

Paul's Use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3: A Rhetorical and Intertextual Analysis

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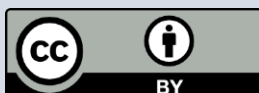
This article is a research project that takes the topic of Paul's Use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3: A Rhetorical and Intertextual Analysis. The study uses the citation strategy of Paul on Deuteronomy in Galatians 3: 10-14 to expose the inability of the Law, and unveils the necessity for the redemptive role of Christ.

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Abstract

This article argues that Paul's use of Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 in Galatians 3:10–14 is neither incidental nor merely evidential but constitutes the decisive rhetorical and theological pivot of his argument for justification by faith. Against readings that treat Paul's citations as prooftexts supporting a pre-formed theology, this study contends that Paul actively reconstructs the Deuteronomic curse tradition to expose the internal logic of law-based righteousness and to articulate its redemptive resolution in Christ. Employing a rhetorical–intertextual methodology that combines close Greek exegesis with comparative analysis of the Septuagint and Hebrew texts, the article demonstrates that Deuteronomy 27:26 functions to totalise the law's demand and universalise its curse, while Deuteronomy 21:23 is deliberately reappropriated to present the crucified Christ as the covenantal representative who bears that curse on behalf of others. The study concludes that Paul does not abolish the law but redefines its theological function, transforming curse from a terminal judgment into the means by which Abrahamic blessing and Spirit-empowered life are realised through faith.

Keywords: Galatians 3; Deuteronomy; curse; Pauline intertextuality; rhetorical strategy

Abstrak

Artikel ini berargumen bahwa penggunaan Ulangan 27:26 dan 21:23 oleh Paulus dalam Galatia 3:10–14 bukan bersifat tambahan atau sekadar pembuktian, melainkan menjadi poros retorik dan teologis utama dalam argumentasinya tentang pembenaran oleh iman. Berlawanan dengan pendekatan yang melihat kutipan Paulus sebagai prooftext bagi teologi yang sudah terbentuk, studi ini menegaskan bahwa Paulus secara aktif merekonstruksi tradisi kutuk Deuteronomis untuk menyingkap logika internal pembenaran berbasis hukum Taurat sekaligus menunjukkan resolusi penebusannya di dalam Kristus. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan retorika–intertekstual yang menggabungkan eksegesis Yunani secara cermat dan perbandingan dengan Septuaginta serta teks Ibrani, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Ulangan 27:26 men-totalisasi tuntutan hukum dan menguniversalkan kutuknya, sedangkan Ulangan 21:23 ditafsirkan ulang secara sengaja untuk menampilkan Kristus yang tersalib sebagai wakil perjanjian yang menanggung kutuk tersebut bagi umat. Kesimpulannya, Paulus tidak meniadakan Taurat, melainkan mendefinisikan ulang fungsinya, sehingga kutuk menjadi sarana bagi berkat Abraham dan hidup oleh Roh melalui iman.

Kata kunci: Galatia 3; Ulangan; kutukan; intertekstualitas Paulus; strategi retorika

INTRODUCTION

The Epistle to the Galatians remains a critical text in the Pauline corpus, often regarded as the Magna Carta of Christian Liberty due to its intense focus on the contrast between grace and Law, and the theme of justification by faith apart from works of the Law. Galatians 3:10–14 sits at the rhetorical and theological center of this epistle, capturing the complex use of Scripture by Paul, particularly Deuteronomy, in his argument against Judaizing tendencies within the early Church (Cowan, 2020, p. 213). In this passage, Paul engages in a deeply intertextual dialogue with Old Testament, strategically invoking Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 to reframe the curse associated with the Law and to elevate the redemptive importance of the crucifixion of Christ. The hermeneutical approach of Paul is anything but arbitrary (Park, 2018, p. 49). His citation strategy reveals rhetorical sophistication, and not only theological depth. This study contends that the engagement of Paul with Deuteronomy in Galatians 3 is best understood as a purposeful act of rhetorical reorientation. He is drawing his audience into a reimagined theological framework where the curse associated with failure to uphold the Law, finds resolution in the crucified Christ, and not merely quoting Old Testament verses to prove a point.

Galatians 3:10–14 constitutes a pivotal moment in Paul's argument, where the apostle deploys Israel's scriptural tradition to redefine the relationship between law, curse, and redemption. By invoking Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23, Paul asserts that reliance on the law entails subjection to a curse, while simultaneously proclaiming that Christ's crucifixion effects liberation from that very curse. This juxtaposition raises a fundamental interpretive question: how can a Torah text associated with covenantal fidelity and blessing be mobilised to support a claim about curse and condemnation? (Dunn, 1985, pp. 523–542)

Scholarly interpretation of this passage has long recognised its theological density, particularly within discussions of justification, covenant identity, and the role of Torah in Pauline thought. Earlier readings often framed Paul's argument in primarily anthropological terms, emphasising human inability to fulfil the law (Seifrid, 2001). More recent approaches, however, have shifted toward covenantal, rhetorical, and intertextual readings, recognising that Paul's use of Deuteronomy reflects a deliberate interpretive engagement rather than a polemical misuse of Scripture (Wright, 2018). Within this trajectory, Paul emerges not merely as a theologian of grace but as a rhetorically skilled interpreter of Israel's Scriptures who rearticulates covenantal categories in light of the Christ event.

Recent scholarship on Galatians provides a multifaceted framework for understanding Paul's rhetorical, hermeneutical, and theological strategies, particularly in relation to scriptural citation and argumentation. Swart demonstrates that the rhetoric of Galatians is best reconstructed through close attention to the syntactic and discourse features of the text itself, arguing that linguistic structures function as reliable indicators of Paul's rhetorical strategy rather than as secondary stylistic embellishments (Swart, 2007, pp. 162–173). Building on this methodological sensitivity, Park shows that Paul's use of Old Testament citations in Galatians 3:10–14 reflects a coherent hermeneutical logic in which Scripture is not merely quoted but recontextualised and reoriented toward a christological and soteriological end (Park, 2018, p.

55). Caneday's influential study further clarifies this dynamic by arguing that Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 21:22–23 in Galatians 3:13 constitutes a deliberate redemptive reappropriation of the curse tradition, transforming a juridical pronouncement of condemnation into a theological affirmation of corporate substitution and redemption in Christ (Caneday, 1989, pp. 185–209). Complementing these exegetical and theological analyses, Albert and Hogeterp situate Paul's argument within broader conceptual frameworks of freedom and slavery operative in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, showing how Paul's rhetoric in Galatians functions to redefine covenantal identity and belonging apart from Torah observance (Hogeterp, 2023, pp. 672–684). In contrast, Forster underscores the importance of textual and translational precision in Pauline interpretation, demonstrating that subtle lexical and syntactic decisions significantly shape theological conclusions in Galatians (Förster, 2023, pp. 203–217). Taken together, these studies reveal that Paul's argument in Galatians emerges from an integrated interplay of rhetoric, intertextual exegesis, and theological reasoning, thereby providing a critical foundation for analysing his strategic use of Deuteronomy as a central theological pivot in Galatians 3:10–14.

The core argument of Namgung is that Paul's understanding of the "curse of the Law" in Galatians 3:10 is best interpreted through Isaianic servant imagery, where the curse is not merely a legal consequence of law-breaking but is ultimately absorbed and resolved through a representative, redemptive figure within God's covenantal plan (Namgung, 2018, pp. 69–90). James D. G. Dunn's influential analysis of Galatians 3:10–14 reframed the discussion by locating Paul's concern within covenantal nomism and boundary-marker debates, arguing that the curse pertains to the law's function in defining covenant membership rather than abstract legalism (Dunn, 1985, pp. 523–542). Christopher Stanley further demonstrated that Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 must be read against its covenant-renewal setting, underscoring the communal and liturgical force of the curse motif (Stanley, 1990, pp. 481–511). Building on these insights, Andrew Cowan provided a nuanced account of the 'curse of the law' as both anthropological and covenantal, contending that Paul addresses Israel's collective standing under the law without excluding individual responsibility (Cowan, 2020, p. 215). Parallel to this, Daniel Streett examined the socio-cultural implications of Deuteronomy 21:23, arguing that Paul's application of the hanging-on-a-tree curse to Christ represents a radical inversion of shame and honour within Second Temple Jewish discourse (Streett, 2015, p. 192). Gert Steyn's textual work reinforced this conclusion by showing that Paul's selective citation strategy reflects intentional hermeneutical adaptation rather than textual imprecision (Steyn, 2015, p. 190). Despite these contributions, much of the literature treats intertextuality, rhetoric, and theology as analytically separable concerns. Studies often prioritise either textual correspondence or doctrinal implication, leaving insufficient attention to how Paul's Deuteronomic citations function persuasively within the argumentative flow of Galatians and within the assumed scriptural competence of his audience (Tolmie, 2007, pp. 132–152).

A significant gap therefore persists in Pauline scholarship: the lack of an integrated rhetorical–intertextual analysis that explains how Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14 simultaneously shapes argument, meaning, and audience reception. While scholars

recognise the importance of Deut 27:26 and 21:23, insufficient work has been done to show why these particular texts are chosen, how their textual variation enhances Paul's argument, and in what way they operate as rhetorical pivots that reconfigure the curse from covenant sanction to christological instrument of redemption (Hogeterp, 2023, p. 672). The sole objective of this study is to demonstrate how Paul employs Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 in Galatians 3:10–14 as rhetorical–intertextual pivots that reframe the concept of curse within a christologically reoriented covenantal argument.

This article contends that Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14 constitutes a deliberate rhetorical strategy by which the Deuteronomic curse is transferred from the domain of Torah observance to the crucified Christ, thereby exposing the inadequacy of law-based righteousness and establishing Christ's death as a substitutionary, covenant-transforming act. Far from serving as prooftexts, Deut 27:26 and 21:23 function as argumentative hinges through which Paul reshapes Israel's scriptural memory in light of the gospel.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative rhetorical–intertextual methodology to analyse Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14. The approach is intentionally integrative, combining close textual analysis with rhetorical criticism and intertextual theory, in order to account for both the semantic content of Paul's scriptural citations and their persuasive function within the argumentative structure of the letter.

The rhetorical dimension of this study is informed by contemporary rhetorical criticism of Pauline discourse, which views Paul's letters as persuasive communications addressed to historically situated communities. Rather than reconstructing a full Greco-Roman rhetorical outline, this study focuses on local rhetorical dynamics within Galatians 3:10–14—such as contrast, theological inversion, scriptural chaining, and argumentative climax—as these relate directly to Paul's deployment of Deuteronomic texts (G. A. Kennedy, 1984, pp. 33–38). Rhetorical criticism is employed here not to categorise Paul's argument into classical rhetorical genres but to elucidate how scriptural citations function as argumentative drivers within his polemical context (Porter, 2017).

Intertextual analysis is applied to examine the relationship between Galatians 3:10–14 and its Deuteronomic source texts (Deut 27:26; 21:23). This study follows a controlled intertextual approach, attending to explicit citation, lexical correspondence, and thematic resonance while avoiding speculative or unlimited intertextuality (Hays, 2020, pp. 14–21). Particular attention is given to textual variation between Paul's Greek text, the Septuagint, and the Masoretic tradition, recognising that such variation often reflects interpretive intentionality rather than textual instability (Tov, 2022, pp. 23–28). Intertextuality is thus understood not as mere textual echo but as a hermeneutical practice in which Paul recontextualises Israel's Scriptures within a new christological horizon. This aligns with recent scholarship that emphasises Second Temple Jewish interpretive conventions, wherein

scriptural texts were regularly reread and reapplied in light of new historical or theological circumstances (Lim, 1997, pp. 7–15).

The analysis further assumes a scripturally informed audience, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers who had been catechetically introduced to Israel's Scriptures. Reception-oriented considerations therefore play a supporting role, asking how Deuteronomic curse traditions would have been heard by first-century readers familiar with covenantal discourse (Barclay, 2017, pp. 63–70). While the study does not attempt a full reception history, it incorporates socio-historical insights to clarify the persuasive force of Paul's argument and the plausibility of his hermeneutical moves within early Christian communities.

Methodologically, the study proceeds in three analytical steps: first, a close reading of Galatians 3:10–14 in Greek, identifying explicit citations and allusions to Deuteronomy; second, a comparative analysis of the relevant Deuteronomic passages in the LXX and Hebrew text, with attention to lexical and syntactical divergence; and third a rhetorical synthesis explaining how these scriptural elements function together to advance Paul's theological claim regarding curse, law, and Christ. This procedure ensures that theological conclusions emerge inductively from textual and rhetorical evidence rather than being imposed a priori (Thurén, 2019, pp. 294–313).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23: Original Context, Pauline Adaptation, and Rhetorical-Theological Function

Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 in Galatians 3:10 functions as the opening forensic indictment of his argument against reliance on the Law. Within its original setting, Deuteronomy 27 forms a liturgical covenant-renewal ceremony in which Israel publicly assents to a series of curses pronounced upon covenant violation, culminating in verse 26 as a comprehensive summary curse. This final pronouncement does not introduce a new offense but seals the entire covenantal demand by asserting that obedience to the Law must be complete and sustained (Deut 27:11–26). As Braulik has shown, Deuteronomy 27:26 serves as a covenantal "totalisation formula," ensuring that no aspect of Torah observance may be treated selectively or partially (Braulik, 1998, p. 181). Paul's appeal to this climactic curse is therefore neither incidental nor illustrative; it functions programmatically to establish that Torah observance, by its very structure, binds the covenant participant to an all-or-nothing obedience.

Paul's adaptation of the text closely follows the Septuagint, signalling his deliberate engagement with the Greek Scriptures shared by his diaspora audience. The LXX reads, *ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ὃς οὐκ ἐμμενεῖ ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς λόγοις τοῦ νόμου τούτου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτούς καὶ ἐροῦσιν πᾶς ὁ λαός γένοιτο* (Deut. 27:26), while Paul renders it as *ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὃς οὐκ ἐμμένει πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις* (Gal. 3:10 NA28). Although the variation is minimal, the rhetorical effect is significant. By intensifying the sense of endurance and total adherence implicit in *ἐμμένει*, Paul foregrounds the impossibility of covenantal success on the basis of

Law-observance. As Steyn notes, this close yet purposeful echo of the LXX demonstrates that Paul's citation is exegetically responsible and rhetorically targeted, rather than merely polemical (Steyn, 2015, p. 192). Forster further argues that this verbal tightening reinforces Paul's broader theological claim: the Law does not fail because it is flawed, but because its totalising demand exposes the inevitability of human failure (Förster, 2023, p. 206). Thus, Deuteronomy 27:26 functions rhetorically to collapse any notion of selective obedience and to place all who are "of the works of the Law" under a covenantal curse.

The second Deuteronomic citation, Deuteronomy 21:23 in Galatians 3:13, performs the decisive theological reversal of the argument. In its original legal context, Deuteronomy 21:22–23 regulates the public treatment of executed criminals, whose bodies were displayed on a tree or pole as a visible sign of divine judgment and social exclusion. Importantly, the hanging does not constitute the execution itself but serves as a symbolic enactment of curse and shame, reinforcing communal boundaries and covenantal holiness (Wright, 2018, p. 94). The LXX formulation—*κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ Θεοῦ πᾶς κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου*—explicitly associates the exposed body with divine curse.

Paul's citation is again selective and theologically calibrated. By omitting the phrase *ὑπὸ Θεοῦ* ("by God"), Paul avoids attributing divine rejection to Christ himself, while still retaining the full symbolic force of the curse tradition. As Streett observes, this omission is not an evasion of the scandal of the cross but a rhetorical safeguard that allows Paul to present Christ's cursed status as vicarious rather than punitive (Streett, 2015, p. 197). Namgung further argues that this strategic truncation enables Paul to recast the Deuteronomic curse within a representational framework, wherein Christ bears the curse on behalf of the covenant community rather than as an object of divine condemnation (Namgung, 2018, p. 79). In this way, Paul does not negate the Deuteronomic logic but redirects it christologically.

Taken together, Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 function as interlocking pillars within Paul's argument. The first establishes the inevitability of curse for all who rely on the Law; the second relocates that curse onto Christ as the covenantal representative. This deliberate juxtaposition produces a theological inversion: the Law's final word of condemnation becomes the precondition for redemption. Far from proof-texting, Paul constructs a coherent intertextual movement in which Torah itself testifies to the necessity and logic of the cross. The curse, once the mark of covenant failure, becomes the means through which covenant blessing is secured in Christ.

Rhetorical Structure of Galatians 3:10–14

Paul's argument in Galatians 3:10–14 is not a loose string of proof-texts but a carefully constructed rhetorical progression in which Deuteronomic curse traditions function as argumentative pivots. The passage advances through three interconnected rhetorical movements—indictment, antithesis, and redemptive inversion—each building upon the previous one to reorient the audience's theological imagination away from Torah reliance and toward christological faith.

Paul opens with a striking and deliberately provocative claim: “*All who rely on works of the law are under a curse.*” This assertion constitutes a rhetorical indictment, grounded in Deuteronomy 27:26, yet reframed in a manner that subverts conventional Jewish expectations. Within Deuteronomistic theology, the law is presented as the path to life and blessing (Deut. 30:15–20). By invoking a curse-text associated with covenant renewal and communal assent, Paul repositions the law not as a vehicle of life but as a covenantal instrument that exposes failure.

The rhetorical force of this move lies in its totalising logic. Paul’s wording—emphasising comprehensive obedience—intensifies the curse’s scope and shifts the focus from selective transgression to the structural impossibility of law-based righteousness. As Cowan notes, the curse here functions not merely as a threat for individual infractions but as a covenantal verdict resting upon all who adopt the law as the basis of justification (Cowan, 2020, p. 216). This indictment destabilises the audience’s confidence in Torah observance and prepares them for an alternative interpretive framework. In rhetorical terms, Paul establishes exigence: the law, far from securing life, produces a condition from which deliverance is required.

Having placed his audience under the weight of the Deuteronomistic curse, Paul introduces Habakkuk 2:4 as a contrastive proof-text: “*The righteous will live by faith.*” This citation does not merely add a supplementary argument but performs a decisive rhetorical pivot. By juxtaposing Deuteronomy and Habakkuk, Paul constructs a sharp antithesis between two mutually exclusive principles: law-based obedience and faith-based life.

This antithetical arrangement is rhetorically effective because it redefines the category of “life.” Life is no longer associated with Torah compliance but with faith, thereby dismantling any attempt to harmonise law and faith as parallel routes to righteousness (Hogeterp, 2023, p. 674). As Tolmie observes, such binary structuring heightens persuasiveness by forcing the audience to recognise the incompatibility of the two systems. Importantly, Paul does not argue abstractly; he allows Scripture itself to articulate the opposition. Intertextually, Habakkuk functions as a counter-witness within Israel’s Scriptures, legitimising Paul’s claim that faith—not law—is the scripturally sanctioned basis of life (Tolmie, 2007, p. 139).

The argument reaches its rhetorical and theological climax in verses 12–14, where Paul introduces the crucifixion as the means by which the curse is overcome. By citing Deuteronomy 21:23—“*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*”—Paul performs a profound rhetorical inversion. The very category of curse that condemned reliance on the law is now reappropriated as the mechanism of redemption.

This move is deeply ironic. Within Deuteronomistic logic, the one hung on a tree is publicly exposed as cursed and shameful. Paul, however, identifies Christ with this cursed status, not as a result of wrongdoing but as a substitutionary act undertaken “for us.” As Steyn rightly notes, the rhetorical shock of this identification lies in its reversal of expectations: the cursed one becomes the agent of blessing (Steyn, 2015, p. 194). The curse no longer functions as covenantal termination but as a christological passageway to promise.

Paul completes the rhetorical arc in verse 14 by explicitly stating the telos of Christ’s curse-bearing death: the blessing of Abraham for the Gentiles and the reception of the Spirit

through faith. This conclusion resolves the tension generated in verse 10 by demonstrating that the curse is neither final nor intrinsic to God's purposes but instrumental in the unfolding of redemptive history (Park, 2018, p. 52). The repetition of phrases such as "*in Christ Jesus*" and "*by faith*" reinforces the new theological centre of gravity and ensures that the audience interprets the Deuteronomic citations christologically rather than legalistically.

Taken together, these three rhetorical movements demonstrate that Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14 is neither incidental nor merely illustrative. Deuteronomy functions as a rhetorical hinge, enabling Paul to expose the insufficiency of law-based righteousness, articulate the primacy of faith, and present Christ's crucifixion as a covenant-transforming event. This analysis supports the central thesis of the study: Paul reconfigures the Deuteronomic curse not as an endpoint of judgment but as a rhetorical and theological instrument through which redemption in Christ is proclaimed.

Intertextual and Audience Reception Implications

Paul's rhetorical–intertextual strategy in Galatians 3:10–14 presupposes an audience shaped, to varying degrees, by Israel's scriptural traditions. While the Galatian communities likely comprised both Jewish and Gentile believers, Deuteronomy in particular occupied a privileged position within early Jewish and Christian scriptural consciousness as a covenantal document read publicly, memorised communally, and associated with questions of obedience, identity, and divine judgment (Zeltschrift Fur Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 2006, pp. 65–69). Paul's appeal to Deuteronomic curse texts therefore activates a shared scriptural horizon rather than introducing alien or obscure material.

The citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 is especially potent in this regard. In its original context, this curse is embedded within a liturgical ceremony in which Israel publicly assents to the covenant stipulations and their consequences (Deut. 27:11–26). As Namgung rightly observes, the curse does not function abstractly but is performative, binding the community to a covenantal self-understanding shaped by obedience and accountability (Namgung, 2018, p. 77). By invoking this text, Paul rhetorically draws his audience into Israel's covenantal memory, positioning them within the same narrative of obligation—only to unsettle that position by asserting that reliance on the law results not in blessing but in curse. This move is rhetorically effective precisely because the audience recognises the weight of the text Paul is redeploying.

The intertextual force of Paul's argument is further intensified by his use of Deuteronomy 21:23. Within Jewish tradition, the image of one "hung on a tree" carried connotations of shame, exclusion, and divine rejection. It marked the executed individual as accursed and unfit for covenantal participation (Wright, 2018, pp. 96–100). For Paul to apply this text to Christ constitutes a deliberate affront to conventional messianic expectations. As Streett demonstrates, this is not merely a theological claim but a social one: Paul reframes a symbol of public disgrace as the locus of divine action and redemption (Streett, 2015, p. 195). The rhetorical shock lies in the inversion itself—what signifies curse becomes the means by which curse is undone.

Paul's use of formulaic citation markers, such as "for it is written," further clarifies how these texts would have been received. Such phrases function not simply as references but as authoritative discourse markers, signalling that the cited Scripture is determinative for the argument being made. Forster notes that in Pauline usage, these formulae establish Scripture as an active participant in the reasoning process, constructing rather than merely illustrating the theological logic (Förster, 2023, p. 209). Consequently, Paul's audience would not perceive the Deuteronomic texts as detachable prooftexts but as integral components of a scriptural argument that redefines their understanding of law, curse, and redemption.

Crucially, Paul's intertextual strategy operates within corporate theological categories familiar to his audience's covenantal worldview. The curse articulated in Galatians 3 is not framed primarily as individual moral failure but as a communal condition affecting "all who are of the works of the law." Cowan has shown that this corporate dimension aligns with Deuteronomic theology, where covenantal blessing and curse are addressed to Israel as a people rather than merely as isolated individuals (Cowan, 2020, p. 218). By portraying Christ as the representative who bears the corporate curse, Paul appeals to a logic of covenantal solidarity deeply embedded in Israel's Scriptures. Wright likewise emphasises that this representative framework enables Paul to present the death of Christ as an event that reconstitutes the people of God, extending the blessing of Abraham to Gentiles without recourse to Torah observance (Wright, 2018, p. 99).

Taken together, these intertextual and reception-oriented considerations reinforce the central claim of this study. Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14 is carefully calibrated to resonate with the scriptural memory, theological assumptions, and communal identity of his audience. The curse texts do not merely supply authoritative backing; they function rhetorically to reframe covenantal reality around the crucified Christ. In this way, Paul reshapes how his audience understands shame, curse, and belonging, ensuring that faith in Christ—rather than adherence to the law—becomes the decisive marker of covenant identity.

Theological Implications: Justification, Substitution, and the Curse

The rhetorical–intertextual analysis of Galatians 3:10–14 reveals that Paul's strategic deployment of Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 is not merely exegetical but deeply theological. These texts provide the conceptual framework through which Paul articulates a coherent vision of justification, the function of the law, the substitutionary role of Christ, and the corporate scope of redemption. Far from operating as abstract doctrines, these theological themes emerge organically from Paul's rereading of Israel's covenantal Scriptures in light of the Christ event.

Justification by Faith: A Redefinition of Righteousness

At the heart of Paul's argument stands a radical redefinition of righteousness. By invoking Deuteronomy 27:26, Paul underscores the law's demand for comprehensive obedience, exposing the impossibility of achieving righteousness through Torah observance. As Seifrid observes, justification in Paul is not a reward for moral achievement but a declarative

act grounded in God's redemptive initiative, rendered necessary precisely because the law pronounces curse upon incomplete obedience (Seifrid, 2001, p. 105). In this sense, righteousness based on the law is not merely unattainable; it is structurally oriented toward condemnation (Cowan, 2020, p. 215).

Paul's appeal to Habakkuk 2:4 functions theologically to inaugurate a distinct mode of righteousness—one grounded in faith rather than performance. This move does not abolish obedience but reorders it within a new covenantal logic. Wright convincingly argues that for Paul, faith signifies participation in a redefined covenant community shaped by divine promise rather than by Torah observance (Wright, 2018, pp. 95–99). This covenantal reconfiguration coheres with broader Pauline theology, particularly Romans 4 and Philippians 3:9, where justification is explicitly detached from legal righteousness and anchored instead in Christ's faithfulness and God's promise (Hogeterp, 2023, p. 676). Thus, justification by faith emerges not as an abstract soteriological principle but as the theological resolution to the problem exposed by the Deuteronomic curse.

Christ as the Curse Bearer: A Theology of Substitution

Paul's declaration that "Christ became a curse for us" (Gal 3:13) constitutes one of the most theologically charged statements in the Pauline corpus. Drawing explicitly on Deuteronomy 21:23, Paul adopts a symbol of public shame and divine judgment and reinterprets it through a substitutionary lens. As Streett demonstrates, this move presupposes a representational logic in which Christ assumes the curse not because of personal guilt but on behalf of others, thereby transforming an emblem of exclusion into an instrument of redemption (Streett, 2015, p. 198).

This substitutionary reading is reinforced by intertextual resonance with Isaianic Servant imagery. Namgung argues persuasively that Paul's language aligns with the motif of the Servant who "bears the iniquities of many" (Isa 53:4–6), suggesting that the cross functions as the locus where covenantal curse is absorbed and neutralised (Namgung, 2018, pp. 83–86). Importantly, Steyn's textual analysis highlights that Paul's omission of the phrase "by God" from Deuteronomy 21:23 is theologically significant: it prevents the conclusion that God actively curses Christ, thereby preserving divine justice while emphasising the voluntary, self-giving character of Christ's act (Steyn, 2015, p. 194). In this way, Paul presents the cross as both curse and cure—judgment borne and redemption accomplished in a single event.

The Function of the Law: Exposure without Empowerment

Paul's rereading of Deuteronomy also entails a fundamental reframing of the law's function. Rather than serving as a path to life, the law operates as a revelatory instrument that exposes sin and pronounces curse. This does not render the law evil or misguided; rather, it highlights its limited capacity within the economy of salvation. As Förster notes, the law possesses diagnostic power but lacks salvific efficacy—it can identify transgression but cannot generate righteousness (Förster, 2023, p. 208).

The rhetorical structure of Galatians 3 supports this construal. As Park observes, Paul positions the law pedagogically, anticipating his later description of the law as a *paidagōgos* (Gal 3:24), whose role is preparatory rather than consummatory (Park, 2018, p. 54). Within this framework, the Deuteronomic curses function propaedeutically: they confront the community with the impossibility of self-justification and thereby prepare the way for faith in Christ. Cowan rightly emphasises that the curse is not the law's final word but the theological condition that necessitates the gospel (Cowan, 2020, p. 218).

From Curse to Blessing: The Abrahamic Inheritance

The theological telos of Paul's argument appears in Galatians 3:14, where curse gives way to blessing. By linking Christ's curse-bearing death to the blessing of Abraham, Paul reorients covenant history away from Sinai and toward promise. The Abrahamic blessing encompasses justification (Gen 15:6), universal scope (Gen 12:2–3), and the gift of the Spirit, which Paul identifies as the eschatological marker of covenant fulfilment (Wright, 2018, pp. 112–116). Wright underscores that this move relocates Christian identity within the narrative of promise rather than law, thereby integrating Gentiles into the covenantal people of God without recourse to Torah observance (Wright, 2018, p. 117).

This transition is not merely theological but ecclesiological. By grounding covenant membership in faith and Spirit-reception, Paul dismantles ethnic and legal boundary markers and establishes Christ as the defining centre of the redeemed community (Hogeterp, 2023, p. 678). The blessing of Abraham thus becomes the antidote to the curse of the law, realised through Christ and appropriated through faith.

Corporate Redemption and Covenant Solidarity

A final and often underappreciated theological implication concerns the corporate scope of redemption. The Deuteronomic curses Paul cites were originally addressed to Israel as a collective entity, reinforcing a communal understanding of covenant responsibility. Paul preserves this corporate logic by portraying Christ's curse-bearing act as representative and communal in scope. As Cowan and Caneday independently argue, the phrase "for us" (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν) signals not merely individual substitution but covenantal solidarity, in which Christ acts on behalf of the community as a whole (Caneday, 1989, p. 190; Cowan, 2020, p. 220).

This corporate emphasis resonates with the liturgical setting of Deuteronomy 27–28, where blessings and curses are proclaimed collectively. Paul's audience, familiar with this covenantal framework, would thus perceive salvation not solely as individual acquittal but as the formation of a redeemed people. Tolmie rightly notes that this corporate dimension has significant ecclesiological implications, presenting the church as a community constituted by shared redemption rather than a collection of autonomous believers (Tolmie, 2007, p. 145).

Synthesis: Curse as Theological Pivot

Taken as a whole, the findings of this study demonstrate that Paul's use of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3:10–14 functions not as proof-texting but as a theological pivot

upon which the logic of the gospel decisively turns. The Deuteronomic curse is neither marginal nor incidental; it is the interpretive hinge through which Paul exposes the inadequacy of law-based righteousness and articulates the redemptive significance of Christ's crucifixion.

Paul's argument advances through a carefully ordered intertextual progression. Deuteronomy 27:26 establishes the problem by articulating the law's comprehensive demand and its consequent curse upon failure. Habakkuk 2:4 then introduces a counter-principle—life grounded in faith rather than performance—thereby intensifying the crisis by rendering law and faith incompatible foundations of righteousness. Deuteronomy 21:23 finally supplies the decisive christological resolution, identifying the crucified Christ as the bearer of the covenantal curse. The result is not merely release from condemnation but the positive bestowal of the Abrahamic blessing, including justification and the reception of the Spirit. This movement from curse to blessing is neither accidental nor ad hoc; it mirrors Paul's rhetorical strategy of problem, escalation, and redemptive reversal.

Crucially, Scripture in this argument functions simultaneously as narrative framework and argumentative engine. Paul does not introduce a novel theological scheme imposed upon Israel's Scriptures; rather, he rereads the Torah itself through the revelatory lens of the Christ event. As Hans observes, such intertextual reasoning demonstrates that Pauline theology is not abstractly systematic but narratively embedded, unfolding through the reinterpretation of Israel's Scriptures as they reach their telos in the crucified and risen Messiah (Förster, 2023, p. 210). The curse, therefore, is not annulled but transformed—retained as a meaningful category precisely so that its redemptive reversal may be proclaimed.

The synthesis of rhetorical strategy and theological content in Galatians 3:10–14 reveals that justification by faith is not an isolated soteriological claim but the culmination of a covenantal drama. The demands of the law expose human inability; the curse names the depth of the problem; and the crucifixion of Christ constitutes God's decisive answer. What appears as scandal and shame becomes, in Paul's rhetoric, the very site of divine grace. The cross is thus neither tragic misfortune nor theological afterthought but the centre of God's covenant-renewing action.

This reading carries broader implications for Pauline theology. Paul does not reject the law wholesale; rather, he reinterprets it christologically, allowing its curses to function as a theological prelude to grace. In doing so, he reframes the identity of the people of God, relocating covenant membership from Torah observance to participation in Christ through faith. The result is a reconstituted community defined not by legal or ethnic boundaries but by shared incorporation into the crucified Messiah.

In this way, the dynamic rereading of Deuteronomy in Galatians 3 discloses a profound theological vision in which Scripture itself becomes the medium of redemption. The law's curse, once a symbol of judgment, is transformed into a witness to God's redemptive love revealed in the cross and extended to all nations. Paul's gospel, therefore, is not a departure from Israel's Scriptures but their fulfillment, achieved not through legal perfection but through the redemptive self-giving of Christ.

Recommendations

This study opens several avenues for further scholarly investigation. First, comparative analysis of Paul's use of Deuteronomic curse traditions in Galatians and Romans (particularly Romans 5–8 and 10) would further illuminate the consistency and development of his covenantal theology. Second, broader examination of Deuteronomy's reception in Second Temple Jewish literature and early Christian writings could deepen understanding of the shared hermeneutical assumptions underlying Paul's argument. Finally, future studies might explore the ethical and ecclesiological implications of Paul's corporate conception of curse and redemption, particularly in relation to communal identity, solidarity, and moral formation within early Christian communities.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Paul's use of Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:23 in Galatians 3:10–14 constitutes a deliberate and theologically sophisticated rhetorical–intertextual strategy, rather than a series of isolated scriptural citations. By tracing the Deuteronomic curse traditions within their original covenantal contexts and analysing their rhetorical deployment in Galatians, the study has shown that Paul reconstructs Israel's scriptural narrative around the crucified Christ in order to articulate a coherent vision of justification, curse, and redemption.

The primary finding of this research is that Paul presents the law—particularly in its Deuteronomic expression—as both diagnostic and preparatory. Deuteronomy 27:26 exposes the totalising demand of the law and its inevitable consequence: a covenantal curse that rests corporately upon all who seek justification on the basis of Torah observance. Yet Paul does not allow this diagnosis to culminate in despair. Instead, by reinterpreting Deuteronomy 21:23 through the lens of the cross, he identifies the crucified Christ as the representative curse-bearer who willingly assumes the law's penalty, not on account of personal transgression but in redemptive solidarity with the covenant community.

This inversion—where a symbol of shame and exclusion becomes the means of covenantal restoration—leads directly to the study's second major conclusion: justification is grounded exclusively in faith and not in the law. Habakkuk 2:4 functions as the theological and rhetorical fulcrum of Paul's argument, redirecting the audience from reliance on works to trust in God's promise. In this framework, the cross does not nullify the law but fulfils its ultimate purpose: it exposes human insufficiency while simultaneously revealing the sufficiency of Christ's redemptive act.

Beyond its exegetical findings, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Paul's hermeneutical method. Paul's engagement with Deuteronomy is neither arbitrary nor proof-textual; rather, it is marked by careful selection, strategic omission, and rhetorical framing that preserves the authority of Torah while redefining its function within a christological horizon. His approach demonstrates sensitivity to covenantal logic and communal memory,

particularly within a context in which Jewish and Gentile believers are renegotiating questions of identity, legitimacy, and belonging in the people of God.

Taken together, these findings underscore that the Deuteronomic curses are not marginalised in Pauline theology but relocated at the very centre of the gospel. The curse is neither denied nor ignored; it is exhausted in Christ. In its place stand the blessing of Abraham, the gift of the Spirit, and the justification of all who believe—received not through adherence to the law but through participation in Christ by faith. Deuteronomy, therefore, functions as a theological and rhetorical hinge in Galatians 3, enabling Paul to pivot decisively from curse to promise, from law to faith, and from condemnation to redemption.

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