



Galatians 3:19-25 as an Argument for God's Faithfulness: Reading Paul's Rhetoric in Light of His Strategy

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IF ASKED TO PROVE THAT PAUL DENIGRATES THAT WHICH IS MOST SACRED TO AND distinctive of Judaism, the first place to which most would turn is Galatians. And, if asked to choose a passage from Galatians that best demonstrates Paul maligning the law, fingers would almost certainly point to Gal 3:19-25.¹ In this passage Paul appears to claim that the law either was not essential to God's plan or did not originate with God. The dramatic and confounding words of Gal 3:19-25 are the focus of this study. The query prompting a re-examination of this passage is this: If

¹So disparaging do Paul's words about the law sound here that J. L. Martyn has written: "one could ask whether in Galatians Paul anticipates Marcion by suggesting that the Law did not come from the Father of Jesus Christ" (*Galatians* [New York: Doubleday, 1997] 365).

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For Paul, the law's divinely ordained functional and temporal limitations originated with God and were essential to God's redemptive purposes. God remains constant and trustworthy in the move from law to promise.

Paul were claiming that the law was supplementary or of suspect pedigree, would not his rhetoric go against the strategy necessary to win his case?

Paul is commonly understood to be denigrating the law in 3:19-25 on the basis that it was either a secondary and inessential part of God's purposes² or never part of God's plans, having originated not from God but from angels.³ While these readings make sense of the rhetoric of the passage itself, they do not, I will contend here, correspond to the strategy that must necessarily undergird Paul's rhetoric. If Paul were denigrating the law in this fashion he would at the same time be denigrating the character of God. For to claim that the law was supplementary is also to imply that God had not anticipated the need for it. And to claim that God did not give the law is to say that there is a significant event in the history of the people of God over which God had no control. If Paul were saying this, his argument would rest on arguing for a God who is neither steadfast nor sovereign. The God behind Paul's gospel would be a God who changes course in response to events God had not anticipated or created. The strategy behind Paul's rhetoric would then be that of demonstrating that God is neither constant nor in control.

I. PAUL PROVES GOD'S SOVEREIGN STEADFASTNESS IN GALATIANS 1-3

Throughout Galatians we rather see Paul demonstrating his recognition of the strategic importance of proving that the sovereign steadfastness of God is revealed through his gospel and not that of the rival evangelists. It is the task of this essay to offer a reading of Paul's peculiar words in Gal 3:19-25 in a manner consistent with the strategy Paul adopts up to this point in Galatians.

Paul's Galatian letter is directed to the challenge presented him by the rival evangelists. The alternate gospel, which required gentile believers to be circumcised, rested on claiming that in it the sovereign steadfastness of God was confirmed. This, for instance, is why Paul brings the Abraham story into his argument. The story of Abraham readily served the purpose of the rival evangelists and was almost certainly included in their pitch to Paul's Galatian converts. On the basis of the scriptures about Abraham the rival evangelists contended that, since God established a covenant with Abraham that included circumcision (Gen 17), unless believers in Messiah were circumcised they were not inheritors of Abraham. The rival evangelists must have charged that Paul's gospel, which did not require circumcision of gentiles, not only contravened the covenant but impugned God's trustworthiness.

The rival evangelists' argument was consistent with the tradition about Abraham. For the Jews Abraham was the epitome of righteousness (*Jub.* 23:10) and his righteousness was connected to his faithfulness (1 Macc 2:51-52). Abraham's faith-

²R. N. Longenecker writes that Paul's use of προσετέθη (the law was "added") in 3:19 "signals a nuance of disparagement and suggests that the law was not of the essence of God's redemptive activity with humankind" (*Galatians* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1990] 138).

³Martyn, *Galatians*, 366.

ful obedience to the covenant implied that even prior to the law Abraham had, in effect, kept the law. In the book of the scribe Jesus Ben Sira, Abraham is spoken of as “the great father of a multitude of nations....He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful” (Sirach 44:19-20). Jewish tradition did not separate Abraham’s faith from his acceptance of circumcision and obedience to the covenant. Abraham was regarded as a law observer. To Jews the story of Abraham signified that from the beginning God required circumcision and law observance of all who would be part of the covenant.

It was essential for Paul to counter this point of view if he were to convince the Galatians of the truth of his law-free gospel. In order to do this Paul needed to demonstrate that his gospel, rather than that of his opponents, attested to the steadfastness of God and truthfully reflected God’s intention. Paul’s challenge to a gospel requiring gentile Christian circumcision relied on positioning himself in the camp of the sovereign and steadfast God. That Paul recognized the strategic importance of proving God’s trustworthiness and used his rhetoric to this end is evident throughout the verses leading up to Gal 3:19-25.

Paul maintains that there is only one gospel of Christ and that it will never change (1:6-8). God revealed this gospel to Paul and chose him, even before he was born, to preach it (1:15-16). God is consistent, working through Paul’s gospel on behalf of the gentiles and through Peter’s on behalf of the circumcised (2:8). God’s call to and gift of righteousness remains. With the death of Christ, God has simply expanded the arena in which God’s purpose for humanity is enacted. Living in the crucified one, whether one is a Jew or a gentile, is now the venue for righteousness (2:20-21).

Paul argues that God’s intention from the beginning of the establishment of God’s people was that the gentiles would be justified by faith (3:8). God had planned all along to make the gentiles the heirs of Abraham apart from the law. Abraham was the first recipient of the gospel that Paul now preaches (3:6) and the first to enact it (3:9). According to Paul, the evidence of Scripture confirms his gospel. God has always intended that the righteous shall live by faith (3:11). The death of Christ does not indicate a change in God’s agenda or that the earlier period of God’s people was flawed. The death of Christ fulfills God’s promise to Abraham (3:14). God had promised that in Abraham the nations would be blessed and now in Christ Jesus this blessing has come about. Verse 14 resonates with the scriptural quote in 3:8: “All nations will be blessed in you.” Just as God promised that in Abraham the nations would be blessed, so now it is in Christ Jesus, the seed of Abraham (3:16), that the blessing has come about. While the rival evangelists may charge that Paul’s law-free gospel for gentiles indicates an inconsistent God, Paul contends that from the beginning God intended gentiles to be included in the promise by faith. The death of Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise.

Paul describes Christ’s death as one in which he became accursed. Citing

Deut 21:23 in 3:13, Paul describes the death of Christ as one who was cut off from his people and from God. Paul and others were under such curse until Christ's death.⁴ For to live under law is to live under threat of curse, to live under threat of exclusion, if one disobeys the law. Christ's death delivered believers from this curse. Paul's argument at 3:10 begins by citing the curse from Deut 27:26. Paul characterizes as under a curse those who are under works of law. While Paul's use of this Scripture is at odds with its function in Deuteronomy, which is to encourage obedience to the law, it at the same time accords with Deuteronomy's rhetoric. The Deuteronomist promises a curse for those who do not uphold the words of the law by carrying them out (Deut 27:26). The fact of such an unusually dense concentration of Scripture in Gal 3:10-13 suggests that Paul felt constrained to interpret these passages because the rival evangelists had used them in support of their gospel. Certainly Deut 27:26, Lev 18:5, and Deut 21:23 readily serve the argument of Paul's opponents. Paul meets this challenge by citing a scriptural passage (Hab 2:4) that contradicts the others. With rabbinic sensibilities Paul draws contradictory scriptural passages together and makes a choice about which passage holds the primary principle which should frame the others.⁵ Paul, of course, chooses as primary Hab 2:4, thereby contending that the basic scriptural principle is that of righteousness by faith. Christ's death, which Paul's gospel interprets as delivering believers from the law, indicates not that God has changed but that God fulfills God's promise. By means of Christ's death God's promise is kept (3:13-14).

God intended, Paul argues, that the law would be temporally limited. The law was not part of the original covenant. The law came significantly later than the covenant. Its coming did not, however, alter the covenant. The advent of the law did not change the original promise in any way. This latter point Paul would share with other Jews. Where he differs is in his willingness to divorce the law from the promise. Paul must argue for the divinely ordained separability of law and promise precisely because his gospel, which necessarily divides the law from the covenant, rests on proving the steadfastness of God. According to Paul, since the law was not part of the covenant, but came later, it is possible to hold both that the law is un-

⁴Paul's use of the first person plural in 3:13 is curious, since his words seem to imply that he asks the gentile Galatians to think of themselves as having previously been law observers. While Paul clearly could not argue that prior to faith in Christ the Galatians had been observers of the Jewish law, he appears to be contending that before Christ everyone, Jew and pagan, was in slavery to the law (cf. 3:23), for whether one was a Jew or a pagan, there was no other way to seek to live righteously than through the law one knew (cf. Rom 2:14). The ancient world understood law in a general sense to be that which reflected justice, a good thing. Aristotle said, "The just...means that which is lawful or that which is equal and fair" (*Ethica nicomachea* 5.1.8 [Rackham, LCL]). Law was understood to be the way to measure and achieve justice. Paul is arguing that the Galatians have already followed law and so already once turned from that means of striving for righteousness.

⁵N. Dahl proposes that here Paul uses legal arguments common among rabbis. When confronted with contradictory passages the rabbis determined which passage held the basic principle that should provide the framework for interpreting the others. Dahl sees Paul operating in this rabbinic mode in 3:10-14. Paul recognizes the contradiction between Hab 2:4 ("the righteous shall live by faith") and passages such as Deut 27:26 and Lev 18:5 ("The one who does these things [i.e., observing the law] will live by them"). Dahl argues that the way Paul resolves the contradiction is to determine that the valid principle is "by faith" (Gal 3:13-14) which makes the other principle, "by law," provisional ("Contradictions in Scripture," in *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974] 159-177).

necessary for gentile believers and that God is trustworthy. Paul strengthens his case by asserting that the promise was made to Abraham and also to Abraham's seed, who is Christ (3:16). Consequently, the promise is the context in which the law came, and the gospel of Christ, being the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and the seed, circumscribes the law. There is a distinction between the law and the promise. In Paul's view, his message that in Christ gentiles receive righteousness apart from law is simply an articulation of the promise made to Abraham's seed who is Christ. Paul's case depends on proving that this demonstrates the constancy of God.

The rhetoric of Galatians up to 3:19 has, then, relied on a strategy of proving the faithfulness of God. We will now examine Paul's words in 3:19-25 on the presumption that their purpose is to further establish and maintain Paul's strategic position.

II. PAUL'S RHETORIC IN GAL 3:19-25: ESTABLISHING GOD'S TRUSTWORTHINESS

In 3:19 Paul asks the question, "Why then the law at all?" The question arises after his declaration that the inheritance promised to Abraham does not stem from the law (3:18). Paul's answer is that the law was added for the sake of transgressions. The verb προσετέθη (the law was "added") is in the passive voice with an undesignated subject. The subject of the verb could be either the angels mentioned later in the verse⁶ or God.⁷ J. L. Martyn notes that in Galatians Paul does not use the standard word δίδωμι ("given") when speaking of the origin of the law and neither does he specify God as the giver, as was common in Jewish tradition.⁸ Martyn further observes that in 3:16-17 Paul identifies God as the validator of the covenant, but says that the law simply "happened" (γίνομαι). In 3:18-19 God "gives" (χαρίζομαι) the inheritance by a promise to Abraham, but the law was merely "added" (προστίθημι) and "decreed" (διατάσσω). Martyn argues that while the rival evangelists (whom he terms the "Teachers") would have spoken in traditional ways of the law being given by God, Paul's avoidance of such terminology indicates that for Paul "the covenantal God played no role in the genesis of (the) Law."⁹

While Paul's interpreters are not charged with saving Paul from his own weaknesses, it is their task to presume, unless proven otherwise, that Paul's strategy remains consistent. If Paul were making the argument that God did not give the law, he would also be arguing, as Martyn in fact proposes, that the law contends against God.¹⁰ That is, for Paul, the law stands in opposition to God's promises for the people of God. Paul's view would be that the law is not only a code unauthor-

⁶So Martyn, *Galatians*, 354.

⁷S. K. Williams, *Galatians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 98; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 138.

⁸Martyn, *Galatians*, 364.

⁹Ibid., 367.

¹⁰Martyn reads v. 21 as Paul's emphatic denial (μὴ γένοιτο—"Certainly not") of the idea that the law, which stands against God's promises, could win the battle (ibid., 366).

ized by God, but one at odds with God's purposes for the people of God. For Paul to make such an argument is strategically to position himself with a God who is neither consistent nor in control.

And this is precisely the reason why this reading of Paul is untenable. For, as we earlier reasoned, in order to win the debate with the rival evangelists Paul must rely on that which such a reading has him denying—the sovereign steadfastness of God. Paul's ability to persuade his hearers rests on proving that his gospel and not that of the rival evangelists demonstrates the sovereign steadfastness of God. Paul must demonstrate that his message about the inclusion of uncircumcised gentiles into the people of God is right because it is the fulfilment of the promise of the God who can be trusted and who is in charge.

As noted above, the rival evangelists were seeking to stake out precisely the same ground. Their gospel, which required gentile believers in Jesus to become Jews, was also based on an argument that God is sovereign and steadfast; that God had made a covenant with Abraham that required circumcision; that God had given the law to the people of the circumcision; that God had offered his covenant, including circumcision, also to gentiles. The coming of Messiah did not change any of this. If it had, the steadfast sovereignty of God would be impugned. The basis of the rival evangelists' attack on Paul's message was that it challenged the trustworthiness of God, that Paul's gospel separated the law from the covenant and divorced faith in Messiah from law observance. In the rival evangelists' view, the God at the heart of Paul's gospel was a God who did not (and perhaps could not) keep a promise.

The evidence that until this point in the letter Paul has recognized that the strength of his argument against his opponents depended on proving the faithfulness of God leads to understanding the implied subject in προσετέθη of v. 19 as being not the angels but God. Some who have decided that God is the subject of this verb have at the same time interpreted Paul to be saying that God's addition of the law was the addition of a thing supplementary rather than essential to God's plan of salvation.¹¹ A God who would add something inessential is, however, less than trustworthy. If this were the intention of Paul's rhetoric he would be giving up the strategic advantage he has worked so hard to gain.

Paul's rhetoric should be understood to be focused on proving that the addition of the law was the addition of something that was predetermined to play a necessary role in God's redemptive agenda. We see precisely this focus when, in the clause immediately following, Paul uses the perfect tense in ἐπήγγελται ("promise"), thereby stressing God's divine direction in salvation. God made a promise at the founding of God's people, to Abraham and to the seed, that remained in effect and was realized when the seed came. On the basis of both the larger strategic context and the immediate rhetorical context, the addition of the law for that period prior to the seed's coming should be understood to have occurred at God's direc-

¹¹So N. Dahl, *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977) 173; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 138.

tion. Accepting God as the subject of προσετέθη makes it most reasonable to read God as the subject also of διαταγείς (“ordained”) in the final clause of the sentence. God ordained the addition of the law.

Paul states that the means by which the law was added was through angels and the agency of a mediator. Those who think that Paul’s aim in these verses is to argue against the law by contending that it is supplemental and/or did not originate with God interpret Paul’s reference to angels and the mediator to mean that God was absent when the law came.¹²

Paul’s strategic advantage would again be lost if he were arguing that God was absent at the advent of the law. Consequently the burden of proof rests with those who would read Paul’s reference either to angels or the mediator as casting aspersions on the law’s importance in God’s purposes. Paul’s statement about angels should rather be understood as a positive reference to the presence of angels at the giving of the law comparable to what we find in Acts 7:38, Heb 2:2, and Philo (*Somn.* 1.141-142).¹³ Other Jewish writers of the day used references to angels this way. For instance, Josephus has Herod say that “we have learned the noblest of our doctrines and the holiest of our laws from the messengers [angels] sent by God” (*Ant.* 15.136 [Marcus, LCL]).

The mediator is almost certainly a reference to Moses.¹⁴ Commentators regularly understand Paul’s reference to a mediator in vv. 19 and 20 to be a denigration of the law. The puzzling words in v. 20 are typically understood to mean that the very fact of mediation tells against the oneness of God and so demonstrates the law’s inferiority.¹⁵ Another way to hear Paul’s statement in v. 20, translated literally “the mediator is not of one, but God is one,” is as a claim that a mediator by definition is a go-between and not the principal initiator of the transaction. The curious first clause of v. 20 repeats what Paul said at the end of the previous verse: the mediator (Moses) was the agent of the advent of the law. Just as in v. 19b, Moses’ agency should be understood as authorized by God. Moreover, by contrasting the mediator of the law with the identity of God, Paul allows for the divinely ordained separability of law and promise so essential if his argument is to be rooted in the trustworthiness of God. Having alleged that God both made the promise (vv. 18-19) and added the law (v. 19), God’s sacred unity allows for the law to have a dis-

¹²E.g., H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 171; F. Matera, *Galatians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 133-134; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 141-143; J. D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A & C Black, 1993) 191. See also W. D. Davies, who suggests that this was heard by Jews as a claim that the law was an inferior revelation because it was mediated by angels. In response some rabbis downplayed the role of angels at the giving of the law (“A Note on Josephus, Antiquities 15:136,” *Harvard Theological Review* 47 [1954] 135-140, esp. 140, n. 11).

¹³Admittedly the OT narratives themselves do not mention the presence of angels on Mt. Sinai (although see the ambiguous reference in Deut 33:2, noted by Martyn, *Galatians*, 357).

¹⁴See T. Callan, “Pauline Midrash: The Exegetical Background of Gal 3:19b,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980) 549-567, esp. 555.

¹⁵E.g., Longenecker states that in v. 20 Paul is arguing “that the circumstances involved in the giving of the Law at Sinai only serve to point up the inferiority of that law, whereas God’s redemptive activity is always direct and unilateral in nature, reflecting the oneness of his person” (*Galatians*, 143).

tinctive peculiarity (to which mention of the mediator draws attention) that does not in any way challenge God's sovereign purposes.

Paul continues by asking the question, "Is the law then opposed to the promises of God?" and answering it with an emphatic denial (3:21). Paul argues that the law is not in conflict with the promises because the law had a purpose separate from the promises. While God intended the promises to give life and righteousness, this was not the function of the law. God intended the co-existence of the law and the promises for a period of time.¹⁶ The law had a specific function—to deal with transgressions (v. 19).

This point is further established in v. 22. Using "scripture" as a metonymy for God,¹⁷ as he did earlier at 3:8, Paul claims that God/scripture confined all things under sin. We see Paul expressing a similar thought at Rom 11:32, where Paul also uses συγκλείω ("imprisoned" NRSV). In the context of stating that the law was added because of transgressions (3:19), Paul also asserts that even the cause of the law—sin—was under God's control. The reason for which God imprisoned all things under sin is so that the promise might be given to those who believe (3:22). Paul's rhetoric serves the purpose of establishing God's sovereignty in the addition of the law, the reason for the law, the relationship between the law and the promise, and the giving of the promise to those who believe.

God's purpose in the promise is, Paul claims, that it might be given to those who believe "ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ" (3:22). This phrase is best interpreted as a subjective genitive, giving the meaning "through the faith of Jesus Christ."¹⁸ It resonates with Paul's earlier thought that God's purpose is that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles (3:14). Believers are those incorporated into Christ through their faith in Christ's faithfulness and so are recipients of the promise to Abraham.

Paul characterizes the period of the law as the period "πρὸ τοῦ ἐλθεῖν τὴν

¹⁶For an interpretation that in some regards is complementary to the one given here, see N. T. Wright, who understands Paul to be affirming the divine origin of the law while at the same time considering that "the law cannot be God's final word." For Wright the law had a temporary status in God's plan because it was given to one race only and God's ultimate intention was to include all people in God's people ("The Seed and the Mediator: Galatians 3.15-20," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 157-174).

¹⁷It has been suggested that "scripture" should be understood as referring to a particular scriptural passage, as Paul does elsewhere (e.g. 3:8; 4:30), and that the scriptural reference is Deut 27:26 (so E. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, International Critical Commentary [New York: Scribner, 1920] 195; and Longenecker, *Galatians*, 144). This makes "the scripture" synonymous with "the law" of v. 19, for the reference to Deut 27:26 (v. 10) undergirds the claim in v. 19. However, Paul's argument about the limitations of the law would be damaged if he were claiming that law/scripture (rather than God) had the capacity to imprison sin. His point rather is that the law was used by God for a particular period of time for certain limited purposes, a point he will reiterate in the following verse. Paul is referring to Scripture as that which testifies to the ways of God.

¹⁸Many have interpreted this phrase as a subjective genitive. See especially E. R. Goodenough, "Paul and the Hellenization of Christianity," in *Religions in Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 35-80; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 87-88; R. B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983); idem, "PISTIS and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake?" *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 1991* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1991) 714-729; and I. G. Wallis, *The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995).

πίστιν” (“until faith would be revealed”—3:23). Paul uses “faith” as a shorthand way of referring to his previous statement in v. 22 about the faith of Jesus Christ. Faith is a synonym for the faith of Christ. The faith that is revealed is the faith of Jesus Christ in whom, through faith, believers participate.¹⁹ Paul says that until the coming of Christ the law guarded human beings. On the basis of our decision that the undesignated subject of προσετέθη (v. 19) is God and our interpretation of verse 22, God must be the agent behind not only the coming of faith but also the law’s imprisoning function. The divinely assigned role for the law was that, for the period before the coming of faith, it should hold humanity in custody. God ordained both that humanity would be confined (συγκλείω) by sin (3:22) and confined (συγκλείω) by law (3:23) for the period before Christ.

Attempting to draw this part of his argument to a conclusion, Paul states, “therefore, the law became our pedagogue until Christ, in order that we might be justified by faith, but faith having come, we are no longer under a pedagogue” (3:24-25). Again, God should be understood as the implied agent behind both the coming of faith with its justifying force, and the use and ending of the law’s custodial power. God’s sovereign steadfastness is demonstrated in God’s use of the law to guard God’s people until the coming of Christ. God’s trustworthiness is seen in God’s fulfilling the promise of righteousness through faith for all the nations (3:6-9) with the coming of Christ (3:23-25).

Paul’s rhetoric in Gal 3:19-25 is focused on proving that it is his gospel and not that of the rival evangelists that reveals God’s sovereign steadfastness. Paul’s answer to his question “why the law” is that the law’s divinely ordained functional and temporal limitations both originated with God and were essential to God’s redemptive purposes. By making such an argument Paul positions himself squarely alongside the claim that God is trustworthy. It is strategically critical that Paul guard this position for the sake of the one gospel he knows to be the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. ⊕

¹⁹Since Paul has been seeking to prove that faith has always been the basis of God’s dealing with God’s people, it is most reasonable to read πίστις in the context of a subjective genitive reading of the phrase ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ of v. 22. Paul has been arguing that believing God has always been the basis of the covenant (3:6-7). The faith that is revealed must refer not to the manner in which humans relate to God but the person through whom humans relate to God. As I. Wallis writes, “Paul identifies the revelation of faith in 3:23 with the coming of Christ” (*The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Traditions*, 113). Others have understood “the faith” to refer to Christ. See, for example, K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 21; R. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 230-32; Martyn, *Galatians*, 122.