

Promise, Law, Faith:
Covenant-Historical Reasoning In Galatians
A Review Article

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*Promise, Law, Faith*¹ is the culmination of 30 years of reflection and teaching on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Author T. David Gordon boldly claims that "Paul's interpreters have not yet, in my judgment, correctly understood the Galatian letter" (13). He presents his interpretation as a *tertium quid* between the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and what he calls the Dominant Protestant interpretation, noting that "mine could be regarded as a 'third perspective on Paul'" (24–25). The Dominant Protestant (DP) interpretation approaches the letter from a systematic-theological perspective focusing on the *ordo salutis* and concludes that "Paul's 'problem' with the law was exclusively or primarily due to an alleged meritorious abuse thereof" (1). Gordon repeatedly refers to this as reading *between* the lines in Paul's letter rather than reading the lines themselves. While he affirms the DP understanding of the *ordo salutis* and justification by faith alone, Gordon commends the NPP for challenging the DP interpretation of Galatians, arguing from a more sociological perspective that "Paul's difficulty with the law is motivated largely, primarily, or even exclusively by the reality that the law segregated Jews from Gentiles" (2).

Both interpretations, however, fail to adjust their thinking to Paul's thoroughly covenant-historical thinking. Twentieth-century Pauline studies "profited greatly by complementing such [systematic] studies with biblical-theological or redemptive-historical considerations of a *historia salutis* nature" (3). Gordon sees himself carrying this approach a step further, focusing specifically on *historia testamentorum*—the history of God's various covenanting acts. Such an

approach recognizes Paul's use of three synecdoches to refer to three different covenants.

[F]or Paul in Galatians, "law" is ordinarily a synecdoche for the Sinai covenant-administration, an administration characterized by law-giving. And "promise" in the same letter is ordinarily a synecdoche for the Abrahamic covenant-administration, a covenant characterized by promise-giving . . . Paul often uses a third synecdoche, "faith," to refer to the new covenant. He does so because it is a covenant characterized by faith in the dying-and-rising Christ . . . So, then, ordinarily when Paul speaks in Galatians of promise, law, and faith, he means the Abrahami...

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