

Was Paul a Prooftexter? The Case of Galatians 3
SBL, Boston, November 21-25 2008
E. P. Sanders
Arts and Sciences Professor Emeritus of Religion, Duke University

Draft. Please do not quote without my permission. Thanks, E.P.S.¹

Among ancient Jews there were numerous types of arguments based on the Bible—far too many for me to try to list, even if I were competent to do so. For my limited purpose today, I wish to mention only two. Before turning to Paul, I shall give one or two examples of each of the two techniques from non-Christian Jewish literature.

RABBINIC EXAMPLES

One category is the use of what we may call “a big picture,” that is, a substantial aspect of the Biblical narrative that is employed to make either a general point or a point about later times. For my one non-Christian example, I have chosen my favorite Rabbinic parable, which replies to the question, “Why were the Ten Commandments not said at the beginning of the Torah?” The Ten Commandments first appear in Exod. 20. Why so late? The answer is that God is like a king who wanted to rule over a group of people. When this would-be king proposed himself as their ruler, they asked “Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us?” So he built a city wall for them, provided a water supply, and fought their enemies. Then they accepted him as king.

Similarly, God: He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down the manna for them, provided a well for them, supplied them with quails, and fought the battle with Amalek. Then he offered them his commandments, which they gladly accepted.¹

This wonderful parable, which puts God’s grace and his demand in the sequence that Protestants approve, uses a few words from the account in Exodus, but the essence of the matter

¹ Please write to me at 10 Altmont Court, Durham NC 27705 or jwgrundle@verizon.net.

is the order of events. I believe that a very large number of ancient Jews knew the narrative line of the Bible and could make use of it.

Category number 2 is what I am calling “prooftexting.” By this word I intend to refer to the practice of taking specific words out of their context in order to make new points. In their original context the words may or may not have lent themselves to the desired meaning. The Bible, however, could be considered as an enormous treasury of words that God gave with the intention that his worshippers make use of them. And use them they did. The interpreter might feel “inspired”; biblical interpretation, however, often did not imply inspiration, but rather scholarship.² The abilities to quote important texts and to use them effectively in a current discussion were signs of authority, as Al Baumgarten has observed.³ As a student, Paul had been near the head of the class, as we now say (Gal. 1.14), and so of course he had the ability to arrange sacred words to make an argument that was both timely and true. For two non-Pauline examples I turn again to the Tannaitic Rabbis.⁴

The first passage is slightly unusual, because the commentator does not specifically quote the words that he needs. In *Sifre Devarim*, the Tannaitic or halakhic commentary on Deuteronomy, one of the paragraphs begins with a quotation of Deut. 16.3, “In haste you came out of the land of Egypt” (Pisqa 130). The commentator asks if the word “haste” applies to both the Israelites and the Egyptians. The question is immediately answered: to prevent anyone from thinking that both Israelites and Egyptians were in haste, the Bible elsewhere says, “Not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites” (Lev. 11.7a). One may ask what the growling of a dog has to do with the question of haste, and the answer is, not much. The Rabbi simply gave the words that identify the passage that he had in mind, not the words that his argument required. Other Rabbis would know the rest of the passage, as would most of you, but I had to look it up. The

unquoted words provide a proof that was acceptable in ancient Jewish argument: “so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (Lev. 11.7b). Because a distinction appears in Lev. 11.7b, the word “haste” in Deut. 16.3 refers to the Egyptians, not to the Israelites.

In prooftexting, it was more common for a Rabbi to quote the words that actually settled the argument. I shall give just one example. In discussing The Day of Atonement (*yôm kippûr*), the commentators in *Sifra*, the Tannaitic commentary on Leviticus, work their way diligently through the requirements of Lev. 23.26-32 (*Sifra Emor* pereg 14). There should be a “holy convocation”; people should “afflict” themselves; they should present sacrifices (all in v. 27); they should do no work (v. 28). The explanation of these requirements is that “it is the Day of Atonement” (v. 28).

The Rabbis naturally asked what the result would be if the stated conditions were not met. What if there were no sacred assembly, what if the people did not afflict themselves, what if there were no burnt offerings and no scapegoat? The answer was that scripture has decreed that “it is the Day of Atonement”—that is, it atones in any case. The only requirement turns out to be repentance, which is proved by the fact that Scripture says “Ach!” (surely!). This otherwise superfluous word, which begins Lev. 23.27, proves that repentance is a requirement, even though the requirements that are in the Bible cannot be met.

Thus while staring straight at the context that makes several requirements for the Day of Atonement, the Rabbis of *Sifra* maintain that the sentence may be broken up and that the clause “it is the Day of Atonement” overrides everything else, except for the provision of repentance, which must be derived from the apparently superfluous exclamation, “Ach,” by which God clearly intended to point to an additional item.

Sifra is traditionally said to be from the School of R. Akiba, not that of R. Ishmael, and it may be that the precise techniques employed here would not have gained universal approval among Rabbis of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

But the general project, that of bringing the Bible up-to-date, was what exegetes of all generations—at least ever since the time of the Chronicler—had been doing. Not every exegetical argument has the purpose of updating the Bible, but this was an imperative task. If Judaism was to remain a functioning and persuasive religion, Jewish scholars had to see to it that the Bible was timely and referred to present conditions. The temple had in fact disappeared. There were no pilgrimage festivals. The conditions of the Biblical period simply could not apply, and so merely The Day, coupled with repentance, provided atonement.

The advantage of a religion of a book is that the book can be taken out of the hands of the aristocrats and the sacerdotal class and can be studied by lay experts (as Morton Smith pointed out).⁵ This feature of Judaism allowed the religion to flourish without the temple and without a professional priesthood.

The disadvantage of a sacred book, however, is that conditions and customs keep changing, and it is difficult to revise a text after it comes to be generally regarded as sacred. Interpretation rushes to the rescue: the book can be updated by being interpreted. The Rabbis simply had to get rid of the requirement of sacrifices, and if they were forced to chop the text up and to grasp hold of only parts of it, that is what they would do.

PAUL

Paul sometimes engaged in his own form of updating the Bible. His techniques were, in general, Jewish, though I would not say that they were “Rabbinic.” I have cited the Rabbis in order to provide illustrative material, but I do not regard Paul himself as a student of Rabbinic

technique. Paul's education is itself a large topic, which I cannot consider today. My examples were intended only to illustrate some of the sorts of things that ancient Jewish exegetes did.

Paul, like others, could argue on the basis of the Biblical narrative. He uses the narrative of the Exodus, for example, in one of the arguments against idolatry in 1 Cor. 10, where curiously he seems to work his way backwards through Numbers, reversing the chronological sequence of some of the passages that he uses. But, nevertheless, he uses the narrative and selects a few passages from it. The narrative plays a major role.

The outstanding case of arguing from a big narrative picture, of course, is the story of Abraham, which is crucial in Gal. 3 and 4 and in Rom. 4. In Galatians Paul leaves out the embarrassing fact that Abraham was circumcised, neither referring to nor alluding to Gen. 17, but skipping from Gen. 15 to 18. He claims that the law (which in the context must include the law of circumcision) came 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3.17). In Romans, however, he rectifies the error and points out that Abraham himself was circumcised (Rom. 4.10-12). The point in Romans is that Abraham was righteous by faith before he was circumcised, which means that he is the father of all who have faith, whether circumcised or not.

Thus Paul, like the Rabbis, and like zillions of other Jews, knew the Biblical narrative and could utilize it in argumentation.

Paul could also employ "prooftexting": using words out of context. In the story of Abraham, the word *sperma* ("seed") is used as a collective noun. God's promises include both Abraham *and his seed*, referring to his numerous descendants (e.g. Gen. 15.5, where the *sperma* are as numerous as the stars in the sky). Paul of course understood this perfectly well, as he reveals in Rom. 4.13-18. Nevertheless, in Gal. 3.16 he takes advantage of the fact that *sperma* is grammatically singular, which allows him to claim that it refers only to Christ. Others can

become descendants of Abraham by becoming one person in Christ—not by being circumcised, which is the way sonship is achieved according to Genesis. Here Paul uses the word *sperma* in a way that is contrary to the meaning of the original context.

Before continuing with Gal. 3 and the passages on righteousness by faith, which constitute the main point of today’s paper, I wish to point out a very clever and extremely Jewish mode of proof-texting in 1 Cor. 15.44-49. Paul apparently remembered the Greek version of Gen. 2.7, “the man became a living *psychê*,” as including the word “first” as well as the proper noun, “Adam”: in his view Genesis stated that “the first man, Adam, became a living *psychê*.” Putting the word “first” into the text was probably a trick of his memory, which would have been influenced by the number of times he had heard the word “first” employed in connection with Adam. In other Jewish literature in Greek, Adam was frequently called the *prôtoplastos*, the “first formed.”⁶

It is conceivable that Paul inserted “first,” *prôtos*, on his own initiative. Alternatively, it is possible that the text of the Bible that Paul had studied included the word “first.” In any case, he considered *prôtos* to be part of the text of Genesis, which we see from the way he used it.

The term “first Adam,” by standard rules of Biblical exegesis, implies a “second” or a “last” Adam. It is like the Rabbinic argument that the story of Achan in Josh. 7 shows that atonement in the World to Come can be proved by scripture. Talk about an uphill argument! According to 7.25, Joshua told Achan that the Lord would “trouble” him “this day” (*yom hazeh*). The phrase “this day” proves that there will be *another* day, on which the Lord will not trouble Achan, whose death, therefore, atones. The *other* day is the World to Come, and Achan will live again, and will not be troubled, on that day.⁷

Thus, for Paul, “the first man” proves that there will be a “second” man (1 Cor. 15.47) or a “last” man (15.45). Since the first man was *psychikos*, the second man will have to be different: he will be *pneumatikos* (1 Cor. 15.44-49). Simple exegesis requires the contrast.

I have called this a form of “prooftexting,” since in our example a word is taken out of context to prove a point that is not in the original text. There is nothing about a “second Adam” in Genesis. Paul’s argument is rather that the existence of a “first Adam” *implies* the necessity of a “second Adam.” The addition of an entirely new person, however, is a very expansive use of a prooftext, and I would consider such expansions to constitute a sub-category under the general heading “prooftexting.” We now turn to more typical cases of using words to prove new points, and this brings us back to Gal. 3.

At this point you need the handout. In speaking, I shall translate the Greek a little slowly. Words that are within sideways carats (<< >>) are quotations from the Bible; words that are underlined occur both in Paul’s source and in Paul’s own words, and words in bold type are Paul’s conclusions from his texts.

Gal. 3.6-7: Καθως Αβρααμ «επιστευσεν τω θεω, και ελογισθη αυτω εις δισαιουσunny.»
γνωσκετε αρα οτι **οι εκ πιστεως, ουτοι υιοι εισιν Αβρααμ** (quoting Gen. 15.6).

Gal. 3.8: προιδουσα δε η γραφη οτι εκ πιστεως δικαιοι τα εθνη ο θεος,
προευηγγελισατο τω Αβρααμ οτι «ενευλογηθησονται εν σοι (Αβρααμ) παντα τα εθνη.» ωστε **οι εκ πιστεως ευλογουνται συν τω πιστω Αβρααμ** (quoting Gen. 18.18, with some use of 12.3).

The first quotation (Gal. 3.6) is in verbatim agreement with Gen.15.6 in the LXX as we have it. The second quotation (Gal. 3.8) is verbatim with Gen. 18.18 in the LXX, except that in Paul’s memory the address was in the second person (σοι), while in the LXX of 18.18 as we have it, the passage is in the third person (αυτω). It is probable that Paul’s σοι has crept in from

the parallel in Gen.12.3. The quotation is mostly from 18.18, however, which Paul doubtless preferred to 12.3 because 18.18 has the words “the Gentiles” rather than “the tribes of the earth” in 12.3.

I shall rearrange these three verses to show more clearly how Paul used his prooftexts. I shall put first the Biblical quotations and then Paul’s conclusions:

Αβρααμ «επιστευσεν τω θεω, και ελογισθη αυτω εις δισαιοσυνην.» (Gen. 15.6)

«ενευλογηθησονται εν σοι (Αβρααμ) παντα τα εθνη». (Gen. 18.18; cf. 15.3)

The underlined words in these two passages become part of the new conclusions that Paul derived from Genesis.

οι εκ πιστεως, ουτοι υιοι εισιν Αβρααμ. εκ πιστεως δικαιοι τα εθνη ο θεος. οι εκ πιστεως ευλογουνται συν τω πιστω Αβρααμ.

As is the case with *sperma* later in ch. 3, these related conclusions provide Gentile Christians with access to the promises given to Abraham—without requiring circumcision. The words in the Bible can prove new points and do not require the reader to consider the context, which includes the circumcision of Abraham.

The arguments from Abraham were *essential* to Paul’s mission, and they were vital to the history of Christianity, which despite its Jewish origin eventually became a largely Gentile religion. In Paul’s view, at least in retrospect, Christ had been revealed to him for the explicit purpose of commissioning him to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles (Gal. 1.15f.; cf. Rom. 11.13f.; 15.18f.). Paul had not followed the custom of circumcising converts. They were to remain as they were, being brought into the people of God in their uncircumcised, Gentile, state (as Paula Fredriksen has emphasized).⁸ But now other missionaries had intruded into Galatia and had pointed out that according to the sacred Scripture that they shared with Paul, God

required circumcision. They doubtless appealed to the example of Abraham. I owe this point to my very first seminar with Lou Martyn.⁹

As a result of this argument by opposing teachers, which might prove fatal to Paul's entire mission, it was absolutely necessary for him to show that God's intention to include Gentiles without requiring conversion to Judaism was in the Bible. He emphasizes the antiquity and the Scriptural basis for his own activity, stating in Gal. 3.8 that Scripture "foreknew" (προιδουσα) that God would righteous Gentiles and also "proclaimed it in advance" (προεσηγγελισατο). Since Paul thought "backwards," from result to cause,¹⁰ he naturally saw the Scripture as pointing to and leading up to his own time. He was not twisting the Scriptures, he was proving a point in a way that was in general highly acceptable to ancient Jews. (In a few minutes I shall offer a caveat re: the acceptability of Paul's argument.)

Paul's argument was probably pitched at the level of the opposing missionaries. Although he addressed the letter to the Gentile converts in Galatia, he argues as if he were one expert Jewish exegete debating with other experts. The Gentile readers may have been a little bewildered, but they would have understood *that* he was quoting Scripture in defense of his gospel, thereby attempting to reassert his authority.

It is noteworthy that in using Gen. 15.6, Paul changes the *pist-* root from a verb in the quotation to a noun in his own formulation, and he changes the *dikai-* root from a noun to a verb. (I'll give you a few seconds to look back at the passages near the top of the handout.) In English we prefer the noun faith to belief and the noun righteousness to justification. The reasons for the preference have to do with the connotations of "belief" and "justification." A belief is frequently an opinion lightly held: our beliefs are below the level of knowledge. "Justification" can often mean "an adequate excuse." So the nouns "faith" and "righteousness" are preferable when

discussing Paul. But we have no verbs that are cognate with “faith” and “righteousness.” We lost the required verbs along the way, during the course of the creation of a new language that combined the French of the conquering Normans with the Anglo-Saxon or Old English of the conquered race. Consequently, Paul’s switches from verb to noun and from noun to verb are hard for translators.

In modern English, it is simplest to write that “Abraham **believed** in God,” which proves that “people of **faith** are the sons of Abraham.” Unfortunately, the change from “believed” to “faith” hides the power of the prooftext. Similarly we incline to write that God reckoned Abraham’s faith as “**righteousness**,” which proves that God “**justifies**” Gentiles, again losing the essence of Paul’s argument.

This confusion in modern English is why Kendrick Grobel, in translating Bultmann, resurrected the Old English verb *rightwisen*, for which Grobel employed “to rightwise,” and why I decided to try to create two new English verbs, “to faith” and “to righteous.”¹¹ If we can say, as people who have never studied English say all the time, that we “author” books and “loan” money, when we have perfectly good verbs, “to write” or “to compose” and “to lend,” I do not know why people resist “to faith” and “to righteous.” But humans are perverse.

Now back to the prooftexts of Gal. 3. When I was a callow youth, I once emphasized the word “all” in Paul’s quotation of Deut. 27.26 and 28.58 in Gal. 3.10¹² (“everyone who does not observe...*all* the things written in the book of the law”). Some time after publishing that mistake, I realized that prooftexters tell us in their own words what their prooftexts mean.¹³ How could it be otherwise? If the Rabbi in *Sifra* did not mean the reader to realize that “the Day of Atonement atones on the sole condition of repentance,” what could he have wanted? That we would study the original passage in Leviticus and discover that sacrifices are also required? The

whole point of prooftexting is to use *words* from a sacred text in order to prove a new point, and that point must be stated explicitly, using those words. The meaning must lie on the surface.

I shall not discuss in detail the rest of the wonderful series of prooftexts in Gal. 3.6-14. I shall, instead, merely list what Paul thought they proved. This list is on the Handout, and so I shall read it quickly:

1. People who faith are the descendants of Abraham (3.7).
2. God righteouses Gentiles by faith (3.8).
3. All who faith are blessed with Abraham (3.9).
4. All those who live on the basis of the law are under a curse (3.10).
5. No one at all is righteoused before God by the law (3.11).
6. The law does not rest on faith (3.12).
7. By becoming a curse, Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (3.13).

Paul's general conclusion to the whole section, Gal. 3.1-13, to which the details may be subordinated, is this: all this proves that the blessings of Abraham come to the Gentiles in Jesus Christ, so that we may receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3.14).

I think that Paul's use of exegesis in his arguments is always brilliant (in the good sense of that word) and frequently dazzling. In the case of Gal. 3.6-14, however, I must point out that arguing against circumcision on the basis of the story of Abraham is very much an uphill struggle. If there were a learned opponent in Galatia, he would immediately counter by quoting Gen. 17.9-14, which concludes with the threat that any uncircumcised male will be "cut off." If Paul faced serious exegetical expertise, his cleverness in getting around Gen. 17 would show him to be too clever by half. Though Galatians is my favorite book, and Gal. 3 is my favorite

chapter, Rom. 4 is a better argument: Abraham is father of all those who have faith, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

I have just one more point regarding Gal. 3.6-14, which I have made before and wish to repeat. In this section, Paul quotes the only two passages in the Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture in which the words “righteousness” and “faith” appear together, and the sole passage in which “curse” and “law” appear together.¹⁴ A word meaning “curse” frequently occurs with “commandments,” but not with “law,” and “law” is the word Paul wanted, just as he wanted “the Gentiles” in quoting Gen. 18.18. If Paul had told his research assistants—let us say Titus and Timothy—that before he wrote his letter he needed them to read all of the scrolls of the Bible line by line and to find every instance in which these two combinations of words appear together, they would have been turning the scrolls until he was executed, and we would not have Galatians.

Paul’s ability to do what he did in Gal. 3 was a function of his memory. I shall illustrate by referring to myself. I have never studied the characteristics of memorization as an academic subject, and my own history is the only source of comparison that I know. I do not mean to put myself in Paul’s league in any way. Now for the example: I was recently asked if I knew the word “guerdon.” I’m old, and my brain is slow, and so it took several seconds before I was able to reply by quoting Browning, “ere the guerdon be gained, the reward of it all,” which shows that “guerdon” and “reward” are parallel terms. Reading the poem by Browning, which was written in contemplation of death, is probably the only time I have ever seen the word. My memory, unlike Paul’s, was not rigorously trained in childhood, but I think that the characteristics of memorization do not change much from person to person. Memory explains how he could find the texts he wanted in the time available for the composition of his letter to Galatia, which

probably required haste. His mind was directed to the Abraham story, probably by his opponents' arguments, and his memory did the rest, easily producing relevant passages in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Habakkuk, as well as Genesis.

Memory similarly explains the constant conflation of similar texts in Paul's quotations. Please forgive me for again paralleling this phenomenon by referring to myself. A few years ago I read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for the first time in several decades. I was surprised to learn that my memory of Mark Antony's address to the dead Caesar was in fact a conflation of two orations. I had forgotten most of the speech that begins, "O mighty Caesar! Dost thou lie so low?" But I had saved some of the lines at what my memory regarded as appropriate places in the address that begins, "O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth."

I feel quite confident that Paul thought of keywords as he ran through the text of the Abraham story in his mind, and other texts popped into his brain. His memory probably combined them for him. Thus "in you all the Gentiles are blessed" conflates Gen. 18.18 and 12.3; "cursed be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law to do them" is mostly from Deut. 27.26 but includes aspects of Deut. 28.58; etc. I have not counted precisely, but I believe that a majority of Paul's quotations involves at least a little conflation.

CONCLUSION

Paul used prooftexts as did many other ancient Jews, and they served to let him prove new points from old texts. Prooftexting is not a suitable form of study and exegesis for modern scholars, but we should not let our own dislike of the method interfere with our appreciation for the ingenious and supple arguments on which important aspects of early Christianity depended.

We often say or hear that Paul's letters are difficult. His conclusions are almost always perfectly clear, and what is difficult is the argumentation that leads to them. He argued like an

ancient Jew, and for scholars to figure out his arguments they need a little time and some perseverance. The arguments of the letters are of course difficult for laypeople—but that just puts them in the very same situation as the Gentile converts in Galatia and Corinth, at least as I imagine them to be. I think that they had not studied the Scripture daily in childhood and youth. So tell your students, or the people in the pew, that if they find Paul difficult they are in good company.

¹ *Mekhilta Bahodesh* 5 (Lauterbach II, pp. 229f.). I first used this parable in *P&PJ*, p. 86, where there is a full reference.

² Jubilees, for example, appeals to revelation, while the Rabbis opposed revelation as a source of Biblical interpretation.

³ Albert I. Baumgarten, “Metaphors of Memory,” volume for Ronnie Agus.

⁴ The Tannaim were the Rabbis from Shimeon b. Johai to Judah ha-Nasi, c. 70 – 220 CE.

⁵ Morton Smith, “The Dead Sea Sect in Relation to Ancient Judaism,” *NTS* 7, 1960-61, 347-60.

⁶ I noted this briefly in “The Testament of Abraham, Recension A,” J. H. Charlesworth, *OTP* I, p. 888 n. *e* (on 11.9). There is a fuller discussion in the magnificent commentary by Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Testament of Abraham*, CEJL, Walter de Gruyter, 2003, p. 250 (on 11.9). For a list of passages in Greek Pseudepigrapha, see Albert-Marie Denis with Y. Janssens, *Concordance grecque des Pseudépigraphes d’ancien testament*, Louvain, 1987, p. 204.

⁷ Mishnah Sanhedrin 6.2.

⁸ Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” *JTS* n.s. 41, 1991, 532—564, esp. 547f.

⁹ See now J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*. The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1997, p. 18, where there are references to fuller discussions elsewhere in the Commentary.

¹⁰ *P&PJ*, pp. 442-447.

¹¹ I struggled with the lack of a verb cognate with “righteousness” in *P&PJ*, pp. 470-72. In *PLJP* I decided to grasp the bull by the horns and to use “to righteous.” See *PLJP*, p. 6 and n. 18 (pp. 13f.). One will find reference to Grobel in both of these discussions.

¹² “On the Question of Fulfilling the Law in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism,” *Donum Gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube*, ed. E. Bammel, W.D. Davies and C.K. Barrett. Oxford: University Press, 1978, pp. 103-126; see pp. 105f.

¹³ For discussion and some bibliography on interpreting either what Paul said the quotation meant *or* interpreting the meaning of the prooftext on its own, see *PLJP*, pp. 21f. and nn. 28, 30 on p. 54.

¹⁴ *PLJP*, p. 21. So also Martyn, *Galatians*, pp. 309f., nn. 78, 83.