

Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies

Vol. 9, No. 1 (2016)

Paul's Letter to the Churches of Galatia

Very Rev. Dr. Paul Nadim Tarazi, Th.D.

Galatians presents a series of unique features within the Pauline corpus. First, the addressees are simultaneously “(all) the churches of (the province) Galatia,” whereas each of the other Pauline letters are addressed to the church community of each of the provincial or imperial capitals and obliquely to the rest of the province or the empire. Second, it is the only epistle that is totally bereft of “thanksgiving” (*eukharistia*; acknowledgment of the grace [*kharis*] given). Although Paul mentions the gift of grace repeatedly (Gal 1:3, 6, 15; 2:9, 21; 5:4, 6:18), he omits the typical expression of thanksgiving because the Galatians are “so quickly” deserting God (1:6). Third, in no other letter does Paul devote so much text to an extended apologia for his status as an apostle of God and Christ, and for the truth of the gospel he is preaching. Fourth, his apologia culminates in the open condemnation of his colleague Barnabas as well as “the pillars” of the Jerusalem leadership, to the extent that Paul remains de facto the only valid apostle. Fifth, Paul backs up his assertion of apostolic authority by drawing a parallel between himself and Moses: Paul leaves a “canon (code, rule)” written “in his own hand (*kheiri*)” (6:11) for all to follow, just as the Mosaic Law itself was given “at the hand (*kheiri*)” of Moses (3:19). Moreover, he asserts that his written canon fulfills the requirement of the Mosaic Law (5:13-15; 6:12).

The hearer of the Pauline corpus gets the distinct impression that a good number of letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) readily use, refer to, or expand on statements made in Galatians, to the extent that Galatians looks as though it is the blueprint of that corpus. And if that is so, it may also be the blueprint of the Gospel of Mark. In 1857 Gustav Volkmar (*Die Religion Jesu*) advanced the thesis that the Gospel of Mark is a story-like rendition of the Pauline gospel, and ideas very much like his have been gaining currency among some more recent scholars (most recently Jesper Svartvik, William Telford, and Michael Goulder). Even scholars who do not endorse this thesis have repeatedly shown in detail that many Markan pericopes are built out of Pauline material extant in his letters and, more particularly, in Galatians. It is worth noting that the distinct and otherwise strange title of Mark, “beginning of the gospel” (*arkhē tou euaggeliou*), is found verbatim in Phil 4:15. Considering that Mark is universally considered the earliest Gospel and that the remaining three, especially Luke and Matthew, draw on its material, then the Pauline corpus can be considered as the basis for the Gospels’ material.

In the Book of Acts, the leadership summit at Jerusalem referred to in Galatians 2:1-10 functions as the culmination of the first part of the book. The Jerusalem debate is followed by a recounting of the activity of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 15:22-35), just as is the case in

Galatians 2:11-21. When one adds the striking fact that all of Paul's apostolic activities detailed in Acts are, without exception, in conjunction with cities to which he wrote (Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome) and that two of his main collaborators in Acts are Timothy and Titus, to whom three of his letters are addressed, one can see how the concerns in the book of Acts are intimately related to those found in Paul's written legacy.

The primacy of Galatians extends to the remainder of the New Testament canon, including the two writings that are usually considered non-Pauline. The first is the epistle of James. Galatians must have made such an impression on the Jews of the diaspora who were living among the Gentiles addressed by Paul that James' hand was forced into writing a circular letter to them critiquing the excess he perceived in the teaching of Galatians, which in his view went too far in its de-emphasis on prescriptions of the Law. Revelation is, by and large, considered to have originated within non-Pauline circles, but it contains numerous features reminiscent of Galatians. The book concludes by pronouncing a blessing upon those who "keep the words of the prophecy" and, conversely, a curse on those who do not (Rev 22:18-19). This is a basic aspect of Galatians (1:8-9; 3:8, 9, 14). The message of the revelation to the seer John is imparted as a set of seven letters that are addressed to seven different churches of the province Asia, and are to be heeded by the members of all seven churches (Rev 2-3). Of the other New Testament writings, only Galatians is addressed simultaneously to multiple churches of one province (Gal 1:2). Last and in no way least, Galatians and Revelation are the only two New Testament books that speak of a heavenly Jerusalem that is expressly presented as being inclusive of the Gentiles (Gal 4:26; Rev 21:2, 10).¹

Galatians, then, can arguably be considered the blueprint for the entire New Testament and, consequently, its study becomes of utmost importance. Yet, before going into its content, one must try to resolve, or at least tackle, the enigma concerning its addressees. With the exception of Hebrews that does not mention any recipients, all other Pauline letters are aimed at communities or individuals in locations surrounding the Aegean Sea which, according to Acts as well as the Pauline corpus, was the area of Paul's apostolic activity until his journey to Rome and the West. Actually, we have Paul's own seal in this matter at the end of Romans:

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, *so that from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ*, thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation, but as it is written, "They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him."

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. (15:17-22)

This being the case, Galatia is well out of the area around the Aegean Sea, the realm of Paul's apostolic activity. So why did Paul compose a letter to that province? To point out that it is mentioned as an area of Pauline activity in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 does not help since we do not hear the details of such visits as in the case of the other churches to which Paul wrote. And in both instances in Acts, Phrygia is mentioned in the same breath as Galatia; hence why not a letter to

¹ See my discussion of this matter in my *The New Testament: An Introduction, Volume 3: Johannine Writings*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004.

Phrygia, or to both the Galatians and Phrygians, especially since this province is mentioned first in Acts 16:6? The answer must lie elsewhere, most probably in the name itself.

Galatia owes its name to the Celts or Gauls who migrated from Ancient Gaul (Western Europe) and settled in Anatolia in the third century B.C. after they had invaded Macedonia. Thus the Gauls preceded the Romans into the eastern provinces. Later the Romans, under Julius Caesar, would conquer the original Gaul. By addressing a letter to the Galatians early on and well before writing to the Romans which he did toward the end of his life, Paul was sending a message to the Roman emperor and Senate as well as to his colleagues in Jerusalem and Judea that lay under the Roman boot. The letter to the Galatians appears to be a programmatic blue print of the entire Pauline message. Its original was obviously intended to remain in the archives of the Pauline school at their headquarters in Ephesus. Indeed, the Jewish-Christian Jerusalemite leadership would not have treasured an epistle containing such caustic content directed at them. Nor would the Galatians themselves, whom the epistle brands as “foolish, thoughtless, brainless” (*anoētoi*) twice in a row (Gal 3:1, 3) have kept a copy of that letter so that it could be read to them repeatedly during their assemblies. In the only other instances in the Pauline corpus where the recipients are called by name, Paul cajoles them in a very positive manner (2 Cor 6:11-12; Phil 4:15-16).

When this letter was read at the gatherings, its message must have resounded loud and clear. Those living in the Roman empire would have been struck at hearing the vocative “O Galatians” (Gal 3:1) and would have associated it with the Gauls, both in its geographical and ethnic connotations. Geographically, Gaul was the westernmost Roman senatorial province. For the gospel message to have been addressed to “Gaul” from Ephesus, indicates that Rome must have been ignored or, at least, circumvented. This is corroborated in the epistle to the Romans, where Paul speaks of his future plans to visit the West: “But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company *for a little (apo merous)*.” (Rom 15:23-24) Here again Paul implies that, if (the earthly) “Jewish” capital Jerusalem is not the center of the universe (Gal 4:25-26), neither is the “Gentile” capital Rome. His aim is to reach the imperial province of Spain, the westernmost part of the Roman empire and thus the farthest point of the Roman (inhabited) world (*oikoumenē*). Put otherwise, Paul’s message is being spread not centrifugally out of Rome, but rather centripetally as though it is besieging Rome to bring it and its emperor to their knees in “submissive obedience” to the gospel (Rom 1:5; 15:18; 16:19, 26). It is in Paul’s gospel, rather than in the person of the emperor, that lies the true “power of God unto the salvation (*sōtērian*; liberation) of all” (1:16). The close link at this point between Romans and Galatians is betrayed in that we find in Romans 1:14 the only other instance of *anoētoi* (foolish, thoughtless, brainless) in a Pauline epistle. The larger context of this occurrence is telling: “I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish (*anoētois*): so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” (1:13-15) One cannot miss the classical opposition between the wise Greco-Romans and the foolish barbarians. Given that the Gauls were viewed as (foolish) barbarians by the Romans, Paul’s intent becomes clear. On the one hand, he is lumping both parties into the one scriptural category of “Gentiles” and, on the other hand, he is informing the

Romans that, among these, they fall at the lower end of his priorities: after having preached to the “rest of the Gentiles” he is now ready “also” for the Romans. Even then, as he will elucidate later in chapter 15, Rome is just a mere stop on his journey to Spain.

Such being the case, it is no wonder that Romans looks like a developed and more detailed rendition of Galatians. The earlier epistle was addressed to the “foolish barbarians” among the Gentiles. The later one addressed the “wise” Greco-Romans with a more sophisticated rendition of the same argument. Still, the necessity for more detail can be construed as sarcastic, reflecting that the “wise” needed such elaboration, while the “foolish” were deemed capable of understanding a more succinct rendition of the same message. This possibility actually becomes more of a probability given the evident proclivity of scriptural literature toward sarcasm. At any rate, since Galatians is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, letter and Romans is one of the later epistles, then the lesson becomes clear. Paul’s gospel that was imposed as incontrovertible canonical scripture on the barbarian Gauls (Gal 6:11, 16) is now imposed on Rome and, by extension, the entire empire. Lest the powerful boast in their assumed primacy, the message goes first to the foolish, the weak, and the low and despised in the world, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 1:27-31, and it is delivered to them not “in lofty words and wisdom” (2:1). The same message is delivered in the same way to the powerful who think of themselves as wise yet from the perspective of Paul, they are actually “babes” and “men of the flesh” (3:1).

The Content and Message of Galatians

In the manner of Jeremiah before him, Paul consigns to a writ the divine message entrusted to him in spite of the fact that it was refused by his addressees (see Jer 36). The Galatians’ swift inclination to desert God (Gal 1:6) is no sign or proof that Paul is not an apostle (vv.1-5) or that his message is not the true one. To the contrary, it is the Galatians who are being troubled by those who are perverting the gospel (Gal 1:7); and further, anyone who does so, even an angel, is under a divine curse (vv.8-9). Actually, again as in the case of Jeremiah, Paul was chosen while yet in his mother’s womb and commissioned directly by God himself (vv.15-17). It is true that for a while Paul was trying to dismantle God’s work, but this is precisely a sign that he was chosen by God himself in spite of Paul’s recalcitrance, as was the case of the prophets to Israel and Judah, and even to the Assyrians (as in the case of Jonah).

Like the Old Testament prophet, the New Testament apostle is assigned by God directly and does not answer to anyone else. That is why Paul immediately embarked on his apostolic endeavor without referring to any human authority, proof of which is the fact that he did not visit the Jerusalem leaders until “after three years” as an apostle (v.18), and then continued his work unhindered for at least eleven more years (2:1). At the Jerusalem summit his apostleship was vindicated (vv.1-10). One should not understand the passage to mean that Paul needed acquiescence from the “pillars,” but rather that his commission toward the Gentiles was validated. One is not to understand “by revelation” (v.2) as referring to “another” revelation than the one mentioned in 1:16, since that would mean that the commissioning revelation was not full and sufficient and needed another certification. Such would contradict both the intention of the passage and the way Luke understood the matter in Acts (9; 22; 26) where the commissioning revelation has a once and for all value. The Greek *kata apokalypsin* (Gal 2:2a) means not so much “by revelation” as “according to (the original) revelation,” which is confirmed in that the following

statement “I laid before them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles” (v.2b) harks back to “[God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (1:16). Paul accepted the showdown in Jerusalem to prove his point to the Galatians (2:5b), not to “the pillars” (vv.5a, 6).

However, the real crux lay in the testing of the agreement in conjunction with communal table fellowship (vv.11-14). The centrality of this matter can be seen in that this issue takes the lion’s share in both Romans and 1 Corinthians, not to mention the endless pericopes in the Gospels that revolve around Jesus eating with *personae non gratae* in the eyes of his opponents. So serious was the matter that it is precisely at this point that the full break takes place between Paul and all the others who took part in the Jerusalem summit, including his colleague Barnabas. With that in mind, the Apostle proceeds to lay down his, or rather the scriptural, teaching (2:15-6:10) using the imagery of the oneness of the Roman “household” (6:10), the ultimate expression of which is table fellowship; indeed the Roman meal came to be known as *symposion* where thoughts concerning the common good were shared and discussed for edification of the “one body” (1 Cor 6; 8; 10; 12-14).

Since the basic dilemma is circumcision and the Law’s requirements regarding it, Paul concentrates his argumentation around the content of the Law in its traditional understanding, namely, in the five books of Moses. Such is evident from Galatians 4:21-23 where, after having invited his addressees to “hear the Law,” he refers to the story of Abraham’s two sons from Hagar and Sarah. Paul’s decision to do this is magisterial; he is trying to show his submission not just to part of the Law, but to the Law *in its totality*, that is, Genesis through Deuteronomy. One becomes impressed with this strategy, since nowhere in scripture is circumcision actually a requirement of the Mosaic Law (Exodus to Deuteronomy), as is virtually universally assumed. The circumcision covenant is instead the necessary prerequisite for the Mosaic covenant, and its implementation is restricted to Genesis in the Pentateuch. Its mention in Exodus 12:44, 48 and in Leviticus 12:3 are mere asides to the main subject matter. This is confirmed in the Book of Joshua, the only other book dealing with the administration of circumcision under an express order by God as in Genesis 17. The circumcision pericope in Joshua 5:1-8 precedes the promulgation of the Mosaic Law, Deuteronomy style, (8:30-35) by three and a half chapters. Not only that, but Joshua inaugurates the second part of scripture, the Former Prophets, which is the sad story of the sons of Jacob who persistently kept breaking the Law and, as a result, were exiled and scattered in the land of the Chaldeans where Abraham originated. Thus, the function of the Mosaic law in the scriptural story is to show that the sons of Jacob are not better than the Gentiles who are not privy to that law, and thus they should not complain about God’s original decision to include outsiders as well as insiders under the tent of Abraham (Gen 17:12-13). In the Latter Prophets this is precisely what God promises to accomplish when he brings those who have obeyed his commandments, both Gentiles and Judahites (Jews), into his city, the heavenly Jerusalem not made by hands of man (Is 40-66).

This is clearly what Paul elucidates in Galatians 3-4 after the preamble in 2:15-21. He begins with Genesis and the promise of blessing to Abraham (Gal 3:8), which includes all nations, then proceeds to show with quotations from Leviticus and Deuteronomy the threat of curse that disobedience to the Law entails. In the scriptural story of the Former Prophets, it is the curse, rather than the blessing promised by the same Law, that is administered. Hence Paul’s conclusion: “Why then the law?” It was added to show that the behavior of the sons of Jacob was one of

transgressions (*tōn parabaseōn kharin*)... [indeed] the scripture closed off as in a prison (*synekleisen*) both parties, Judahites as well as Gentiles (*ta panta*) under the aegis of sin (*hypo hamartian*).” (Gal 3:19, 22)

However, the same scriptural story is bracketed, as Paul insists, by a summons to have trust (*pistis*) in God’s control over all situations, even those that seem impossible. This can be seen in the quotations from Genesis and Habakkuk. Paul starts his argument with the former, which refers to the practical impossibility of God’s offer to Abraham (Gen 15:1-6; Gal 3:6). The latter is from the Latter Prophets (Hab 2:4b; Gal 3:11), and is about Yahweh’s apparent “injustice” in allowing the Chaldeans to overrun his city Jerusalem (Hab 1:2-17). In the same way, Paul brackets his own summary presentation of the scriptural story with a reference to the requirement of trust (Gal 3:6 and 23-25).

However, throughout his presentation, he has in mind what he will underline in his conclusion: the oneness of table fellowship around Christ (vv.26-29). This can be seen in the interjection of the oneness of the “offspring, which is Christ” (v.16), i.e., the inclusive Messianic community gathered around its head.² Here again it is important to notice that the quotation is taken from Genesis in conjunction with the promise to Abraham, which is precisely the point with which Paul ends his argument in chapter 3: “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (v.29). Furthermore, if Paul begins and ends with Abraham it is because the Apostle is following the scriptural story line that begins with Abraham in Genesis and ends with him in Isaiah 40-66.

Chapter 4 deals specifically with the topic of freedom versus slavery, which will control the content of the rest of the epistle. The reason behind its necessity as well as its importance lies in the fact that the Jerusalem leadership was trying to impose circumcision on the Gentiles in order to bring them not so much into the community of Abraham but rather into that of Jacob—James is the English rendering of the Greek *Iakōbos* (Jacob)—i.e., the Jews of that time. It is the Apostle’s contention that to force circumcision on his Gentile communities, the majority of whom were slaves, would bring them into another kind of slavery: they would be forced to submit to the didrachma, the temple tax, and to diverse dietary rules to which they were not accustomed. Put otherwise, they would have to be judaized (Gal 2:14; 4:8-9) and, in such case, they would cease to be Gentiles. This would contradict the message of the Latter Prophets, more specifically Isaiah 40-66, whereby Gentiles, together with the Judahites, will be called into God’s new city. Hence Paul’s refusal to allow Titus to be forced into circumcision (Gal 2), whereas he had Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother, circumcised (Acts 16:3). However—and this is the crux which Paul will revisit in more detail in Romans 2—what really matters is not to be circumcised or remain uncircumcised, but to do God’s will. Needless to say, this is not a Pauline twist since the Pentateuch previously spoke of circumcision of lips (Ex 6:12, 30) and heart (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6). Jeremiah is the only other Old Testament book besides the Pentateuch and Joshua that deals with circumcision. Jeremiah not only speaks of the circumcision of the heart (4:4), but it actually does not consider circumcision of the flesh a distinctive sign (9:25-26).

In order to liberate the Galatians from the yoke imposed by Jerusalem (Gal 4:8-10), Paul devised baptism—a rite of cleansing—as an expression of the circumcision of the heart (see Col

² Paul Nadim Tarazi, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994), 138-43.

11:12), which unites all believers, regardless of their religious or social status, into the one messianic community (Gal 3:26-4:7; see also 1 Cor 7:17-24). But the price of freedom is quite costly since it requires the community's members to sever their relations with "false" brethren (Gal 4:29-30). If they fail to do that, they will lose God's gift and be severed from the messianic community into which he called them (5:4). That is why, before engaging in his argument from the Law (4:21-27) which leads up to the summons to cast out false brethren, he digresses into the literary *topos* (theme) of friendship in 4:12-20. His purpose is to persuade the Galatians that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, he is on their side the way a true father is on the side of his little children. On the other hand, his opponents, who are concerned about their own interest rather than the interests of the Galatians, are behaving like cajoling peers. Then to back up his directive for the Galatians to expel those who are disturbing them, he uses his apostolic authority to the full extent ("Now I, Paul, say to you"; 5:2) in order to sum up his teaching concerning the strict prohibition for Gentiles to undergo circumcision (vv.2-6).

Once Paul has liberated the Galatians from the yoke of Jerusalem, he embarks on the task of freeing them from Rome. To do so, he uses the literary device of *captatio benevolentiae* to inspire a positive attitude toward the very difficult request he is about to make to them. He does this by praising them for having run the good course and inviting them to proceed on it in spite of those who are perturbing them (vv.7-12), and he reminds them of the freedom in Christ to which they were called (v.13a; see earlier v.1). He strikes them suddenly with an about-face: "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of (*douleuete*; serve as a slave would) one another." (v.13b). He then invites them to submit to the "law of Christ" instead of the Roman law, which submission requires them to walk the way of the spirit, i.e., of God's will, rather than that of the flesh, that is, of their own will (5:14-6:10). Further, he warns them that God will not be mocked, and that they will be judged based on their love for the other (6:7-10).

Having completed his argument, Paul consigns to a writ for the ages his "rule" to be followed by all throughout the generations (6:16), committing as well as inviting the Galatians to abide by God's grace (6:18) which they were in the process of deserting (1:6).

Basic Bibliography

Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

Paul Nadim Tarazi, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994).

Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The New Testament: An Introduction. Vol.4: Matthew and the Canon* (St Paul, MN: OCABS Press, 2009) where the primacy of Galatians is discussed.