

**Per Jarle Bekken**  
***Paul's Negotiation of Abraham***  
***in Galatians 3 in the Jewish Context***

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When Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, he wove together many disparate parts of the Hebrew Bible. He alluded to Isaiah's servant songs. He spiritualized the narrative of Hagar and Sarah. He referenced traditions about Abraham, the promises made to him, and the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac). This raises the question regarding how much of Paul's theology, and specifically, his use of Abraham's narrative, was developed solely by Paul and how much was based upon what had already been taught by other Jews? In other words, how much was Paul building upon the foundation of what was already understood by some Jewish teachers, and how much was he creating his own schema? *Paul's Negotiation of Abraham in Galatians 3 in the Jewish Context* deftly contributes to the body of literature that attempts to answer these questions. It focuses solely on Paul's argument in Galatians 3 about Abraham's faith and justification and compares Paul's line of reasoning with writings from Philo that have not previously been compared to Paul's writings.

Within Galatians, Paul uses Abraham as an example of a model follower of God. Though some Galatians believed that they should live according to law (3:2), Paul argues that this was not the case with Abraham. According to Paul, Abraham was taught the gospel and was justified via faith in that gospel (3:8). He was then given a set of promises that extended to his offspring, whom Paul identifies as Jesus, and then to those who "belong to Christ" (3:29). All of these blessings were given because of his faith and not because of his obedience to the law. Some may read Paul's words as radical and anti-Jewish and thus see them as Paul's attempt to undermine any Jewish influence on the church in Galatia. Bekken, however, attempts to situate this discourse within Jewish tradition itself: "A comparison of Paul with Philo with regard to their rationale for the mediation of the Law may indicate that Paul's argument would not perhaps have been conceived to be so idiosyncratic in a Jewish context as scholars have surmised" (233).

Bekken's comparison between Paul and Philo begins in chapters one and two with his examination of Philo's understanding of Abraham. Many times, Philo describes Abraham as the model proselyte, as one who turned from idols to serve the One God (34–37). Crucially, in discussing Abraham and in seeing him as a model proselyte, Philo emphasizes Abraham's "piety" and "nobility of birth," in opposition to a genealogical relationship to his descendants (38). While this does not "mean that the ethnic differences disappear," it does mean that Philo saw spiritual character and thought as more important than physical lineage (40). In this way, Philo set out Abraham as an example to those who were not Jews but who could become Jews via conversion. They could follow Abraham's example by modeling his character. These proselytes join Abraham's family: "The proselytes receive a Jewish identity in terms of character traits they share with Abraham as their model convert...[Philo] never speaks about the converts in terms of ethnic language such as Abraham's descendants or *ethnos*" (62). In chapter three Bekken discusses Philo's interpretation of Abraham's belief in Genesis 15 and his obedience in the *Akedah* in Genesis 22. Philo sees a relationship between belief and obedience and interprets them in light of one another (75). In chapter four Bekken considers Philo's understanding of Genesis 26:5, in which God states that Abraham kept His laws. Philo argues against the idea that Abraham followed the law of Moses, which Bekken suggests was the "conventional Jewish position on Abraham," and instead posits that Abraham followed a Law of Nature (96).

Bekken then turns to Paul and his exposition of Galatians 3 in chapter 5. When considering Paul, he produces textual evidence that suggests that Paul's discussion of Abraham initially began with his discussion of the Galatians' receipt of the Spirit (129–30). This context is crucial as it suggests that just as Philo saw Abraham as the model proselyte, Paul said Abraham's receipt of the Spirit was an example to the Galatians, and he too eventually presented Abraham as the model proselyte (172). It is also noted that Paul's style of argumentation finds similar styles in Philo's writing (139). Paul too links Genesis 15 and Genesis 22 (181). Repeatedly, Bekken builds upon the initial foundation of Philo's interpretation of Abraham, noting that Paul's line of reasoning, while unique to Paul, has echoes in Philo's exposition. The final chapter of the book, chapter six, contains a summary and conclusion.

Overall, Bekken is highly successful in demonstrating a connection between both Paul's style and exposition in Galatians 3 and Philo's writings about Abraham. The study presents a wealth of information and dives deep into the texts. The material presented is thoughtfully weighed and conclusions are balanced. With that said, perhaps one of the only suggestions for improvement in the book would be in the study's organization. The two-fold division of the material is beneficial in clearly navigating Philo's interpretation versus Paul's interpretation. Nevertheless, the sections do not parallel one another. The material discussing Philo spans four chapters, while the material discussing Paul spans one. If the sections were parallel, however, with one chapter noting Philo's approach to a particular topic and then a corresponding chapter about Paul describing Paul's approach, it would perhaps

make the arguments clearer. Outside of this small suggestion, the book is an incredible resource in that it argues powerfully for a Jewish foundation in a book that some read as anti-Jewish. This foundation provides a strong basis for situating Galatians within Jewish thought and therefore as a book that must be interpreted in that light.