



## Torah and the Gentile Predicament

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**From the Introduction of his book *Paul and the Torah. The angels of the nations, elements, powers in first-century thought, and the diverse uses of the term "law."***

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by Lloyd Gaston

#### The Gentile Predicament

Even to set down conclusions briefly will distort Paul. He did not begin with an objective analysis of the Gentile situation, and he thought mythologically rather than systematically about it. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to oversimplify here in order to make clear what is at issue. Chapter 1 [of the book *Paul and the Torah*] raises the question of how the law relates to Gentiles in early Jewish thought. Chapter 2 carries the argument further by discussing in particular the apocalyptic conception of the angels of the nations. Since these two essays were written, there has appeared a significant study of Paul's theology advocating apocalyptic as the matrix for all of Paul's thought (J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. Because he does not take seriously enough the considerations concerning Gentile addressees, he understands Paul's theology as being directed primarily against Judaism). An even more recent book revives the "principalities and powers" as part of Paul's background (W. Wink, *Naming the Powers*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, {angels of the nations: p 26-35}). It is to be hoped that these two works will provide the stimulus for renewed attention to these important aspects of first-century thought.

The basic myth can be baldly stated. If early Judaism thought that God ruled over Israel directly, his rule over the Gentile nations was indirect and impersonal, through an agent something like a Persian satrap, if one will. The most common way of imagining these agents is in terms of the "angels of the nations." A more Hellenistic way of putting the matter is to say that God's rule, especially over nature, is administered by the "elements of the world," that is, earth, water, air, and fire, or by the gods, especially the national gods. All of these are to be found in Paul along with much more general language concerning "the powers." If in principle the rule of the angels or elements or gods was intended to be benevolent, for most people of this period it was experienced as oppressive. None of this is stated explicitly by Paul, but the basic pattern must be presupposed as part of the first century world-view.

Soteriology in such a perspective would mean liberation from the tyrannical rule of the powers. One could imagine a redeemer figure sent from God to dethrone the powers by destroying them, or imprisoning them, or taming them and calling them back into the service of God. While all of these aspects are to be found in early Christian writings, they are much too triumphalist for Paul. Instead of Christ the Redeemer killing the tyrannical powers, it is people who die, by participation in his death. E. P. Sanders characterizes the heart of Paul's soteriology appropriately as "change of Lordship." (E.P. Sanders, *Paul*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p 463-472). By "dying" in baptism people lose as it were their old citizenship and acquire a new one ("Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ," Phil 3:20). They still live in the country of the tyrant but as resident aliens no longer subject to his laws, and with the hope of his

eventual dethronement.

There is a peculiarly Pauline version of this whole conception of "the powers." He emphasizes the function of God's law in the administration of the angels or elements to the extent that he can use "law" as a power which oppresses Gentiles and from which they need to be redeemed. It is not just that the law will function as a criterion in the final judgment; it also operates within history. As in the Wisdom of Solomon, the law punishes evildoers outside the covenant by visiting them with the inevitable consequences of their acts. This is a retributive process within history which Paul, drawing on Biblical concepts, can call "the Wrath." Once he even refers to "the curse of the law," meaning nothing different (Gal 3:13). The powers administer the law, and "the law works wrath" (Rom 4:15). The "law" then is not just something which people do; it does something to people, as I hope to show in Chapter 6. There is a further usage, the most important of all, when Paul also speaks of Sin and Death as personified powers. They are really not to be put in the same category as "angels of the nations" or the like, and to distinguish them perhaps they should be called "the Superpowers." If the angel administers the law, and the law works wrath, then Sin uses the whole process. Sin uses the process to produce more sin (Romans 1), so that sin is a corporate concept for Paul, and Sin does so in order to pay wages, namely death (Romans 5-6). Indeed, both Sin and Death can be said to reign over all humanity outside the covenant, and it is the importance of these Superpowers which has kept Paul from spelling out more clearly the role of angels or elements as powers. Those outside the covenant are completely subject to the Lordship of Sin and Death, who use the process of the powers administering the law. This is the Gentile predicament.

## Gentiles and the Law

Paul uses the word *nomos*, law, in disparate and strange ways indeed. He can say, for example, that "I myself serve with the mind God's *law* but with the flesh Sin's *law*. For the *law* of the Spirit, of life, has set you free in Christ Jesus from the *law* of Sin and Death . . . so that the decree of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk . . . according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:2-4). Like most interpreters, I conclude that this richness of usage parallels the variety of meanings found in the Hebrew word *Torah*. I have already referred to the concept of the law as it relates to Gentiles- This concept, which is not recognized by many interpreters, is discussed mostly in Chapters 1, 2, and 6. Chapter 4 deals also with other uses of the word *nomos*, as it occurs in the central section of Galatians. Like the Hebrew *Torah*, *nomos* is often used for Scripture, either in the narrower sense (Pentateuch) or wider sense (Torah, Prophets, and Writings). Parallel to the development in Rabbinic writings, in Paul *nomos* occasionally means "covenant," but the reference is to the covenant made on Sinai with Israel and only with Israel. Also, in certain contexts Paul can speak of Gentile Christians keeping the commandments (1 Cor 7:19) or fulfilling the law (Gal 5:14, Rom 13:8-10), a concept about which he speaks firmly but vaguely.

If it is true that the word *nomos* is used in such different senses, ought this not to be indicated in translation? . . . [I]t is ultimately not satisfactory for the following reasons. First, it obscures the fact that, as it is axiomatic for Paul that God is one, so it is equally true that God's *nomos* is one. To be sure, it makes a great difference if that *nomos* is experienced in the context of covenant or in the context of creation and the angels of the nations, but there are not two different laws operative here. Second, to distinguish accurately all the ways in which Paul uses the word *nomos*, more than two words would be necessary in English, as when covenant is distinguished from Scripture in Rom 3:21. Third, Paul is aware of the ambiguity of his usage, and the sharpness of some of his deliberately paradoxical statements would not be clear if the same word were not used, as in: "I through the *nomos* died to the *nomos*" (Gal 2:19). In the future, then, one ought to use a single English word to translate *nomos*; perhaps the word "Law" can be rehabilitated to serve this purpose.

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