirety: i.e. the sonship of Abraham being dependent upon sharing a like faith with him, continuing the original response to God’s covenant initiation. Burton (“Know therefore...” p. 155), and especially Dunn who cites Betz (“Know then—probably intended as imperative and so as drawing attention to the importance of the claim being made.” p. 162) support this reading. Williams remains on the fence combining both interpretations as, “Understand [in the imperative] (or you know)...p. 85. Lightfoot, however, explicitly indicates the indicative rather than the imperative due to the “argumentative nature of the letter generally...and possibly also to the meaning of the verb γίνοσκετε (‘to perceive’ rather than ‘to know’)” (137).
things under sin” (3:22). It has a voice, and it speaks...This time-spanning speech of the text is a crucial attribute; the text is reckoned as a knowing voice that has the power to address the present out of the past—or to address the past out of the present, in such a way that readers, overhearing, may reconceive the present.20

When comparing Gal. 3.22 in which “scripture locked up all things under sin” with Rom. 11.32 in which God does so, we can deduce that ἡ γραφή is sometimes used by Paul as a stand-in for ὁ θεός.21 God and scripture being used interchangeably in this manner, indicates that Paul is still intimately close with the Jewish scriptural tradition that was his birthplace. His use of scripture as the voice of God testifies that he believes that it is the same God who speaks to Israel in scripture who is fully operative in the lives of those who believe in Christ. This same continuity will be present when Paul describes the character of covenant before and after Christ in vs. 15-18.

After bringing the scripture’s (God’s) past action to come alive in the present, Paul then repeats the Galatians’ present experience in light of the scripture’s ‘foreshadowing’: “so that those from faith (ἐκ πίστεως) are being blessed with Abraham (who was blessed) according to his faith” (vs. 9). Paul’s dynamic interplay between scripture as witness and the Galatians as witnesses to their own intimate encounter with God, can be diagramed as follows:

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21 Gal. 3.22: ἀλλὰ συνέκλεισεν ἡ γραφή τὰ πάντα ὑπὸ ἁμαρτίαν
Rom. 11.32: συνέκλεισεν γὰρ ὁ θεός τοὺς πάντας εἰς ἀπειθεῖαν
Scripture’s witness to past relationship: Vs. 6- Ἀβραὰμ (Gen. 15.6) ἐπίστευσεν...

Present relationship in continuity: Vs. 7- οἱ ἐκ πίστεως, ...υἱοὶ εἰσιν (present indicative) Ἀβραὰμ

Scripture’s witness to past relationship: Vs. 8- προευγγελίσατο τῷ Ἀβραὰμ... (Gen. 12.3)

ἐνευλογηθήσονται...

Present relationship in continuity: Vs. 9- οἱ ἐκ πίστεως εὐλογοῦνται (present indicative)

In 3.6-9, the key word is ‘blessing’, that which God gave to Abraham (past), foretold that it would be given to the nations by way of Abraham (future), and that which God is now giving to those who have faith (present). In the transition from vs. 9 to vs. 10, a stark contrast is being made between this ‘blessing’ and the ‘curse’ which those who are ‘from works of law’ are under. Paul again cites scripture, this time Deut. 27.26: “Cursed be all who do not abide by all the words in the book of the law, to do them.” Turning back to Deuteronomy, it is necessary to find the context of this scriptural reference. What is happening in Deut. chapters 27-30 that brings about these recitations of curses and then blessings, and to whom do they refer?

Moses and the Levites are preparing to escort the people of Israel across the Jordan and into the promised land. Upon accomplishing this, the Levites are to recite the list of curses to all the people to which they will respond, ‘Amen,’ and so too with the blessings. These curses tell the Israelite people what they should not do, and the blessings tell them what they should do. The ritualized action of communal assent to the curses and blessings defines the people of Israel, holding them fast to the obligations that God has spelled out for them. In chapter 28, the curses become foretellings of the future, a future for the Israelite people where they will not uphold the words of the law by observing them (27.26), and therefore God will send them into exile:
“Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lack of everything” (28.47-48). Likewise, “If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting maladies” (28.58).

For Paul, the curse and its enactment in the exile are not part of the Israelite people’s historical past, but rather, an ever present reality. The law that leads to disobedience brings on an ‘exile’, a ‘not yet’ in the God/community connection where sin still separates God’s people from himself (Gal. 3.22). The promises of God in Deut. 30 to bring his people back from exile (“Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back.”-30.4), cannot come through law, for with the law came the curse (Gal. 3.11). Only an action of God can ‘gather them and bring them back’. Christ’s death on the cross, in which he embraces the curse on behalf of God’s people, makes way for the blessing that had been promised through Abraham to the Gentiles. The people of Israel, God’s people in covenant with Abraham, are being rescued from ‘exile’ alongside the ‘Gentile sinners’. Paul’s best expression of the need for the ‘bringing back’ of the Israelite people in communion with the Gentiles is Gal. 2.15: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” The ‘works of law’ have not and do not guarantee an unbreakable relationship between God and the Israeliite people. There is still a state of ‘separation’, which is only eliminated by God’s action in Christ. God alone can do the ‘bringing back’ -- irrespective of law, just as he ‘reckoned Abraham
righteous’ and brought him close--irrespective of law.

Though the method of analyzing verses 10-14 based on an historical interpretation of the Israelite journey from Sinai to exile as it is expressed in Deuteronomy 27-30 is not widespread, N. T. Wright in his The Climax of the Covenant uses the same focus in his own hermeneutic. He insists that Paul is not prooftexting (grasping at texts in his scriptural tradition which will emphasize such contrasts as ‘blessing’ and ‘curse’), but rather understanding covenant in terms of the relationship formed between God and Abraham in Genesis as one founded on promise and faith, a promise that would eventually reach all of the nations. In this context, then, Wright goes to Deuteronomy where he finds Paul hearing in this text what he did in Genesis—the voice of God promising and foretelling the Israelites’ future: “The blessing and curse are not merely ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ options: Deuteronomy declares that Israel will in fact eventually make the wrong choice, and, as a result, suffer the curse of all curses, that is, exile (Deut. 28.15-29.29).”22 Wright’s primary emphasis then falls upon God’s promise in Deuteronomy to set things aright in the future, a future which Paul believes to have already taken place in the Christ-event:

Deuteronomy 30 then holds out hope the other side of covenant failure, a hope of covenant renewal, of the regathering of the people after exile, of the circumcision of the heart, of the word being ‘near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (30.1-14). In other words, Deuteronomy 27-30 is all about exile, restoration, understood as covenant judgement and covenant renewal...in the cross of Jesus, the Messiah, the curse of exile itself reached its height, and was dealt with once and for all, so that

the blessing of the covenant renewal might flow out the other side, as God always intended.\textsuperscript{23}

We are in agreement with Wright that Paul is indeed reading the covenantal history of the Israelite people, and finding therein a true story that has taken place and is still taking place presently to include the lives of the Galatians. The context of Galatians chapter 3 has shown Paul to be concerned with maintaining a continuity between a) scripture’s reckoning of the God/community relationship with Abraham and his descendants expressed in Genesis, and b) scripture’s continuing saga of the covenantal relationship consisting of separation and a future ‘bringing back’ as it is told in Deuteronomy, and c) the Galatians’ own experience of that same relationship in terms of a ‘bringing back’ that has been fulfilled in the salvific death of Christ. The Abrahamic covenant with God was two-dimensional, encompassing both a present and a future reality: the Abraham who believed was reckoned righteous (present), and “all the nations will be blessed in you” (future). Scripture’s witness in Deuteronomy relates law to curse, in that God foretells Israelite disobedience to the law and the ‘exile’ that will ensue. The future blessing that remains constitutive of the Abrahamic covenant cannot be realized for “all nations” when Israel itself is cursed. Only Christ’s death on the cross, in which he shares the curse placed on the people of God\textsuperscript{24}, can inaugurate the blessing.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.140-141.

\textsuperscript{24}see Gal. 4.4, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (NRSV).
Gal. 3.15-18

We have been focusing on the content of the previous verses in order to be fully prepared to encounter what we find in this, our most crucial pericope for questions concerning Paul’s understanding of the covenantal relationship. Paul has let scripture tell the story of curse and exile—a separation from God that began with the introduction of the law—and he has maintained that in Christ blessing is restored for both Jew and Gentile. But the picture Paul gives of the ‘God/community connection’ with promise and blessing as the defining terms of the relationship and law as the backdrop for the period of exile, goes against the fundamental belief on the part of Paul’s opponents: in the covenant that identifies God’s people, promise and law are as two hands joined in wholehearted agreement. In verses 15-18, Paul addresses covenant head on and defines it in both human and divine terms.

Vs. 15 Brothers, I am speaking in human terms (κατὰ ἀνθρώπων): likewise, no one nullifies or adds a codicil to a human will (διαθήκη) that has been ratified.

Shifting from his scrupulous attention to scripture (to which he will immediately return in vs. 16), Paul gives the Galatians an ordinary, everyday example on the level of a human initiated will to serve as a paradigm for the divinely initiated covenant. The strength of Paul’s comparison lies in the fact the Greek word διαθήκη is the legal term used for a contract between a testator and her beneficiary, as well as the word used by the Greek Septuagint for the Hebrew berit—the covenant made between God and His people. Dunn points to the weakness of the will/covenant parallel because of the fact that wills could indeed be amended. More to the point, there is

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sufficient proof for the potential for change on the divine side of the comparison as well, where Scripture uses the word διαθήκη for God’s Sinaitic legislation (new demands of the covenant placed upon the Jewish people, extending the agreement that was made with Abraham). Rather than pointing out the lapses in Paul’s reasoning, Martyn’s recent commentary identifies the will/covenant comparison as Paul’s means to “dissociate the term diatheke from its use in the vocabulary of Hebraic theology, where it means ‘covenant’.”

Both Dunn’s focus on the faultiness of Paul’s comparison and Martyn’s emphasis on the comparison as rhetorical device to further distance Paul from his opponents, are detrimental to a full appreciation for the metaphor that Paul is creating here. Paul’s intent is not to be entirely accurate or to spar with his Jewish-Christian opponents. Rather, this human example of a last will and testament becomes a paradigm for his definition of covenant. A person’s will includes a present and a future element. The document of the will itself outlines the inheritance to be bestowed as well as the beneficiary/ies who will receive it, signed and approved by the testator. Sometime in the future, the gift of the testator will indeed belong to the beneficiary/ies. In regard to the character of the legal agreement itself, we must take Paul at his word. No one (οὐδεὶς) annuls (in the present indicative) or adds to (also present indicative) this ratified (signed and sealed) testament. The verbs in the present indicative indicate an established fact. What takes center stage here? The character of the will being that it cannot be made void (obsolete) and it

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26Ibid. 182.

27From Martyn, J. Louis. Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1997. 338. Here, as before in his previous articles, Martyn is intent on setting Paul at odds with his Jewish-Christian opponents so that he will not resort to adopting their categories, to the point where Paul will jarringly separate covenant from its religious dimension.
cannot be added to by anyone (i.e. not even the angels of vs.19 who bring the law).

How does this portrayal of the human will relate to the divinely initiated covenant? Just as a will is a presently ratified document that consists of the gift of promise (the inheritance) that will be bestowed on the beneficiary/ies at some future point in time, the covenant is also God’s promise of inheritance that was “drawn up” in the “present” of his dealings with Abraham that looks forward to a future fulfillment. Just as no one can void a will, no one—not even God—has redefined the covenant outside of the scope of promise. The character of the covenant as promise can never be overshadowed, can never be lost, and must never be forgotten. God, in his faithfulness (Rom. 3.3) does not forget it.

As Paul sees it, wills cannot be changed in either of two ways: 1) made null like a check that is voided and no longer valid, or 2) somehow changed or added to. Both of these, whether subtraction in the form of denial, or addition, would be stating that the will (i.e. covenant) was not authentic, or not enough in and of itself. If its character can be changed, then it was not valid in the first place. For Paul, the character of the God/community connection actualized in the covenant remains the same, as does the character of the will. At the time when the covenantal relationship was first begun, it was based upon God’s act of promising and human beings having faith in the content of the promise before it comes. There is a hopeful looking ahead to the future when the inheritance will be received. Recall Gal. 3.8 that dealt with the pre-gospeled blessing upon the nations that was a ‘not yet’ condition that would require future fulfillment. The promise as inheritance has its present characteristic of being spoken by God to Abraham, so that we can say that the promise was made, giving birth to a people who would look toward its future fulfillment. Over the course of that relationship, God’s people experience a period of separation
of unfulfilled desire, until the eschatological dimension of promise rectifies the breach in the act of Christ’s death (Gal. 3.10-14). Now, as a result of Christ’s intervention, the content of the promise is bestowed on the people of God: Jews who have faith in Christ and Gentiles who have received the blessing foretold to Abraham.

The God/community connection remains the same in that it is constituted by promise. The faith of God’s people in regard to that promise must be transformed when it passes from the stage of ‘what will be given’ to ‘what has been given’. God, as Father, promises an inheritance to his children via Abraham, and they are called upon to have faith—a hanging on to the promise in its unfulfilled state. Now, as the Galatians do in fact know, the inheritance has been received and they are being called upon to have faith—a hanging on to the promise in its fulfilled state which is the person of Jesus Christ.

Vs. 16 And the promises were spoken (ἐρρέθησαν) to Abraham and to his seed.

It does not say and to the seeds (καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν), as of many but as of one—and to his seed (καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου)—who is Christ.

Here we have no actor; with the verb ἐρρέθησαν in the aorist passive (were spoken), the receivers of the promise come to the foreground. This is an historical happening, the original act of covenant forming as it is found in scripture. As it happened, Abraham and the Singular Seed (Christ) heard the words of God’s promises in their unfulfilled state. There was Abraham and Christ: Abraham who is past looking ahead to the future, and Christ who is both past and future. Christ has a past as one who was present for the inauguration of the covenantal relationship.  

28 Gal. 3.16: τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματί αὐτοῦ. Paul believes the promises to have been spoken to both Abraham and Abraham’s seed, and will quickly delineate that the seed was Christ. Christ, then, was present at the initial formation of the
then brings those promises of the past into the future, fulfilling them and making them a present reality for all those who have faith in him. Paul is again referring to what he previously discussed in verses 10-14: Can the people of God in and of themselves with the Sinaitic legislation make the promise of their own inheritance as well as the blessing of the Gentiles a reality? No, they cannot. Only Christ can. Christ is in the promise as future fulfillment, and Christ is in the promise as present reality. As Abraham’s example shows, the people of God were defined by their faith in the future of God’s promise, their future inheritance. The people of God are now defined by their faith in the present fulfillment of the promise in the person of Jesus Christ.

Vs. 17 And I say this: the law that has come four hundred and thirty years after cannot make void the covenant that was previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise ineffectual.

This verse serves to draw out the analogy between the human will and the divinely established covenant and is in direct parallel to the first verse in our pericope:

Vs. 15

Εδεικνυόμενον διαθήκην

Vs. 17

τούτω δὲ λέγω

διαθήκην προκεκυρωμένην ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ

covenantal relationship. Wright describes this as being indicative of Paul’s conception of Jesus as ‘corporate personality’--Jesus as “the one in whom the promises are fulfilled, in whom the people of God are summed up” (174). We would like to add to this idea of a ‘corporate’ dimension a ‘continuous’ dimension, in order to emphasize the fact that Christ is past, present, and future, carrying the reality of the covenantal relationship from its infancy to its fulfillment. In this sense, Christ is not a new dimension to this relationship, but both a sharer in the destiny of the Israelite people from the very beginning, as well as the fulfillment of that destiny. Paul relates this permeating presence of Christ in 1 Cor. 10.1-4 as well: “...and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.”
οὐδεὶς ὃ...νόμος

ἀθετεῖ ἡ ἐπιδιατάσσεται οὐκ ἀκυροὶ εἰς τὸ καταργῆσαι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν

Just as no one can add to a human will that has been ratified, it is also true that the law cannot be added to the covenant ratified by God so as to redirect the character of covenant away from promise. The time element of the law (coming four hundred and thirty years later) in vs. 17 refers to the adding of a codicil in vs. 15. Paul has given us a universal definition of covenant that does not allow for the adding of elements that would serve to diminish its true character. Faith has always been the defining characteristic of the human side of the covenant, beginning with the faith of Abraham that waited in expectancy. The faith itself has changed shape, from a faith in something that will happen, to a faith in something that has happened. This is an historical faith that is changing based on the fulfillment of the promise in time. Therefore, Paul is emphasizing the continuity of the ‘God/community connection’ in which God’s promise and the community’s faith are the dynamics of the relationship. The interaction between God and his people changes based upon the crossover from ‘inheritance promised’ to ‘inheritance received’. Unlike Christ who is present throughout the divine/human relationship and brings it to its fullest reality (vs. 16), the law does not have a significant role to play in the fulfillment of the promise (i.e. the blessing of the nations).

Vs. 18 For if the inheritance is from the law, it is no longer from promise. But God gifted it to Abraham through promise.

“For if the inheritance is from the law, it is no longer from promise.” But, we know that the inheritance cannot be from the law, for the very nature of covenant, just as a will, has its
understanding of inheritance rooted in the promise that is to be fulfilled. And God, in fact, initiated the covenantal relationship with his promise to Abraham.

Conclusion

Having analyzed verses 15-18 of Chapter 3, we are now equipped to return to the questions that were initially posed: How does Paul already find continuity between the past and present constructions of the covenantal community, in the face of the opponents’ belief that they must enforce a continuity that is presently being sacrificed? And, is Paul really claiming that the people of God in Christ is a creation ex nihilo, having no relationship to the people of God we find in Israel’s scriptures?

Continuity between the Past and Present of the Covenantal Community

Paul reads scripture and finds therein a God who consecrates Abraham as his covenantal partner by speaking the words of the promise. For his part, Abraham looks forward with expectancy for the day when the promise will be fulfilled. As Paul uses the word “promises” in the plural in vs. 16, we are forced to ask what the promises were. Land (Gen.13.15), numerous descendants as countless as the stars (Gen.15.5), and most importantly, the blessing of all the nations. Of these promises, the blessing of all the nations, was the most far off. In spite of the addition of the law, the task of God’s people has always been to hang on to the promise in its unfulfilled state. As the promises were spoken to Abraham and to Christ, Christ extends them in their unfulfilled state (specifically the blessing of all the nations) into the future and fulfills them, making them a present reality. Not even the testator of the will, not even God as the testator of
the covenant, changes the premise of the divine/human relationship which is the promise/faith
dynamic. What changes is the shape of faith from a faith in ‘the inheritance in its fullness that is to
come’ to a faith in ‘the inheritance in its fullness that has been received’.

We are in agreement, then, with Dunn who posits a ‘shared understanding’ between Paul
and his contemporary Jewish counterparts. Unlike Dunn, however, we choose to define
‘covenantal nomism’ in terms of its theological importance: a statement of the God/community
connection. For Paul’s opponents this God/community connection defines their identity (being)
with respect to law--what God has given them to do (acting). Paul, on the other hand, wants to
instill in the minds and hearts of the Galatians a sense of the history of the people of God in which
God defines their identity (being) through promise (both in Genesis and Deuteronomy). God does
not base his people’s ‘being’ on what they have ‘done’. Rather, he takes it upon himself to both
create and sustain their being throughout the course of a transformative history by the pattern of
promise and faith. It is this pattern that was instilled prior to law, which remains authoritative.
‘Continuity’ is maintained because it has always been the same covenant. It is in this vein that
Erich Gräßer writes: “Paul does not see both covenants as taking place one right after another, so
that the new covenant were to take over from, surpass, or replace the old. They are not in the
least founded on continuity in a doctrine of salvation history. Strictly speaking, the new covenant
is the “old”, that which was established with Abraham and is fulfilled in Christ.”29 The fact that
this is not a ‘heilsgeschichtlich Kontinuität’ means that there is no supersession. Rather than
replacing what he has done in the past, God is continuing it into the present, extending it forward

29Gräßer, Erich. Der Alte Bund im Neuen Exetische Studien zur Israelfrage im Neuen
Mohr, 1985. 68.
in the person of Jesus Christ.

Creation *ex nihilo*?

The fact that Paul identifies Christ as having heard the promises along with Abraham does not mean that the people of God was not formed until the Christ-act. It does mean, however, that the promises were not fulfilled until the Christ-act. Paul highlights Jesus’ past and future presence in the covenantal relationship in order to make it clear that the people of God in and of themselves with the law of the Sinaitic covenant cannot make the promise of the blessing to the Gentiles a reality. This is God’s task in Christ. In verses 10-14 of Chapter 3, Paul presupposes the existence of God’s people from the very institution of the covenant with Abraham, a people whose encounter with the law was marked by separation from God in exile. The law would not be sufficient in bringing them back to God, and neither would it allow for the blessing of the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles alike were in need of Christ as the catalyst for the full inheritance of the promise. In this sense, the people of God have a developing identity, not completely formed until the promise is kept and the Gentiles are blessed. Ever since the initial formation of God’s people, they were defined by a future element. As Paul has witnessed in Galatia, the law can have the effect of keeping God’s people stuck in the past, not allowing the faith in the fulfillment of the promise to take precedence.

We have repeatedly disagreed, then, with Martyn’s perspective of a people of God who has just been created, heretofore only a thought in the mind of God. Due to Paul’s use of scripture as ‘voice of God’ which is continuous, his focus on the history of God’s people in terms of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis and Deuteronomy Chapters 27-30, we cannot claim that
Paul is disregarding the existence of Israel as God’s chosen one. If Martyn’s assessment of Galatians were true, we would then have to ask how Paul could suddenly do a three hundred sixty degree turn in Romans 11.18 when he reminds the Gentiles of the existence of Israel as God’s chosen: “If you do boast, remember that it is not you that supports the root [Israel], but the root that supports you.” This Romans text does not indicate a contradiction, but rather emphasizes the very same continuity to which Paul has attested even in Galatians: a people of God who is created, shaped and maintained by God’s promise.

The question of this study, namely the existence of the covenant before and after Christ in Gal. 3.15-18, proves crucial when facing the three-fold issue of ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ in Paul’s letters: 1) How is Paul in ‘continuity’ and/or ‘discontinuity’ with the Jewish tradition that is the source of his Christian identity? 2) How is God’s revelation in Christ ‘continuous’ and/or ‘discontinuous’ with the history of divine revelation to the Israelite people? and 3) How is the Christian community/church as people of God ‘continuous’ and/or ‘discontinuous’ with Israel as people of God? To reject Dunn’s suggestion of a ‘shared understanding’ and opt for Martyn’s insistence of Paul’s separation from any such categories, would deny Paul as covenantal theologian, a denial that the present study cannot make. The claim being made here is not that Paul is entirely ‘continuous’, but that there is a delicate relationship of ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ that needs to be recognized. The Paul of Gal. 3.15-18 does indeed have the potential of being a fruitful dialogue partner with respect to present day Jewish-Christian dialogue.
Works Cited


