

Galatians

The opening chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians discloses important information about the purpose of this letter, although establishing the identity of those described in the opening section as members of 'the churches in Galatia' is dependent on determining the precise significance of the term 'Galatia'. It is a term that could be used ethnically to denote descendants of Celtic tribes who had settled in the heartland of Asia Minor (the old kingdom of Galatia is a large area of central Asia Minor) and also administratively to describe a Roman province (which covered a much larger area, including the southern cities of Derbe and Lystra). If Paul has in mind the churches established by him during his so-called 'first missionary journey' (described in Acts 13-14) - Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe - this region lay to the south of ethnic Galatia. This is known as the South Galatian hypothesis and, if Paul was writing to them before the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the letter was composed around 49 CE. The alternative theory, known as the North Galatian hypothesis, which today has fewer supporters, is that the establishment of these churches is implied in Acts 16:6 (and 18:23), thus later than Paul's Thessalonian and Corinthian correspondence, as late as the mid-fifties CE. Nevertheless, the South Galatian theory is not excluded by a later dating, and it could indicate that the Jerusalem meeting in question is Paul's third rather than second visit to the city on the occasion of the council.

Opening Greetings: 'Paul an Apostle.....' (1:1-5)

What can be claimed with a certain degree of confidence is that, whatever the precise location of these Galatian churches founded by Paul, they comprised primarily of Gentiles, whose pre-conversion state he describes as their prior worship of 'beings that by nature are not gods' (4:8). Nevertheless, the close relationship of which Paul speaks in this letter changed after his departure and an urgent crisis prompted him to write this letter. This becomes apparent from the opening words of the letter, where Paul states his case immediately and forcefully. According to the usual conventions of letter writing (as applied by Paul in Romans, 1 Corinthians and Philippians), one would expect the introduction to include the following elements: the naming of letter's author and its recipients, a greeting followed by a word of thanksgiving and prayers for the recipients. Paul departs from this convention by bypassing the usual thanksgiving and prayers, and their place is taken by an unparalleled description of Paul's apostolic credentials: 'Paul an apostle - sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead... (1:1).

In this unequivocal claim of the divine origin of his commission, Paul refers to himself from the outset as an *apostolos*. This term, while not widely used in classical Greek,

would have been easily recognized by his audiences as possessing the meaning 'messenger' or 'envoy' to denote one sent out (from *apostellō*) with the authority of the one who was being represented. Paul uses the term in this manner in 2 Corinthians 8:23 to describe the delegates from one of his churches (cf. Phil. 2:25). Paul viewed himself as one 'sent out' to be a missionary to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15-16; 2:8), but the term had also acquired a more specific meaning in early Christian circles, that is, to denote those who had been called or commissioned by Jesus for the work of mission. It is a term used exclusively in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew of the twelve who were sent out by Jesus to preach and to heal (Mk 3:14; 6:3; Mt. 10:2), while in Acts it occurs almost exclusively for the disciples to whom the risen Christ had appeared and commissioned to bear witness to the gospel (1:2, 26; 2:37, 42-43). Paul certainly believed that this more specific definition of an 'apostle' also applied to him (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7-11), and he states emphatically in this opening verse in Galatians that his enduring authority as an apostle was not derived from a human source but came directly from Jesus (1:1), evidently referring to his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This also accounts for Paul's reference to God in this verse as the one who raised Jesus from the dead (1:1) and for his reiteration in 1:12 that he received the gospel through 'a revelation of Jesus Christ'. Thus, despite the fact that he was not an eyewitness to Jesus' life in the flesh, his commissioning by the risen Christ gave him every right to call himself an apostle.

It may be significant, in this respect, that Paul speaks firstly of that which he is not (an apostle sent by human authorities) before outlining the true nature of his apostleship (through Jesus and God). This may indicate that he is responding to accusations about his apostolic status, claiming that it derived entirely from his contact with other human beings, and especially from the apostles in Jerusalem (cf. 1:18). This had become a matter of immediate concern for the Galatians. This method of reasoning, described as 'mirror-reading', is sometimes accused of circularity (that is, attempting to reconstruct the accusations against Paul from his apparent response; see the recent commentary by J. Louis Martyn). However, if one applies some of the criteria set out by John Barclay in an important assessment of 'mirror-reading' based on the evidence of Galatians, the location and assertive nature of this claim, as well as the additional defensive arguments outlined by Paul in the first two chapters, strongly suggest that the origin and nature of his apostleship was being challenged. This should, nevertheless, be qualified by the remark that Paul's primary concern is not to receive acknowledgement for his own personal status; he defended his authority in order to defend the divine origin of the gospel he preached. Indeed, while the term 'apostle' and its cognates occur only four times in the letter (up to 2:8), the word 'gospel' (*euangelion*) occurs fourteen times in the first four chapters.

Thus, when Paul turns, quite abruptly, to the central issue which causes him so much distress, he speaks not of his own authority but of the Galatians' apostasy to a different gospel: 'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ' (1:6-7). Some aspects of this declaration, in which Paul embarks on the central theme of this letter, require comment. First, the adverb translated as 'so quickly' in the NRSV can mean 'so soon' (that is, after Paul's departure from Galatia), but it could also denote the speed with which they could turn to another view. Secondly, the Greek verb rendered by the two verbs 'deserting' and 'turning' (*metatithes*) is unusual for Paul (this is its only occurrence in his letters) and denotes a change of mind or a turning away. It is also a term used in a technical sense in II Maccabees to describe the apostasy of Hellenized Jews from their faith during the Maccabean period (4:46; 7:24: 'Antiochus not only appealed to him [the youngest of the seven brothers] in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would *turn* from the ways of his ancestors..'). This is an instructive text for understanding some of Paul's vocabulary in Galatians 1. What should also be noted is that Paul uses the present rather than the past tense, suggesting that they are in the process of, but have not yet completely, defected from the true gospel. Paul therefore expresses his astonishment that the Galatians are abandoning the gospel, and that they are doing so under the influence of some who are stirring up trouble.

The Troublemakers (1:6-7)

A controlled and disciplined method of 'mirror-reading' from the evidence of the letter makes it possible to glean some significant facts about the identity of these troublemakers or 'agitators' (1:7; 5:10, 12). First of all, it can be ascertained that these agitators were themselves Christians. Paul, already in this opening section, raises the issue whether what they preach is 'gospel' (1:6-9), indicating that Paul and his opponents are bound together by their faith in Christ, but clearly not by their interpretation of what this faith entails. Secondly, that these agitators are Christ-believers of Jewish descent is implied by the focus on circumcision in various parts of the letter, indicating that Paul is offering a sustained response to their demand that the Galatians be circumcised. That this is what primarily motivates the agitators is suggested by Paul's comment in 6:12: 'It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised'). They seek to establish their own reputation by using the rite of circumcision, a sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, as an identity marker over and against other nations (cf. *Jubilees* 15:11-15; 16:14) but also by the emphasis in the first chapters on the nature of Paul's

relationship with the Jerusalem church and his focus on the issue of the identity of the 'sons of Abraham' (in chapters 3-4) and his appeal to scripture in the discussion (cf. 2:16; 3:23; 4:4-5, 21). It thus appears that faith in Christ, according to these agitators, should also include observance of works of the Law like circumcision, but probably also Jewish food laws (2:1-10; 2:11-14) and feast days (4:9-10: the Galatians are concerned with 'special days, and months, and seasons, and years').

Some attempts have been made to deny the Jewish identity of these people, particularly by Johannes Munck (*Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*), who argued on the basis of the use of the present tense in 5:3 ('every man who lets himself be circumcised') and 6:13 ('those who are being circumcised') that they were Gentiles from within the Galatian church, convinced (due to their contact with Jews) that circumcision was the proper mode of entry to Christianity. This argument is nevertheless severely weakened by Paul's consistent strategy in this letter of distinguishing between the Galatians themselves (by referring to them in the second person plural) and the troublemakers (in the third person plural). Furthermore, the participle in 6:13 can be rendered as 'those who cause [you] to be circumcised', which is more in line with the reference to the same people in the previous verse as 'those who compel you to be circumcised'. Others have claimed that Paul was waging battle 'on two fronts', against Jewish Christians who sought to impose circumcision on the one hand (chapters 1-4) and against Gentile liberalists or pneumatics on the other hand who claimed that life in the Spirit meant freedom from ethical demands (chapters 5-6). This has primarily been argued on the basis of the apparent change in focus in 5:13 ('do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence') and the charge in 6:13 that 'even the circumcised do not themselves keep the law'.

It is more likely, however, that Paul, in the two final chapters, is warning against potential dangers for those who over-emphasized the notion of Christian freedom, without it necessarily being a part of the Galatians' own experience ('those who do not themselves keep the law' could, in the light of the Antioch incident, indicate that certain Jewish Christians, by associating with Gentiles, were not keeping to the law according to their own stringent standards). Furthermore, if Paul was combating a second group in chapters 5-6, it is strange that he focuses completely, in his final summary (6:12-16), upon the single issue of circumcision.

It seems that these opponents had come as Jewish Christian missionaries ('Judaizers') from outside Galatia (some time after Paul's departure) and probably claimed authorisation from the Jerusalem church. Their aim was to correct Paul's interpretation of the gospel by attempting to make the Gentile Christ-believers in Galatia 'true heirs

of Abraham' through the rite of circumcision. What is less certain is the nature of the relationship between these opponents and those identified as 'false brothers' who infiltrated the private meeting between Paul (and Barnabas and Titus) and the Jerusalem apostles (2:4-5) and those who came 'from James' when Paul confronted Peter in Antioch over the issue of table fellowship with Gentiles (2:12). The troublemakers may well have represented a similar kind of understanding of the Christian gospel, and they may even have aligned themselves with such figures; but it does not necessarily follow that they should be identified with one another to form a single group.

The Gospel of Christ (1:11-12)

What Paul emphasizes is that the agitators have been presenting the Galatians with a quite different interpretation of the gospel, even claiming that Paul had misguided them by suggesting that there was no need for Gentile believers to receive circumcision or be obedient to the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Paul's readiness to accept Gentiles without requiring them to receive circumcision was viewed as unacceptable by these Judaizing missionaries, even as an attempt on his part to 'please people' (Philo, *Spec Leg* 1 states that 'circumcision is an object of ridicule among many people').

Paul, nevertheless, claims that he is a 'servant of Christ' (v. 10), owing obedience to his master in the preaching of the gospel. For him, the central element in the gospel is God's grace, as he himself experienced when he received his commission on the road to Damascus (verses 15-16). This experience demonstrated to Paul the essential character of the gospel: salvation was universal with only one condition (faith in Christ), and this could apply to Gentiles as well as to Jews. It is this gospel that Paul places before the Galatians in as forcefully a manner as he can. He is so convinced that the gospel preached by him is the 'gospel of Christ', that the threat of an alternative interpretation prompts him to adopt particularly fierce language about cursing its adherents ('let that one be accursed' in vv. 9-10 renders the word *anathema*, a term regularly used to translate the Hebrew *herem* which denotes something set aside for destruction by God (Lev. 27:28-29; Deut. 7:26)).

As a manifestation of God's grace Paul emphasizes that the gospel he preaches is of divine origin and authority, as is made explicit in his programmatic statement in 1:11-12: 'For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it; but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ'. Paul opts for the term *apokalypsis* in this verse ('revelation') to describe his Damascus road encounter with the risen Christ; it is a term that he uses elsewhere to describe a disclosure of heavenly

authority (cf. 1 Cor. 4:6, 26; 2 Cor. 12:1, 7; Gal. 2:2) and here denotes the divine revelation that forms the basis of the gospel. It is this claim that Paul sets out to defend in the next sections, often categorized as Paul's autobiographical section, although what he in fact offers is a selection of key events that substantiate his argument about the divine origin of the gospel of Christ.

'Earlier Life in Judaism' (1:13-14)

Paul's first defence of the gospel is his earlier life or conduct also before his encounter with the risen Christ. What is particularly striking here is the way in which he describes this earlier conduct (*anastrophē*) in terms of his allegiance to Judaism. The underlying Greek term (*Ioudaismos*) only occurs here (and verse 14) in the New Testament, and, once again, its use in 2 Maccabees throws important light on its usage by Paul. In this text, which contains some of the earliest attestation of this word, it denotes Judaism as a distinctive entity in contrast to Hellenism (2:21: 'those who fought bravely for Judaism'; 8:1: 'those who continued faithfully in Judaism'). In other words it denotes a Jewish identity rooted in faithfulness to its own heritage and a notion of separateness from a Gentile identity, over and against those who were succumbing to the pressures of 'foreign ways' (4:13). Martin Hengel thus defines 'Judaism', as used in the Maccabean literature, in the following way: 'The word means both political and genetic association with the Jewish nation and exclusive belief in the one God of Israel, together with the observance of the Torah given by him' (*Judaism and Hellenism*, 1-2).

Thus, although Paul still viewed himself as a Jew ('my people': 1:14; 2:15), he speaks of his former life as somebody on the inside whose life was totally dominated by his commitment to his own heritage. Paul draws attention to two particular manifestations of this commitment: it was manifested negatively through his persecution of 'the church of God' to extremes ('violently': verse 13), probably with reference to Jewish Christians (whom he viewed as threatening the boundaries of Jewish self-identity), and he progressed beyond his Jewish contemporaries in his knowledge of the traditions of his ancestors (verse 14). The emphasis on ancestral traditions, which probably included observance of oral law by the Pharisees (*Ant.* 13:408; *Mk* 7:5) as well as dedication to the written Mosaic Law, he views as an expression of his 'zeal', a term used widely in Jewish tradition for the motivation to preserve the distinctiveness of Israel's heritage and covenantal identity (see *Jubilees* 30:1-20; *Sir.* 45:23-24: 'Phinehas son of Eleazar ranks third in glory for being zealous in the fear of the Lord, and standing firm, when the people turned away'; *I Macc.* 2:19-28). Note in particular Philo, *Spec Leg* 2:253: 'there are thousands, who are zealots for the laws, strictest guardians of the ancestral customs, merciless to those who do anything to subvert them'.

'Set Apart and Called by God' (1:15-16)

Clearly, Paul's aim in this brief autobiographical sketch of his earlier life as a zealous Jew and persecutor of the church is to demonstrate that his conversion was due to direct divine intervention, for no other reason could explain the dramatic transformation that had taken place in him (cf. Phil. 3:6 - again no suggestion of inner turmoil). That this is the action of God is made explicit in verse 15, where Paul draws on prophetic language to describe his divine commissioning. He refers to his call in terms of having 'been set apart from my mother's womb', a deliberate echo of Jeremiah 1:5 (and a possible play on the original meaning of 'Pharisees' - the separated one is the one who is set apart by God for the gospel): 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'. Furthermore, another expression of a prophetic call is echoed in the words 'and called me ...to proclaim him among the Gentiles' (vv. 15-16), reminiscent of the call of the Servant of the Lord in Second Isaiah (49:1), which involved being sent as a light to the nations (49:6). The revelation of the Son for which this calling prepared is his experience on the road to Damascus (see 1:1, 11), which he elsewhere describes in terms of seeing Christ or of Christ appearing to him (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; 2 Cor. 4:6). He notes, however, that the revelation takes place 'in me', to denote the personal transformation that has taken place (cf. Gal. 2:20: Christ lives in him; 4:6: the Spirit of the Son resides 'in our hearts').

Independence from the Jerusalem Church (1:16-20)

Paul explicitly emphasizes that he did not receive his commission to preach the gospel (to the Gentiles) from other human beings or confer with them (verse 16: 'I did not confer with any human being'), denying that he had consulted with those who were recognized as authoritative interpreters, particularly (as he will then make clear) the leaders of the Jerusalem church. The term 'apostles' in verse 18 could refer specifically to these leaders; certainly the term includes the Twelve, but it may also point to a wider group (in view of 1 Cor. 15:5-7) and included James the brother of Jesus (see v. 19).

Setting out only the most relevant events which followed his encounter with the risen Christ (with limited information, he states that he did not hurry to Jerusalem in order to gain an explanation of his call-vision, but he went away to Arabia (1:16-17). Although it has been popular to interpret this reference as indicating Paul's withdrawal to the desert, even containing echoes of Moses' experiences (particularly as 'Arabia' could denote a vast region as far south as the Sinai peninsula), it probably connotes a region close to Damascus. The kingdom of the Nabatean king Aretas IV was known as Arabia (cf. 2 Cor. 11:32; Josephus, *War* 5.4.3 notes that Nabatea was included in Arabia), and was populated with many cities in which Paul, presumably, preached his gospel to the

Gentiles before returning to Damascus (v. 17). All this is intended to underline his independence from the Jerusalem leadership, for only after three years (which could indicate two years, since the year from which counting began would be reckoned as the first year) did he go up to Jerusalem and 'visit' Cephas. Paul stresses that this visit only lasted fifteen days. By indicating its brevity, he seeks to emphasize that he could not have come totally under the influence of Peter during this short time. He did not see anyone else of significance except James, the brother of the Lord, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church (1:18-19). Again, from the perspective of a mirror-reading of the text, it is possible that Paul's opponents were claiming that he had gone to Jerusalem immediately after his conversion and was given instruction in the gospel for a period of time by the apostles.

He may not have been dependent on Peter and other leaders like James for initial instruction on the gospel (his understanding of the gospel was firmly established before this visit), but this is not to deny that Paul, as he makes clear in later sections of this argument, was eager to receive recognition from them on issues related to the gospel (including its preaching among the Gentiles). There is no pejorative tone to his description of his encounter with the Jerusalem leaders; he states that they were apostles before him (verse 17) and acknowledges their legitimacy and probably his dependence on traditions that he has received (for example 1:4 reads like a formula). What does require comment is Paul's reference to his encounter with Cephas. The underlying Greek term (*historēsaí*) can connote the notion of getting acquainted with somebody and even learning something from somebody, but because of Paul's emphasis on his independence from Jerusalem in this section, it is interpreted in a minimalistic fashion by some scholars (note NRSV 'visit' is deliberately vague and open-ended). This need not be the case (discussed with Peter the origins of the early Christian movement and Jesus' earthly ministry). However, Paul's recognition of the significance of the gospel is based solely on his experience of the risen Christ. Thus he stresses that he received his authorisation as a missionary directly from God through Christ, and that this had already taken place a long time before his visit to Jerusalem. For two/three years he did not go to Jerusalem, and when he did subsequently visit the city, he stayed only for a fortnight and met only two apostles. Furthermore, even after this visit, he did not meet these leaders again for fourteen years, during which time he persevered with his missionary work in Syria and Cilicia (1:21; cf. Acts 9:30) and had little interim contact with the Jerusalem leaders.

He continued to be unknown to the Judaeian churches; this need not indicate the congregations in Jerusalem, who would have known Paul already from his earlier life as a persecutor of the church. This persecution may not have extended beyond Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8:3; 26:10), but these congregations outside the city were ones of

prominence, probably because they would be closely associated with the mother church in Jerusalem and would be among the oldest congregations. He did not know them personally, but his widespread reputation as a persecutor led them to glorify God for the dramatic transformation that had taken place in Paul (striking a similar note to the initial part of this so-called autobiographical section). While Paul had previously been 'in Judaism', those who are now 'in Christ' give glory to God because of the divine origin of his call, apostolic status and the gospel preached by him (v. 22).

The Seal of Approval of the Jerusalem Apostles

Paul therefore acknowledges the authority of the Jerusalem leaders and is eager to demonstrate that, during his second visit to Jerusalem (described in 2:1-10), he did receive recognition from the Jerusalem leadership. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem fourteen years later, Paul presented the mother church with the gospel preached by him. Why does he stress these facts? Probably to challenge the Judaizing believers' view that it was their form of preaching that had been authenticated by the Jerusalem apostles. Paul now goes to great lengths to indicate that these leaders were not opposed to him, but listened to his message and acknowledged that his gospel to the Gentiles was of equal stature to the gospel preached by them: They acknowledged that 'he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles'. Without this seal of approval his mission would have been 'in vain' (2:2) - for they had the authority to force Titus to receive circumcision (2:3) and even to add certain elements to Paul's teaching (2:6). This, however, was not the case, for the pillar apostles acknowledged his commissioning to the Gentiles and gave him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (2:7-9).

The Incident at Antioch (2:11-14)

Antioch was the main city in Syria and had become one of the most important centres of early Christian missionary work. In a city of this kind it was inevitable that the issue of the inter-relationship of Jewish and Gentile Christ-believers would come to the fore. Paul therefore draws attention to the presence of Peter in this city, and that his custom of eating with the Gentiles changed when representatives from James arrived in their midst. The situation it seems was that some Christ-believers of Jewish descent had developed the custom of eating at the same tables as the Gentiles. This was totally prohibited in Jewish law, for, according to the levitical dietary laws, they were not allowed to eat forbidden and unclean food. Peter had initially accepted Paul's view that to eat separately was a breach of Christian freedom and community, but his view changed when the Jewish-Christian brethren arrived. This hypocrisy led Paul to criticise Peter publicly, drawing attention to the inconsistency of his actions: he had

previously lived like a Gentile in Antioch, but by withdrawing and eating separately, he was indirectly putting pressures on the Gentiles to adopt Jewish customs. Paul recognizes that the gospel could only flourish if it was separated from the Jewish rituals. Paul chooses to describe this particular event to the Galatians for two reasons: a) He firstly demonstrates his independence of the authorities in Jerusalem; and b) by publicly opposing Peter, one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, in Antioch, he was also asserting his own apostolic authority.

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