

Vignettes from the Life of Paul: The Encounter with Peter at Antioch
T. David Gordon

I. The Background

A. The Threefold Abrahamic Promise: Numerous descendants, promised land, blessing to all nations/peoples/tribes through a *single* descendant of Abraham:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16)

B. The Sinai Covenant Segregated Israel from the Gentiles/Nations by building a fence or wall around Israel to preserve/protect them from Gentile idolatry and inter-marriage, and to preserve the genealogical integrity of the “descendant of Abraham,” Christ (Mat. 1:1 “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham”).

1. Deut 7:1 When the LORD your God brings you into the land...2 You shall make no covenant with them ... 3 You *shall not intermarry with them*, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons,...

Ezra 9:1 “The people of Israel... have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands...10:2 And Shecaniah addressed Ezra: “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land... 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, ...and let it be done *according to the Law*.”

2. Isaiah 5

1 Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will *remove its hedge* (τὸν φραγμὸν αὐτοῦ), and it shall be devoured; I will break down its *wall*, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel...

3. Eph. 2 alludes to Isa. 5, and refers to “the law” as the “wall/hedge” that segregated the Israelites from the Gentiles.

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that at one time *you Gentiles in the flesh*, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, *alienated from the commonwealth of Israel* and *strangers to the covenants* of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who *once were far off have been brought near* by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has *made us both one* and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall (τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ λύσας) of hostility 15 by *abolishing the law* of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself *one new man in place of the two*, so making peace, 16 and might *reconcile us both to God in one body* through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

C. Peter had received a vision not to declare unclean what God had cleansed.

Acts 10:9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became *hungry and wanted something to eat*, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: “*Rise, Peter; kill and eat.*” 14 But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, “*What God has made clean, do not call common.*”

16 This happened *three times*, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.... Acts 11:1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God (Cornelius and others in Acts 10, after Peter's vision). 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party *criticized him*, saying, 3 "You went to *uncircumcised men and ate with them*." 4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for *nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth*.' 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, '*What God has made clean, do not call common*.'... 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then *God gave the same gift to them* as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "*Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life*."

II. The Text

Gal 2:11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was *eating with the Gentiles*; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, *fearing* the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews *acted hypocritically along with him*, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their *hypocrisy*. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was *not in step with the truth of the gospel*, I said to Cephas before them all, "*If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?*" 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 ~~yet~~ we know that a person is not justified by works of the law (KJV: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law...") but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will *be justified* (οὐ δικαιωθήσεται, citing Psa. 143:2—"Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is *righteous* [οὐ δικαιωθήσεται] before you.")

A. Probably due to his vision regarding Cornelius (Acts 10/11), Peter had declared the Gentiles to be benefactors of Christ's saving work, to be baptized into the church with the earlier Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and that they were no longer to be regarded as unclean or common.

B. Peter's earlier/gospel behavior of eating with and baptizing Gentiles violated the (segregating) law of Moses. Acts 11:2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party *criticized him*, saying, 3 "You went to *uncircumcised men and ate with them*."

C. When Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles, Paul confronted Peter publicly
 -for his cowardice,
 -for his hypocrisy, and
 -for his behavior that was inconsistent with "the truth of the gospel."

How can Peter's behavior be contrary to "the truth of the gospel?" Was it not merely a discourtesy, or a pragmatic mistake in terms of missions strategy? No: for Paul, "the gospel" may be summarized in several ways (because it is so rich), but one way to summarize it is as the fulfillment of the third pledge to Abraham:

Gal 3:6 Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." 7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that *God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham*, saying, "*In you shall all the nations be blessed*." 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.... 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— 14 so that in Christ Jesus *the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles*, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.