

# Freedom in Galatians: A socio-historical study of the slavery and adoption imagery



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Paul's freedom in Galatians is the initiation of redemption acted by God's grace through his only Son, Jesus Christ, to set human beings free. Christian freedom is said to be the process of being freed from slavery to freedom; however, this article is giving a different insight into freedom in Galatians, that is, the progress of Christian freedom is not from slavery to freedom, but slavery to slavery. The main point is whom one belongs to: either sin and flesh, or Jesus Christ. Therefore, a full understanding of the meaning of freedom in Galatians has to take the imagery of slavery and adoption into consideration in order to be fully comprehensive.

**Contribution:** This article deals with basic Christian attitudes towards faith, especially regarding the identity of being a Christian and how to live out the characteristics of a Christian life by recognising the true freedom in Christ.

**Keywords:** freedom; socio-historical study; slavery; adoption; Galatians.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1997) defines freedom as 'the freedom of speech, thought, and religion to do whatever one wishes, without being controlled or limited'. This definition of freedom often leads many people, even Christians, to misunderstand freedom as the ability to do whatever one wants according to one's desires (Keener 2019:484). However, Christian freedom is a freedom bound by love, and therefore the freedom that comes in Christ is bound by love (Gl 5:13d; Betz 1979:256; Loubser 2005:322; Oakes 2015:169–170) which, in turn, bears the fruit of the Holy Spirit regarding the needs of others. Thus, the freedom as referred to by Paul in Galatians is a freedom that is regulated in Christ (Loubser 2005:322). In this sense, this research aims to establish the relationship in Galatians between the concept of *freedom*, on the one hand, and *slavery* and *adoption imagery* on the other.

## Method of research

It is important to filter out the words and phrases connected with the concepts of *freedom*, *slavery* and *adoption* used in Galatians. The study was done by using the comparative historical linguistic method, including the synchronic approach (Janse van Rensburg et al. 2015:157) in a socio-historical context of the metaphor (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 2003:5, 117, 154–155; Soskice 1985:15; Van der Watt 2000; Janse van Rensburg et al. 2015). Firstly, utilising the lexicon of Louw and Nida (1996),<sup>2</sup> all terms in Galatians that relate to the concept of freedom in relation to the imagery of slavery and adoption were filtered out in order to focus on all the specific passages that relate to it. After this, it is given the exegesis of the metaphorical meaning of freedom in the texts (Gl 1:1–5; 2:1–10; 3:6–14; 3:23–29; 4:1–7; 4:21–5:1; 5:13–15).

## Definition of the concept of freedom in Galatians

### Greek words for the concept of *freedom* in Galatians

The concept *freedom* in Galatians is defined by Louw and Nida (1996) as:

The state of a person who has been set free by someone who has paid the ransom money. In this way the person is not only taken from a state of confined life, but also moved to a more elevated position. (domain 37.127–138)<sup>3</sup>

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1. Freedom in Galatians: A socio-historical study of the adoption and slavery imagery, Fika J. van Rensburg, Faculty of Theology of North-West University, 2019.

2. The Louw and Nida lexicon is used because it provides a definition of the meaning of words and not only the translation equivalents.

3. In Galatians, Paul used five of these 12 specific words related to freedom: ἐλευθερία/ἐλευθερώ (2:4; 5:1, 13), ἐλεύθερος (3:28; 4:22–23, 26, 30–31), and ἐξαγοράζω (3:13; 4:5). Regarding the frequency of the concept of *freedom* in Galatians, one could argue that this letter could be seen as the letter of Christian freedom (Loubser 2005:324).

## Greek words for the concept of *slavery* in Galatians

According to Louw and Nida (1996) the concept of *slavery* (δοῦλος) is defined as:

The state in which a person finds himself who is completely controlled by another from a position of ownership as property, obligating him to fulfil the orders and wants within the authority sphere of the owner. (domain 37.1–32, 44.9, and 87.76–86)<sup>4</sup>

## Construction of the slavery imagery in Galatians

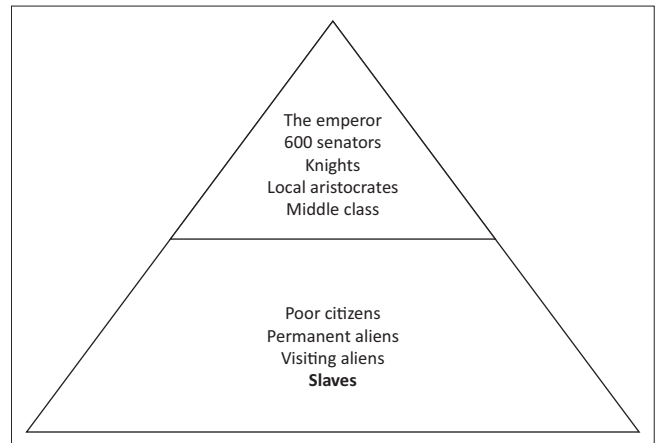
Slavery was deeply rooted in first-century Roman society. It is estimated that at the beginning of the Christian era, more than 30% of the population of Roman Italy was either in slavery or had been freed from slavery. Therefore, everyone in that society knew what slavery was (Turner 2013:3). Not only did slavery become economically necessary, but it was regulated by law and justified (Bartchy 2013:169). The Greek-Roman civilisation was primarily based on a hierarchical system, as can be clearly seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Van Wyk & Van Rensburg 1997:231).

Slaves were subject to their masters' power of ownership and had no self-determining choice but to act according to their masters' wishes (Goede 2010:46). However, being a slave in the Roman Empire could have positive or negative consequences.<sup>5</sup> Some positive points suggest that, being a slave during this period, was not as horrible in all cases as many people now believe (Byron 2003:24–25). Slaves at the time had more freedom in their daily lives: they could save money to buy their own freedom (Byron 2003:24–25); they were given *peculium* (money), which they were free to use and even to buy their own freedom (Goede 2010:74; Horsley 1998:47; Lyall 1981:78). It is said that some slaves at the time had better skills than their masters and were therefore appointed as household or financial managers, or as tutors and governesses of their masters' children. They were eventually given the hope of freedom at the age of 30 (Goede 2010:58).

However, other negative perspectives suggest that, even though slaves could be free at the age of 30 (Gaius 1.17), most of them did not live long enough to enjoy their freedom, because the average age of slaves only reached 30 (Patterson 1982:185–186). Equally inevitable was the fact that, as nonhumans without legal rights, slaves were often treated roughly. Slaves did not have the right to own property or testify in court. Finally, although slaves could purchase their freedom, they would still live in an ongoing relationship with their patron and client after they were freed (Goede 2010:86; Tsang 2005:70). One of the remaining relationships with the sponsor requires the emancipated person to agree to

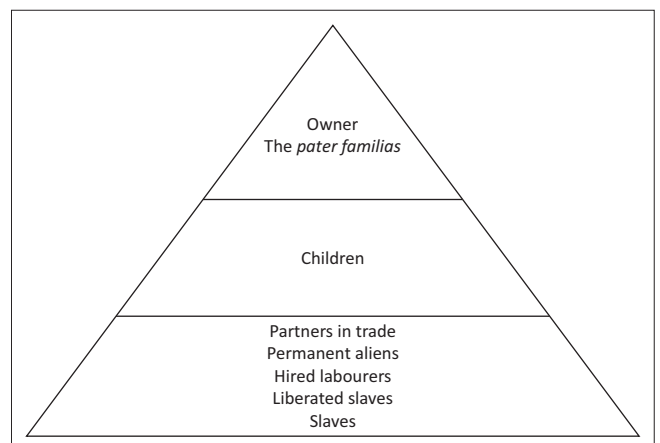
4. Paul used 12 words regarding the concept of slavery in Galatians: δοῦλος (Gl 1:10; 3:28), ἐνέχω (Gl 5:1), ὑπὸ + accusative (Gl 3:10, 22–23, 25; 4:2–5, 21; 5:18), παραδίδωμι (Gl 2:20), δουλῶμαι/δουλεύω (Gl 4:3, 8–9, 25; 5:13), δουλεία (Gl 4:24; 5:1), καταδουλόω (Gl 2:4), παιδίσκη and δούλη (Gl 4:22–23, 30–31), συγκλείω (Gl 3:22–23) and ἀναγκάζω (Gl 2:14; 6:12).

5. In the Roman Empire, the identity of a slave was not the most important thing, but who the owner of a slave was, because when one saw a slave, it was not the identity of the slave that one saw, but who the owner behind it was. Therefore, the scholar Martin (1990:85) says that it did not matter that a person was a slave; the most important factor was whom the slave belonged to.



Source: Moxnes, H., 1997, 'What is family? Problems in constructing early Christian families', in H. Moxnes (ed.), *Constructing early Christian families: Family as social reality and metaphor*, pp. 13–41, Routledge, London and Van Wyk, G. & Janse van Rensburg, F.J., 1997, 'Οἰκέται (household servants) in the first century Graeco-Roman civilization: A socio-historic construction for the interpretation of 1 Peter 2:18', *In die Skriflig* 31(3), 229–249. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v31i3.1610>

**FIGURE 1:** The emperor was at the top of the social pyramid, followed by the 600 senators, knights and local nobility – all of whom had enough influence to govern the policies of the state. The lower class of slaves was at the bottom of the pyramid. The social hierarchy in the Greco-Roman period came from the hierarchy of top to bottom in the family.



Source: Van Wyk, G. & Janse van Rensburg, F.J., 1997, 'Οἰκέται (household servants) in the first century Graeco-Roman civilization: A socio-historic construction for the interpretation of 1 Peter 2:18', *In die Skriflig* 31(3), 229–249. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v31i3.1610>

**FIGURE 2:** In the 1st century, the family usually consisted of more than parents and children. The status of the slave was again at the lowest level. The dominant figure in the family was the *pater familias*, who had complete legal control over the family as a whole and over the slave in particular.

provide services to his or her master. These services include working a certain number of days per week, month or year, depending on the slave's ability and previous occupation (Lyall 1981:79). Another bond is that, in some cases, the patron is entitled to inherit the freedman's property and, in a sense, the patron is also considered an heir. The patron could claim a gift from him, the *munera*, but the most general link lay in the concept of *obsequium* (Lyall 1981:79).<sup>6</sup> One can clearly see that, in the Roman Empire, the concept of slavery had both positive and negative connotations.

Given the context of slavery, Paul uses slave imagery in a way that expresses both positive (Gl 1:10) and negative

6. The meaning of *obsequium* is the duty of respectful conduct showing itself in many specific rules, and it can mean the practice of obeying rules or requests made by the master in authority.

perspectives (Gl 2:4; 3:10). On the negative side, slavery is oppressive in every way and people need to be set free from it. Paul uses this aspect of slavery to refer to slavery as sin: the various connections to the law and the flesh, which is like the master having complete control over the lives of his slaves, making them his property and obligating them to himself. On a positive note, Paul speaks of himself as a 'slave of Jesus Christ' (Gl 1:10) and encourages the Galatians to 'be slaves to one another through love' (Gl 5:13). All positive statements are about salvation (gaining freedom) and adoption.

### νόθεσία [adoption as a son] and semantically related words in Galatians 4:5

The concept *adoption* (νόθεσία) in Galatians is defined (Louw & Nida 1996) in this study as:

The process through which a person declares formally and legally that someone who is not their own child is henceforth to be treated and cared for as a legitimate child, including complete rights of inheritance. (domain 35.53)

### Construction of adoption imagery in Galatians

In the Roman tradition, the members of the family group are the cornerstone of society, and it is also the primary context for social, religious, economic and political security (Chang 2021:5–6; MacDonald 2009:29; Malina 2009:18–19). The father has the ultimate authority to adopt someone into the family, granting that person all the rights of a legitimate child. Thus, the phrase *adoption as a son* should be understood in the context of the social reality of the first century and also according to Roman law (Krueger & Watson 1985:19–20). Because family continuity was very important in the Roman culture, the adoption of sons was done to avoid the risk of family extinction (Burke 2001:122). In addition, inheritance rights and legal status passed from the father to the adopted son who had to give up all rights to the original family in order to assume the family responsibilities as an adopted son (Krueger & Watson 1985:21–22).

Under the new paternity, the adopted person who has all his previous debts erased, opens a new life (Burke 2006:40; Chang 2021:6), and takes on a new status, name and responsibilities (*De Domo sua* 35). Thus, fidelity is the most important thing in an adoptee's life. Paul uses the metaphor of adoption as a son to express what the pagan conversion process means. The imagery of adoption suggests that the way in which the pagan becomes a Christian, and especially the adoptee, undergoes a dramatic transformation similar to the experience of resocialisation shared by the early Christians (Burke 2001:124). Thus, the relationship of freedom in Galatians is implied within the framework of slavery and adoption imagery.

### Freedom within slavery and adoption imagery

To establish the meaning of freedom in Galatians, the following pericopes are exegeted: Galatians 1:1–5 (ἐξαίρεω);

2:1–10 (ἐλευθερία); 3:6–14 (ἐξαγοράζω); 3:23–29 (ἐλεύθερος); 4:5 (ἐξαγοράζω); 4:21–5:1 (ἐλεύθερος, ἐλευθερία, ἐλευθερώω); 5:13–24 (ἐλευθερία). The method of exegesis is based on Van Rensburg and others, but the Greek analytical diagram was omitted because of limited space.<sup>7</sup> The pericope sections used the breakdown of Galatians as proposed by De Boer (2011:14) and Keener (2019:vii–viii).

### Galatians 1:1–5: ἐξαίρεω

Galatians 1:1–5 is the preface to the opening of the epistle (Keener 2019:48). In this preface, Paul speaks of the divine origin of his apostleship (Gl 1:1) and of the gospel that Christ gave us to deliver us from 'the present evil world' (Gl 1:4). Paul presents himself as an example of an apostle being delivered from this evil age through the saving grace of Christ (Gl 1:4) in opposition to those who are committed to human and carnal power and want to enslave the Galatian believers (Gl 6:12–13; cf. Oakes 2015:24). Thus, freedom through Christ allows one to escape the present evil age through faith and enter the family of the Father.

The important Greek term used by Paul is ἐξαίρεω (Gl 1:4) – a word that is one of the concepts related to freedom. In the context of Galatians 1:4, it can be interpreted to mean 'to deliver someone from a dangerous or confining situation' (Bauer 2000).

This passage is not concerned with the image of the master in the family, but with the image of the father, expressing the freedom that God grants in love to all of those who believe in Christ and enter his house. As the master, Jesus Christ is not like those lords who are served by others; rather, he is the Lord who is willing to give himself up for all so that we may become children of God through his sacrifice. Through the image of father and master, believers are sons (and daughters) of God and slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ.

From a socio-historical perspective, this passage is relevant to the first-century family, especially as God is described as 'Father' on three occasions (Gl 1:1, 3, 4; cf. Oakes 2015:38). As the authority of the father in the context of Greco-Roman society, Paul emphasises the role of God as father, because God raised his son Jesus Christ from the dead by his patriarchal power (Gl 1:16; 2:20; cf. 4:4, 6).

Further, in accordance with the will of God as Father, Jesus Christ is designated as κύριος [Lord]. This title refers not only to the many lords of the Roman social family, but also to the Roman emperor who has sole authority in the Greek-Roman world (De Boer 2011:28). By means of this metaphor, it is pointed out that the way God creates the new family, that is,

<sup>7</sup>The steps of biblical interpretations are as follows: (1) analysing the thought structure of the Greek in the pericope; (2) determining the key verse of the pericope; (3) establishing the socio-historical context of the pericope; (4) doing word study of important concepts in the key verse; and (5) giving the communication goal of the pericope. However, although the steps of analysing the structure of Greek thought in the pericopes are completed, they will not be presented in this article due to the limited space (Janse van Rensburg et al. 2015:3).

by offering his only Son for the sins of mankind (Gl 1:4). This act of God differs from the way the Roman emperor establishes the family through military power.

'The present evil age' (τοῦαιῶνος τοῦνεστώτος πονηροῦ) can refer to the Roman empire. The epistle was written around 55 CE during the prosperous reign of the emperor Nero, and brought about inter-ethnic harmony through his power (Oakes 2015:41). The phrase can also refer to the power of sin as the master who enslaves all men (Gl 3:22). This power, often called σὰρξ [flesh], dominates the recipient of the letter (Gl 5:13–24; De Boer 2011:35). Whether referring to the Roman Empire or to the power of sin as master, the Lord Jesus Christ has set all men, Jews and Gentiles alike, free from the law, sin and the power of the flesh.

Therefore, the purpose of this passage was to make the Galatian believers aware of the fact that Paul's apostleship came directly from God the Father. They had also been set free from the present evil age and had entered the house of God the Father. This 'being set free' was due to the fact that Jesus Christ obeyed the will of 'our Father' by giving himself for the sins of men to set them free. Thus, through the Lord Jesus Christ, God established a new family as a kind of community.

### **Galatians 2:1–10: ἐλευθερία, ἀναγκάζω, καταδουλόω**

The argument for the imagery of freedom and slavery in Galatians 2:1–10 is that the false brothers tried to enslave the Gentile Christians by demanding circumcision as a prerequisite. They tried to enslave Titus who was a Greek by forcing him to accept circumcision (Gl 2:3a).

In this passage, there are three important Greek words used by Paul in connection with slavery and freedom. The first word is ἀναγκάζω (Gl 2:3) – a word used in Scripture with regards to the concept of slavery, meaning to force someone to accept something. Ἀναγκάζω is used twice: in Galatians 2:3 and 2:14, referring to false brothers who not only forced Gentile Christians to be circumcised (2:3), but even forced them to live in the manner of the Jewish people by adopting the peculiar Jewish way of life (ἀναγκάζεις ιουδαΐζειν) (2:14; cf. Bauer 2000; Oakes 2015:69). Thus, the false brothers act as a family at home with the intention of oppressing the Gentile believers.

The second word associated with slave imagery is καταδουλόω, which can be defined as 'to gain control, to make a slave, to make someone obedient, to make like a slave'. In this passage, καταδουλόω presupposes that circumcision and the law are 'slaves', referring to the curses (ὑπὸ κατάραν; Gl 3:10), sins (ὑπὸ μαρτίαν; Gl 3:22), the Law (ὑπὸ νόμον; Gl 3:23), guardians and custodians (ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους; Gl 4:2), or the elements of the world (ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου; Gl 4:3), which Paul expounds in Galatians 3:10–4:11.

The last word is ἐλευθερία (Gl 2:4), as in the words ἐλεύθερος, ἐλευθερώ and ἐξαγοράζω. In the context of Greco-Roman society, these words contrasted with slavery, because slavery

was accepted as an institution; conversely, it had legal authority for those who were socially free, because freedom of status provided voice, honour, dignity and equality of power in the empire.

From a socio-historical point of view, Paul specifically targets a group of 'false brothers' (cf. Gl 2:4). He therefore met with these leaders privately. Paul used the example of Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile (Gl 2:3–5), to proclaim what the true gospel is. The leaders in Jerusalem accepted Paul's gospel that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised (Gl 2:7) and acknowledged that grace had been given to him (Gl 2:9a–c). Thus, the truth of the gospel was demonstrated when they accepted Titus.

For Paul, this gospel was not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles (the uncircumcised), and there were no social boundaries in the Lord Jesus Christ, for he made all men free to enter the warm house of God the Father. However, false brothers snuck in and tried to take away their freedom as family members in order to enslave (καταδουλόω; Gl 2:4) them. Slavery here can refer to forced circumcision (ἀναγκάζω; Gl 2:3) or to the law, which is later described in this letter as a form of slavery (cf. Gl 4:21–31); yet Christ 'has set us free' (Gl 5:1; 3:13; 4:4–5; 5:13; cf. De Boer 2011:114).

Furthermore, in the 1st century surrounded by a sense of honour and shame, Jews felt honoured for being Jewish, especially those who kept the Law. Circumcision was a sign of honour among the Jews, signifying belonging to the covenant with Abraham and Moses through the sign on the human body (DeSilva 2012:38). It always observed as a mark of honour, and if the Gentiles wanted to be part of the Jewish people, they had to be circumcised, otherwise they would lose the honour of the covenant.

In the Greco-Roman social context, being enslaved meant being separated from one's family, tribe, identity, sense of honour and dignity. The false brothers acted like thieves or pirates, trying to enslave the Galatians and steal them from the house of God in Christ Jesus. Paul challenged his opponents, using such combative language as 'the false brothers (ψευδαδελφούς)' (Gl. 2:4a), referring to someone who 'pretends to be an intimate member of a socio-religious group' (Louw & Nida 1996). This expression contrasts with that in the term *brothers* (ἀδελφοί; Gl 1:2, 11). Paul further defines these false brothers with another negative adjective παρείσακτος [secretly brought in or smuggled in] (Gl 2:4a), spying on their freedom (Gl 2:4b) for the purpose of enslaving their true brothers and sisters (Gl 2:4c). However, the Lord Jesus Christ has paid the ransom to set all believers free from their state of confinement and to become members of the family of God and gain elevation in status.

In summary, the purpose of this passage is to exhort the reader not to be enslaved by false brothers. By bringing Titus to Jerusalem as an example of freedom in Jesus Christ, he



expresses what it means to be free in Jesus Christ. By receiving the right hand of partnership from the leaders in Jerusalem, Paul proved that his gospel was not only directly from God. Freedom is therefore the release from the compulsion of circumcision.

### Galatians 3:6–14: ἐξαγοράζω

The insight of this passage on freedom and slavery is that all men are under a curse, because no one can fully comply with all the requirements of the law. The only way for mankind to be free from the curse is through faith in Christ as Abraham believed in God.

An important word related to freedom and slavery is ἐξαγοράζω (Gl 3:13); the metaphorical meaning is 'to secure someone's right by paying a price, to purchase, to acquire as property' (Bauer 2000). In this passage (Gl 3:13–14), Paul firstly explains how Christ purchased the believer from the law (Gl 3:13a). Then he adds that it became a curse for them (Gl 3:13b) for the purpose of bringing the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus to the nations (Gl 3:14a), with the main result being that believers would receive the promise of the Holy Spirit through faith (Gl 3:14b). It is clear to see that Galatians 3:13a and 3:14b demonstrate the main idea of Galatians 3:1–4:7, that Christ redeems 'us' from the curse of the law so that 'we' may receive the promise of the Holy Spirit through faith (Gl 3:1–5; De Boer 2011:209). This main idea is reminiscent of Galatians 1:4 where Paul mentions that the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins so that we might be delivered from this present evil age. Both concepts introduce the idea of liberation from the law (Gl 3:13b) and the present evil age (Gl 1:4b–c) by being on the wood (the cross). Because of sin, no one is justified before God. However, all are set free by the redeeming act of the Lord Jesus Christ and are transferred into the new family of God. Therefore, for Paul, all men are enslaved to the power of sin. Freedom from this barbaric master (sin) can only be obtained through the Lord Jesus Christ by believing in him as the new Master and not through any human standard or the Mosaic law.

In the social context of the first century, people were not chosen to join a family on their own merit. Instead, their merit came from their lineage – the reputation of their ancestors. Both the Greek Roman and Jewish cultures were proud of their lineage (DeSilva 2012:158). Descent gives a person the status and identity of a group of descendants of Abraham as the ancestors of Israel (Esler 1997:130). The linear genealogy can be seen as a rational inheritance right to power, status, rank and office (Esler 1997:130–132). Therefore, the behaviour of the ancestors followed by the descendants is an affirmation and existential meaning for the group and others. Thus, in this passage, Paul utilises Abraham as an example to refute the agitators based on the Genesis 15:6 and 12:3 passages. However, these agitators emphasise Genesis 17:9–14 and Abraham's act of sacrifice. Paul, on the other hand, emphasises Abraham's faith rather than the works of the law.

The purpose of this passage is to refute the agitators who teach that Abraham's blessing was through the works of the law. However, Paul proves that if man tries to obtain blessing through the 'works of the law', he or she will surely fail and be cursed, because all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are unable to fulfil God's law. Only in Christ Jesus can mankind be free from the curse of the law. Therefore, the Galatian believers could receive the blessing of Abraham – the promised Holy Spirit.

### Galatians 3:23–29: ἐλεύθερος

In this passage, Paul treats the law as a slave who disciplines the master's children in the first-century household; the slave disciplines the children until they reach adulthood. Thus, Scripture speaks of the task of the disciplinarian (the law) being completed when Jesus came. When the Gentiles believe in Jesus Christ, they are all, without distinction, children of God, for they are all one in Christ and all equally the heirs of Abraham according to the promise.

The imagery of freedom and slavery in Galatians 3:28 surrounds παιδαγωγός and ἐλεύθερος. By utilising the image of the disciplinarian (παιδαγωγός; cf. Gl 3:24–25) and the Son of God, Paul places this passage in a first-century family context. Παιδαγωγός is a slave in the family whose task is to oversee the activities of the children in the family from infancy (6 years old) to adolescence (16 years old) (De Boer 2011:240; Esler 1997:179). He is not only responsible for accompanying the children to and from school, and supervising their daily activities, but also for their behaviour. This role also included reprimanding and punishment for wrongdoing (Belleville 1986:59). This man was considered 'schoolmaster' or 'instructor'. This is evident in Galatians 3:24 where it is stated that the disciplinarian is there to 'lead us to Christ'.

Paul uses the image of παιδαγωγός to emphasise that his control over the children is temporary and to show that believers have been set free, because faith has come, and they are no longer under the influence of disciplinarians (Gl 3:25). The age of faith had come, ending the age of the law (Gl 3:22). Paul states that the age of maturity had come for the Galatian believers, and that the age of the law as παιδαγωγός had passed away (Belleville 1986:60). By faith they came of age and became sons and daughters of God, equal heirs outside the law for Gentiles and Jews alike (Belleville 1986:61).

The second image Paul uses is that of children of God (υἱοὶ θεοῦ). Paul uses this title to define the new group of Christ, including not only Jews, but also Gentiles who have become children of God through faith and are therefore heirs of God. Paul may also be referring to the children in the family in the context of first-century society. The dominant figure in the family was the father, who controlled all the members of the family.

For Paul, there was a unity in Christ across the most basic social divide in Greco-Roman life. Paul here applies an entry rite which indicates that believers are baptised not into the

assembly – as in the social clubs of the first century – but into Christ so that they may share in his passion and new life (Gl 2:19–20; 5:24; 6:14–15, 17; cf. Oakes 2015:130–131), while gaining divine kinship through Christ (De Boer 2011:243). Here, Paul does not emphasise the rite of baptism per se, but rather faith in Christ. In Christ, believers are one and qualified to be the only begotten son of Abraham (Gl 3:16), and therefore ‘heirs according to the promise’ (Gl 3:18). The Gentiles are not threatened by the sign of circumcision, for they are heirs of Abraham through Christ by faith and are therefore children of God.

In short, the law was the will of God, and was only used as a temporary measure to point out the necessity of faith in Christ. When Jesus Christ came, the law, which distinguished between Jews and Gentiles, ceased to have any effect. Therefore, the freedom obtained through faith in Jesus Christ gives believers an equal status as heirs of the promise, namely the Holy Spirit.

### **Galatians 4:1–7: ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, δουλῶ**

Paul’s argument in this passage is that the heir, as long as he remains a minor, is subject to the guardians and trustees as a slave. Likewise, the believer is a slave to the laws of the world (the same as the Law). However, God sent his Son to deliver them from the law. Thus, through the Holy Spirit, they become children of God and heirs.

This Scripture is a result of the use of key words linked to the metaphorical imagery of freedom, slavery and adoption: ἐπιτρόπους, οἰκονόμους, δεδουλωμένοι, ἐξαγοράση, υιοθεσία pointing out that God sent his Son, born of a woman, that is, born under the law to redeem (ἐξαγοράση) believers from the slavery of the law (δεδουλωμένοι) (ἐπιτρόπους and οἰκονόμους) as a secular law (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) so that they might be set free and adopted as children of God (τὴν υιοθεσίαν). God’s promised heir to Abraham, the Spirit of Christ. However, as with the metaphor of παιδαγωγός in the social context, Paul continues to use the metaphor of ἐπίτροπος [guardian] in this passage (Gl 4:2).

In the context of first-century Greco-Roman society, the precise function of the ἐπίτροπος was to manage the treasury, the fields and the cattle, but generally speaking, the ἐπίτροπος managed the families of minors until they reached adulthood (Bauer 2000), including providing food and clothing for minors, as well as all necessary education and general well-being (Belleville 1986:61; Keener 2019:321). The minor (νήπιός; Gl 4:1) is theoretically the rightful owner of the estate. However, the control of his property and well-being is in the hands of the legal guardian, and therefore the minor cannot act independently while he or she has not yet reached the age of maturity.

Being ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν [under a disciplinarian] (Gl 3:25) is equivalent to being ὑπὸ πειρόπους [under a guardian] (Gl 4:2), which means that there is a lack of freedom in the

family during childhood. The child’s life and possessions were controlled and managed by others until the father determined that the child had matured and released the child from guardianship in due course (Gl 4:2–4). Here οἰκονόμοι [trustee] must be understood as a Greco-Roman guardianship (Goodrich 2010:265–273). These two words overlap in meaning. The former is responsible for movable property such as servants and livestock, while the latter is responsible for immovable property (Belleville 1986:62).

Paul’s reference to the personification of the law (Gl 3:23–25) and the guardianship (Gl 4:2) indicate a temporary control over people (De Boer 2011:241). Paul notes that, although the child is under the control of a disciplinarian, guardian and trustee, he or she, like the slave, lacks the capacity for self-determination. Likewise, the Jews under the Law lacked this ability. The main theme of the metaphor in Galatians 4:1–2 is that the age of the law is not permanent.

Another socio-historical aspect of this passage is υιοθεσία [adoption as a child] (Gl 4:5), which was a common social institution in the social context of the first century (Keener 2019:345; Oakes 2015:138). However, God the Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ, is compared to the Roman emperor (the father of the nation) or the father in the Roman family. In the Greco-Roman family, the will of the father is absolute. By using such imagery, Paul’s gospel message to the Galatians was non-negotiable.

Therefore, the purpose of this passage is to remind the Galatian believers that their time as slaves in the house of God is over. Now they were no longer slaves, but children of God and heirs, for God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to set them free. God also sent the Spirit of his Son to prove that they were God’s children and therefore his heirs.

### **Galatians 4:21–5:1: ὑπὸ νόμον, παιδείκη, δουλεία, δουλεύω**

Paul’s argument in this passage is that Abraham had two sons who represent two covenants. The first son was born of the slave Hagar through the flesh (see Gn 16:2); the second was born of a free woman through the promise (Gn 21:1–3) and the Holy Spirit. The status of these two sons was related to their mothers. However, the children of slaves persecuted the children of free women as described in the Old Testament. The result of this persecution in the past was that the slave mother and her son were cast out of the house and lost their inheritance rights. Paul interpreted this Old Testament narrative allegorically, arguing that the Galatians were free children through Christ.

Therefore, the meaning of the ‘free’ and ‘slave’ imagery in the argument of Galatians 4:21–5:1 is that Jesus Christ sets believers free, just like Isaac who was promised by God to Abraham and not born through human intent (Gn 16:2). Therefore, the Galatians should stand firm in Christ and not be enslaved again. Under this understanding, σάρξ is an important concept related to freedom and slavery. In

Galatians 4:29, σάρξ is described by Bauer (2000) as 'all the parts of the body forming a whole called flesh, in which it is so dominated by sin that no good thing can come out of it'. Thus, σάρξ here (Gl 4:29) refers to being enslaved to sin (cf. Gl 5:19–21; 6:8).

In Galatians, σάρξ is used several times to allude to foreskins, which became an important issue in the church (Gl 6:13). The problem was that some believers in the church wanted to obey the requirements of the law by having their foreskins removed in circumcision. In this sense, the word has a negative connotation in contrast to the promise (Gl 4:23) and the Holy Spirit (Gl 4:29), and can even be used as an act of personification in opposition to the Holy Spirit (Gl 5:16–17; De Boer 2011:336). Thus, the flesh refers to the 'sinful inclination of the individual' which shows the 'sinful power' (Longenecker 2001:38–41). This meaning of σάρξ can also be associated with 'the present evil age' (Gl 1:4) in contrast to the Holy Spirit and the new creation (Gl 6:15; Barclay 1988:205).

From the standpoint of socio-historical texts, Jerusalem was the centre of life with the Jewish feasts and the Temple. In Jewish writings, the city is associated with the authority of God (Oakes 2015:156–157). The opponents (Gl 1:7) focused on the element of geography to confirm their privilege and status as God's voters. However, Josephus, recognising that God's will was to destroy the temple and the holy city through the Roman Empire, believed that Jerusalem and the temple should not be the primary foundation for God's obedient people, but that the people should obey God's commandments as obedient slaves. For him, the most important thing was to be a faithful slave of God (cf. *Jwr* 3:354<sup>8</sup>).

Philo interprets the two women, Sarah and Hagar, as an allegory referring to different human qualities: one enslaved to pleasure or lust (*De posteritate Cain* 122<sup>9</sup>) the other giving herself to the Creator God by virtue to nourish her son (*De posteritate Cain* 130<sup>10</sup>). He also describes slavery as a matter of morality and obedience, for mankind has two tendencies: first, to be enslaved by pleasure or desire as Adam, Eve and Esau were, and thus separated from God; or second, to be free in the eyes of God as Abraham was, and faithful to his master (cf. *Leg* 3:88). Thus, one does not depend on external status or place of birth, but on obedience to God in order to be a good person with true freedom.

Paul's understanding is similar to that of Josephus and Philo, but differs in one important way: His understanding of slavery and freedom was based on the need for man to be free through the redemption of Christ. The actual location (Jerusalem) was not important to Paul, for the redemption of Jesus Christ was

8. '... I willingly give them my hands, and am content to live. And I protest openly, that I do not go over to the Romans as a deserter of the Jews, but as a minister (slave [δούκονος]) from you'.

9. *De posteritate Cain* 122: '... those who pursue a life of pleasure have only a brief and fictitious want of opportunities ... therefore, having swollen extravagantly, and become enormously distended by their profuse fatness and luxury ...' (Cicero 1891).

10. *De posteritate Cain* 130: 'Now Hagar is the handmaid of Sarah, the new dispensation of perfect virtue...' (Cicero 1891).

not a geographical or any external sign. Although Jerusalem was under Roman control at that time, God could still work anywhere in the world, because God is the one who created the whole world. The one who makes man a child of God is the woman who belongs to freedom, that is, Sarah. Her children are thus born free, which is related to Jerusalem above. The opponents who persecuted the Galatians (Gl 1:7) belonged to the slave Hagar, now related to Jerusalem, and they were the children of the slave who could not inherit with the children of the promise and had to be cast out.

Paul quotes in Galatians 4:27 from Isaiah 54:1 to issue the song of triumph about the barren woman, which must be understood in the context of the suffering servant (Is 52:13–53:12; Oakes 2015:157). At that time, Israel was in exile and Jerusalem was very desolate such as an abandoned barren woman, but God would restore his people through an obedient servant. Now Israel is a slave to the power of the Roman Empire as was the case in Babylon. Isaiah's prophet described a return from exile, and the Lord promised to let Israel return to the land where she would prosper. For Paul, the metaphor is an expression of the fact that now God will redeem the people as he promised to Abraham and Sarah, even though Sarah was barren (Gn 18:9–15), and he will re-establish a new family through a servant like the prophets and the royal family.

Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1, originally a comforting prophecy to a barren and desolate Jerusalem, and further comparing Sarah to Jerusalem as the mother of freedom (Gl 4:26). An obedient servant will now manifest the faithfulness of God's promise to the people by realising the nations of many peoples. For Paul, the solution to the problem of disobedient Israel could only come through Abraham's descendant: the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, as the obedient slave of God, would restore the nations to a father-son relationship with God.

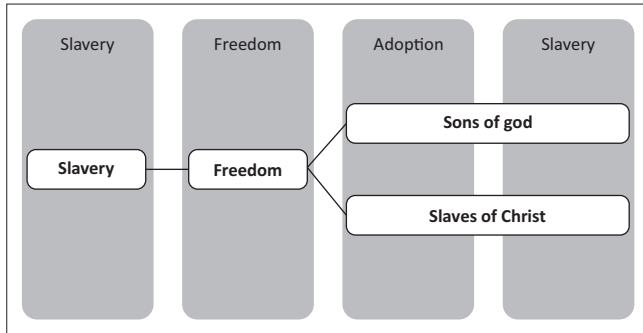
Therefore, the purpose of this passage is to convince the Galatians that through the redemption of Christ Jesus, they will be free as Abraham's descendants. They must remain steadfast in their freedom and heirship. Although some opponents try to enslave them like the female slaves (Hagar), the descendants of these slaves (the agitators) must be driven out of the house of God.

### Galatians 5:13–15: δουλεύω

Paul's argument in this passage is that, although the Galatians were free, they should maintain this freedom and realise how evil the power of the flesh is (Gl 5:13c). They must use their freedom properly and not abuse it, but serve one another in love (as slaves – δουλεύετε [Gl 5:13d]).

In the argument of Galatians 5:13–15, the meaning of 'freedom' and 'slavery' is that believers, having been freed from the power of the flesh, must again be enslaved, but now by their new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they must serve one another in love and fulfil the commandments





**FIGURE 3:** One can see that from the perspective of redemption, after being set free from slavery and gaining freedom, Christians receive new identities as children of God (vertical) and as slaves of Christ (horizontal). The progress of Christian redemption and freedom is not from slavery to freedom, but from slavery to slavery. However, the Master has changed this: it is now no longer sin or flesh, but Jesus Christ is the Master, the new Owner.

of God. Freedom is not to be abused to do what one likes, but to serve one another as slaves.

In conclusion, the purpose of this passage is to encourage the Galatian believers, who have been set free from the present evil age (flesh and sin) to become members of God's family, that they will naturally become slaves to serve one another. This is because of the example set by the self-sacrifice in love of their new Master, Jesus Christ. Based on the price Christ paid on the cross (Gl 2:12–21), Paul could call himself a slave of Christ so that he would be faithful in proclaiming the gospel of his Master (Gl 1:10). Therefore, the Galatians should hold fast to their Master, Jesus Christ, and be guided by the Holy Spirit so that they may serve one another in love.

## Conclusion

For Paul, freedom is the metaphorical link between slavery and adoption, the liberation of mankind by the grace of God through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Prior to this redemption, human beings, as slaves, were completely controlled by their masters, namely sin, the flesh and the law, and were bent on doing only what their masters wanted them to do. In this oppressive and cruel situation, God as Father, gave himself up for them in love through Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, to pay their debts and set them free. He not only brought them from a state of confinement to a state of freedom (the image of slavery), becoming slaves to one another in love, but also formally adopted them, declared them his children, and welcomed them into his warm family as their new Master (the image of adoption).

Through the dramatic transformation of salvation, Christians are not only vertically recognised by the Holy Spirit as children of God; they are also recognised as slaves of Christ, serving their family members horizontally with love, doing what God the Father desires and glorifying his name. Therefore, the definition of freedom in Galatians can only be fully understood by considering the metaphor of slavery and adoption as illustrated in Figure 3.

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