

# Introduction

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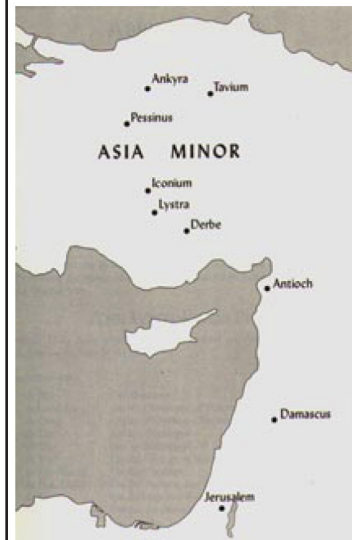
*The Date of the Epistle**The Importance of the Date for Interpreting the Epistle*

Any one who studies the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians must reckon with the issue of when the letter was written. While in all biblical studies the background of the text is vital for a proper understanding of its meaning, this is especially true regarding the date of Galatians. The pivotal issue (as far as the standard commentaries are concerned) is whether Paul wrote Galatians before or after the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. If he wrote it before the edict of the Council was rendered, then we must understand his words to be a preface to the Council's decision made without their final word in place. If, however, he wrote after the Jerusalem Council, we must interpret his teaching on the issue of Gentiles and circumcision as some kind of "commentary" or application of the Council's decision.

Often the dating of the book is linked to geographical issues. Let me explain: in the province of 1st Century Galatia (Asia Minor), there were congregations both in the north and south of the region. In Paul's first journey to establish congregations, he visited the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 14:1, 8, 20) all of which are in the southern part of Galatia. Acts does not indicate that he travelled to the northern regions of Galatia at this time. On his second journey, after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, Paul and his companions travelled through Phrygia (Acts 16:6) and many scholars consider this to be a description of the northern regions of Galatia. So it appears that Paul established congregations in the south before the Jerusalem Council convened (i.e., on his first journey) and in the north on his second journey after the Jerusalem Council.

How does this affect the issue of the date of writing? The answer lies in who the recipients of the letter were. If Paul wrote this epistle to the congregations located in the south of Galatia (those he established in his first journey), then it seems reasonable to conclude that he wrote the letter shortly after he had travelled there and before the Jerusalem Council. (It is

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also possible, of course, that he wrote to the congregations in the south much later, even after the Jerusalem Council.<sup>1</sup> If, however, the letter was written to the congregations in the north, then it must have been written after his second journey, and thus well after the Jerusalem Council.

### *The Data for Determining the Date*

Much has been made of the Jerusalem visit as described in Galatians 2, and whether the description given by Paul fits the venue of the Jerusalem Council as described in Acts 15. There appears to be a clear discrepancy between the two accounts.

#### **Galatians 2**

Paul went up by revelation

Paul was accompanied by Titus

The leadership included John

The meeting was private

No decrees are mentioned

#### **Acts 15**

Paul was sent by the congregation in Antioch

Paul was accompanied by “some others”

John is not mentioned

The meeting was public

The decrees are a central issue<sup>2</sup>

Some have suggested that these “discrepancies” are not that significant and can be explained various ways. But while there may be explanations, it seems to me that the manner in which the two passages differ should not be swept aside. Granted, other epistles of Paul obviously written after the Jerusalem Council do not mention the decrees, but these epistles are not dealing with the issue of circumcision the way Galatians does. Indeed, the issue of circumcision is a central one in Galatians (2:3,7-9,12; 5:2-3,6,11; 6:12-13,15) and this was the primary issue confronting the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-2). It hardly seems likely that Paul would not have appealed to the decision of the Council to bolster his thesis to the Galatians had he written after the edict was formulated.<sup>3</sup>

We may also note the behavior of Peter as described in chapter 2. Apparently Peter was willing to eat with the non-Jewish believers until those from Jerusalem came. When in the presence of the Jewish sages from the Holy City, Peter withdrew from the non-Jews in conformity with a prevailing halachah that one ought not to eat with Gentiles. Once again, would Peter have been so brazen in this action after the Jerusalem Council? One would expect that Peter would have conformed in halachah to the Jerusalem Council after the decree was finalized. This would lend weight to the argument that the situation described by Paul occurred before the Council of Acts 15.

The issue of whether Paul wrote this epistle before or after the Jerusalem Council has been a hotly debated matter among commentators and scholars in Pauline studies. Much has been written on the subject, but no clear conclusion has been accepted by the majority. Many hold the position that there is simply not enough clear and undisputed data to be dogmatic. In assessing the argu-

1 Silva takes the view that the letter was written to the congregations in the south, but that it was written later, after the Jerusalem Council. Moises Silva, *Interpreting Galatians* (Baker, 2001), pp. 131-32.

2 Taken from Silva, *Ibid.*, p. 132.

3 For the classic argument against this, i.e., that the letter was written after the Jerusalem Council but that Paul did not want to appeal to the decrees of the Council because he wanted to emphasize that he had received this message directly from God and not from the Council, see J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Warren Draper, 1891), pp. 43-61.

ments, I would say that there is more data supporting an early date than a late one. While there is not enough clear data to be dogmatic, I will opt for an early date of writing (most likely around 48-49 CE) and allow this to factor into the interpretation, though with caution since this conclusion is based primarily on inference.

### *Galatians and the Jerusalem Council*

After all the discussion of the date of the epistle, and its connection with the Jerusalem Council, a more fundamental question remains: was the Jerusalem Council dealing with the same issues that Paul dealt with in his epistle to the Galatians? Or to put it another way, is Acts 15 and Galatians talking about the same thing?

Clearly, the issue revolved around how a person entered the Covenant God had made with Israel. The prevailing thought of the Judaism in Paul's day (at least as we understand them from the Pharisaic literature of the Mishnah and Talmuds) was that ethnicity, that is, being a physical descendant of Abraham, secured eternal salvation.<sup>4</sup>

All Israelites have a share in the world to come, as it is said, Your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified (Is. 60:21). m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1<sup>5</sup>

Sanders has shown that this same perspective (that all Israel was secured a place in the world to come) shows up in other statements of the Rabbis as well,<sup>6</sup> and that the prevailing belief was that all Israelites had a place in the world to come except those who willfully forsook the Covenant and denied God.

The issue before the Jerusalem Council, however, was not how a Jewish person secured eternal life (place in the world to come) but how a Gentile obtained such a blessing. Here we must understand the term "circumcision" to be a short-hand way of referring to the ritual of the proselyte, the rabbinic ceremony in which a non-Jew was accorded the status of a Jew. So the question posed in Acts 15:1 is whether or not a non-Jew needed to gain the status of Jew through the rabbinic ritual of the proselyte in order to be counted as "saved":

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1)

... from the perspective of the Rabbis, a Gentile could secure a place in the world-to-come only by becoming a Jew. This, the Rabbis taught, was possible through becoming a proselyte, a ritual based

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4 For further discussion on this, see Tim Hegg, *The Letter Writer* (TorahResource, 2008), pp. 235-36, hereafter abbreviated TLW.

5 The Talmudic discussion may be found at *b.Sanhedrin* 90a, though there is no direct comment on the opening phrase, "All Israel have a share in the world to come."

6 He points to *Tanchuma* Bechuqqotai 5; *y.Taanit* 63d; *b.Sanhedrin* 97a-98b. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Fortress, 1977), pp. 149-50.

entirely upon their rules but without any foundation in the Torah itself. In fact, the added phrase “according to the custom of Moses” in the opening verse of Acts 15 may point to the fact that the disagreement taking place between Paul and Barnabas was not over what the written Torah prescribed for Gentiles but whether or not the additional teachings of the Sages were binding upon them.

Thus when men from Judea taught that “unless you are circumcised (undergo the ritual of a proselyte) according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved,” they were simply applying the standard theology of their day. This is what the Council was dealing with: Did all Israel have a place in the world-to-come? Did Gentiles therefore need to submit to the man-made ritual of the proselyte so that, in accordance with the prevailing theology, they too could secure eternal life, that is, be saved?<sup>7</sup>

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It is instructive for us to understand that the Rabbis did see a way for a Jewish person to lose his secure place in the Covenant. While they listed a number of offenses through which a person could lose their place in the world to come, all of them may be distilled under the general heading of denying God, something more simply identified as idolatry. Idolatry was the acceptance of false gods, which in itself was a denial of the God of Israel Who proclaimed Himself as the only God.

Granted, the willful disregard for any commandment could be evidence of the denial of God Who gave that commandment,<sup>8</sup> but the underlying sin is that of idolatry. This is important for a correct understanding of Acts 15, because the Council’s edict, consisting of four prohibitions, is directed against idolatry as it was customarily practiced by Gentiles in the pagan temples.<sup>9</sup> The decrees formulate by the Council were not a direct answer to the primary question of how the Gentiles were to become members of the Covenant, but a directive to the believing Gentiles so that they would be received within the covenant community of which they were a part. They would need to prove that they had made a clean break with their former idolatry. Their daily living required covenant faithfulness, evidenced by their obedience to the One true God of Israel and their utter disdain for anything connected to idolatry.

Of course, the firm stance of the Council was that Covenant membership was granted on the basis of faith in Yeshua for both Jew and Gentile. That is clear—there was no disputed on this issue.

“And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” (Acts 15:8-11)

The decrees, then, were not a direct answer to the question of whether or not a Gentile needed to become a proselyte in order to “be saved,” but were the

7 *TLW*, p. 236.

8 Note 1John 3:8-9: the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

9 See *TLW*, Chapter 5.



necessary instructions to believing Gentiles in order to guard them from the accusation that they were still practicing idolatry (by participating in the meals at pagan temples). Had they been seen participating in the pagan Temple rituals, their viability within the Jewish community would have ceased. Thus, the four prohibitions given by the Council all relate to common practices within the pagan Temple precincts.

This is not, of course, how Acts 15 is usually interpreted. The majority of Christian commentators consider that in giving the four stipulations, the Jerusalem Council was answering the question: “how much of the Torah do Gentiles need to obey?” But what I am suggesting is that the question posed to the Council was whether a Gentile needed to gain the status of “Jew” in order to be received as a covenant member. This question they answered with a united “No!” A non-Jew was to be received as a righteous Gentile and therefore as a full-fledged member of the covenant. But whereas a proselyte was expected to take upon himself the full yoke of the Torah (which in Paul’s day included the extra rulings of the Sages or the Oral Torah), the Council decreed that the non-Jewish believer should adhere to the rabbinic restrictions pertaining to idolatry as at least the entrance requirements into the Jewish community.

How does this give us background for Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians? I would suggest that precisely the same issue of covenant status is what Paul is addressing in this epistle. I might further suggest that this issue is what prompted the need for the Jerusalem Council in the first place. Paul had taught the Galatians that membership status in the Covenant was through faith in Yeshua plus nothing. This was true for both Jew and Gentile (and thus the confusion that Paul was teaching Jews they no longer needed to circumcise their sons, Acts 21:21). But the prevailing view of the Sages (that covenant membership was available only to those who were Jews, and that therefore Gentiles needed to become Jews through the ritual of a proselyte) had been so deeply ingrained in the theology of the day that it was unthinkable for some that Gentiles should be admitted into the covenant community without becoming proselytes.

Thus, if this perspective is warranted, Paul’s polemic against circumcision in his Epistle to the Galatians is given to answer the very same issue the Jerusalem Council faced. The term “circumcision” is therefore a shorthand term for “becoming a proselyte” in both instances. Like the Jerusalem Council, Paul is not dealing with the question of whether a Gentile should obey Torah, but with the teaching of some that a Gentile needed to receive the status of “Jew” through the rabbinic ceremony in order to have bona fide membership in the Covenant. That the writing of Galatians may well have preceded the Jerusalem Council would indicate that Paul’s teaching on the subject was verified and substantiated by the Council.

With this in mind, we should also reckon with the fact that when Paul speaks of the “Law” (*νόμος*, *namos*) in Galatians we cannot presume that he is referring exclusively to the written Torah. That the whole issue of becoming a proselyte involved rabbinically derived Oral Torah must likewise be taken into account.

#### *The Specific Situation that Occasioned the Epistle*

At the beginning of the Epistle Paul identifies the reason for writing:

...only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Messiah. (1:7)

We shall have to consider more precisely what is meant by “the gospel of Messiah,” but suffice it to say at the outset that Paul, as the Apostle of Yeshua, was carrying to the people the gospel which found its source both in the person and teaching of Yeshua. Whatever “disturbing” influence existed within the congregations of Galatia, its primary evil was that it stood, in some measure, opposed to the gospel of Messiah. While we cannot surmise from this statement how the proponents of this “other gospel which is not another” (1:6-7) might have compared it to the gospel of Messiah as they knew it, we certainly can understand that from Paul’s viewpoint this teaching was clearly errant and a grave danger to the believers in Galatia.

Who were these people whom Paul identifies as “disturbing” the Galatians with contrary teaching? My perspective is that they were simply those who were pressing the prevailing, rabbinic halachah upon the Gentiles in the Galatian congregations, arguing that as Gentiles who had come to confess the One God of Israel, they needed to become proselytes according to the received, rabbinic authorities. That they had forsaken their paganism and confessed Israel’s God as their own was good, but there was more that was needed. Only Israel is granted a place in the world to come, and non-Jews must therefore undergo the proselyte ritual in order to be assured of eternal salvation.

This, of course, is not the prevailing view of Christian commentators. Their view may be represented by many popular titles on the book of Galatians: “Galatians: the Character of Christian Liberty” (Tenny); “Free from Bondage God’s Way” (Kay Arthur); “Galatians: Paul’s Character of Christian Freedom” (Morris); “Galatians: Epistle of Christian Liberty” (Brooks); “Free to Love: Paul’s Defense of Christian Liberty in Galatians” (Buckel); “Galatians: A New Kind of Freedom” (Somers); “Freed from the Law to be Led by the Spirit” (Wilder). The list could go on and on! But the point is obvious: the long-standing interpretation of Galatians among Christian scholars and commentators is that Paul is answering a Jewish insistence upon obeying the Torah with a clear message of freedom: the Christian has been freed from the Torah and is therefore at liberty to be led by the Spirit.

It is in the context of this perspective that those who were “disturbing” the Galatians are identified. They are often labelled as Judaizers,<sup>10</sup> opponents (particularly of Paul),<sup>11</sup> agitators or troublemakers,<sup>12</sup> or Teachers.<sup>13</sup> Generally (though surely not in every case) these are described as Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who were attempting to encourage the non-Jewish members to live according to Torah, something that Paul considered anathema because the Torah had been abolished in favor of the grace which came through Messiah’s death and resurrection. Paul’s message, then, in contrast to that of those causing a “disturbance,” is that Messiah has made an end of the Torah (at least for Gentiles) and that the liberty found through the indwelling Spirit is the backbone of the believer’s halachah (way of life). While this description is overly general and brief, it nonetheless summarizes the vast majority of material written on Galatians since the rise of the Christian Church in the 2nd and 3rd

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10 This term was first used by Marcion in the mid-second Century CE, cf. Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians* (Fortress, 2002), p. 115, n.9.

11 e.g., Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians in Hermeneia* (Fortress, 1979), pp. 5ff.

12 Note the remarks of Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians* (Fortress, 2002), p. 127ff. (Hereafter, *Irony*)

13 J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians in the Anchor Bible* (Doubleday, 1997), pp. 117ff.

Centuries, and particularly since the Reformation. Longenecker’s summary statement is telling:

...the common, almost uncontested view during the patristic and Reformation periods was that Paul’s opponents were Jewish Christian Judaizers.<sup>14</sup>

But the very term “Jewish Christian” betrays an historical perspective that needs to be scrutinized. Granted, the term “Christian” is found three times in the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Pet. 4:16). The reference in 1Peter is later, perhaps six or seven years before the destruction of the Temple. Thus, the only references to the label “Christian” that would fit the time-frame of Galatians are those in Acts. Yet regardless of the dating of this term, it is clear that its meaning before the destruction of the Temple and after cannot be assumed to be the same. At first the term identified those who were followers of Yeshua whom they declared to be the Messiah (Χριστός, *Christos*) which means “anointed one” and is the LXX term for “anointed,” equivalent to the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ, (*mashiach*). But it did not identify a group that was separate and distinct from the larger Jewish community as the word “Christian” does in our day. Indeed, by the 2nd Century CE the term “Christian” had taken on a nuance it did not bear in Paul’s day.

In Paul’s day, the term “Christian” defined a person who had confessed Yeshua to be the long-awaited, divine Messiah anticipated by the Judaisms of his day, and promised by the prophets of Israel. But this confession had not yet resulted in the division later to be defined by terms such as “synagogue” and “Church.” The people of “The Way” were considered, both by themselves, and by pagans, as a sect of Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the first thing we must reckon with as we come to identify the influencers<sup>16</sup> in Galatia is that this was an “in house” debate, not a “synagogue vs. Church” struggle. I do not mean to diminish the stark differences of theology and belief between those who had confessed Yeshua and those who had denied His messiahship, but this chasm of difference could not have been any larger from a community standpoint than that which existed between Pharisee and Sadducee. The fact that after the division of the Synagogue and Church in the late 1st and early 2nd Centuries a very wide chasm developed should not be read back into the situation which Paul addressed in Galatia.

What can we learn, then, about those who were disturbing the Galatians as far as Paul was concerned? First, we should note those things which are not said about them because in the history of interpretation of Galatians, much has been assumed which cannot be sustained from the epistle itself. For instance, it is usually held that the influencers came from outside of the congregations, probably from Jerusalem. But the text never states this. The fact that Paul speaks of an earlier situation in Jerusalem (2:3ff) where “false

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14 R. Longenecker, *Galatians in Word Bible Commentary* (Word, 1990), p. lxxxix.

15 Consider how the term “sect” (αἵρεσις, *haireisis*) is used in Acts to describe Pharisees, Sadducees, as well as Nazarenes and “The Way”: Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5,14; 26:5; 28:22.

16 This is a term Nanos has adopted to describe those who held a “different gospel,” *Irony*, p. 193ff.



brethren” came to spy upon Paul in order to trap him in some theological error should not be considered a description of the current influencers in Galatia. Paul brings up that experience only as an example of theological error which had similarities with the false teaching facing the Galatians. In fact, there is no clear evidence that the influencers were “outsiders,” but it is even more likely that they were members of the Galatian communities

Secondly, the language Paul uses to describe the influencers would indicate that from Paul’s perspective, they were not believers in Yeshua, at least as he defined saving faith. But this does not indicate that they had, from their point-of-view, a deceitful motivation or destructive goals. The experience of community within “Messianic congregations” or Torah Communities of our own times has awakened us to a scenario that may, in fact, very much parallel the situation which Paul addressed. Those within Torah Communities that have a strong attachment to the traditional synagogue find in that attachment something of great value. The cultural traditions, based in rabbinics, have formed deep social and religious categories from which they have derived valuable meaning for everyday life. Their desire to lead Jews and non-Jews alike into this life of rabbinic orthodoxy is motivated (at least from their vantage point) from a desire to see the “good” of such *halachah* developed in the lives of others. They have a “message of good” (i.e., a gospel) that has millennia to undergird it, and generations of examples of how this “good” has benefited the Jewish community. They believe that they can yoke a life of rabbinic orthodoxy with an acceptance of Yeshua as Messiah, and it is this message that they attempt to instill in the non-Jewish members of the community.

But this “gospel” seeks to find a way to “have Yeshua” while at the same time be accepted by the traditional Jewish community. In so doing they inevitably diminish the unique position of Yeshua (and especially His deity) in favor of finding common ground with the Jewish community who has denied Him. As such, the “offense of the cross” is likewise diminished, and the very core issues of redemption/atonement are often compromised. It is not uncommon to hear that some non-Jews have left the Messianic community, seeking conversion within an Orthodox Synagogue. When asked why, the answer often includes something like “we want to experience the ‘real thing.’”

Modern Judaism defines itself in numbers of ways, but one is consistent: a rejection of “Jesus” as the Messiah. As Gentiles begin to experience the realities of Torah life within a Torah Community or Messianic Congregation, they come to an appreciation of the deep significance of Sabbath, Festivals, Liturgy, and daily *halachah*. An increased appreciation for Jewish ways and culture produces a natural connection to the solidarity of traditional, modern Judaism. The reasoning is clear: “if I’ve gained so much in my personal life of worship by living out Torah, why not experience Torah life within the community that has kept it since ancient times?”

But this is actually a wrong assumption: modern Judaism has only some things in common with ancient Judaisms—it is by no means identical with any one of them. The desire to experience the “real thing” is naively understood as a doorway to ancient truths. The reality is that modern Judaism has evolved away from ancient Judaisms in similar proportions to the evolution of today’s Church away from the 1st Century sect called “The Way.”

Nevertheless, the perspective of some within Torah Communities, that conformity to modern, orthodox Judaism is the best way for living out Torah, is at odds with the gospel as it is found in Messiah. The reason is obvious: faith in Messiah declares Him to be just that—the Messiah. And modern orthodox

Judaism defines itself, at least in one sense, as a community that has unabashedly denied that Yeshua is the Messiah. This sets up, in my opinion, a modern-day scenario that may well parallel the situation in Galatia. The influencers are convinced that the long-standing, prevailing theology of the Sages is the best form of *halachah* for all covenant members, Jew and non-Jew alike. But this prevailing theology, which requires the rabbinic ritual of proselytism, diminishes the unique role of Yeshua in the whole scope of salvation. The two cannot exist peaceably. The message of the influencers is one of “good,” that is, there is a way to please God in one’s life—that is to conform to the teaching of the Sages. But this “message of good” (another “gospel”) is not compatible with the “gospel of Messiah,” which proclaims membership in the covenant on the basis of faith.

So are the influencers believers in Yeshua? Not from Paul’s perspective. The “message of good” which these influencers proclaim is one which renders its adherents accursed:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Messiah, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Messiah. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal 1:6–9)

The message of the influencers is not the “gospel of Yeshua plus Torah” (as the vast majority of Christian commentators have asserted) but a “message of good” that denies the central and unique role of Yeshua (though such a denial may have been subtle to the outsider). Paul would not make such a condemning judgment against those who were genuine believers even if they differed with him on non-essentials. The message the influencers are giving is not the truth.

You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? (Gal 5:7)

Furthermore, they are hindering the non-Jewish believers in their pursuit of the truth. What is more, their driving motivation is not that Messiah should be honored, but that they would escape persecution for bearing His testimony:

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Messiah. (Gal 6:12)

Their message is clearly opposed to Paul’s and he views them as those who cause him trouble:

From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Yeshua. (Gal 6:17)

We may therefore assert that the influencers who were disturbing the Galatians were those who most likely were members of the community, but who were committed to the prevailing, rabbinic theology of the day, and

were therefore attempting to persuade the non-Jewish believers to undergo the ritual of a proselyte in order to be fully received within the covenant community.

Were the influencers Jewish? Though the text never states this explicitly, it seems likely that they were. Twice Paul refers to the influencers as those who affect circumcision:

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Messiah. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Torah themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. (Gal.6:12–13)

While it is possible that these were proselytes who had taken upon themselves the role of urging other non-Jews to become proselytes, the more natural sense is to understand the influencers as Jewish members of the community who either performed circumcisions (a *mohel*) or who helped non-Jews through the process of proselytizing.

But their motivations for leading the non-Jewish members toward becoming proselytes were not entirely altruistic. They were apparently undergoing some form of persecution from the established Jewish communities on account of their willingness to associate with a community that allowed Gentiles full participation. Thus, at least some of their motivation was to prove to the wider Jewish community that the prevailing authority of the Sages (along with their theology) was well in place in the Galatian congregations as well. In other words, they wanted to be counted as within the established, traditional community, not outside of it.

It would seem, then, that the influencers were Jewish members of the Galatian congregation, who believed that the best thing for the non-Jewish members was to become proselytes because apart from their submission to this rabbinic ritual, they remained less than full covenant members.

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#### *The Target Audience of Paul's Exhortations*

Given the scenario suggested above, it becomes clear that Paul's primary audience was non-Jewish members of the Galatian congregations who were not proselytes but who had come to genuine faith in Yeshua and had been received into the community on the basis of Paul's teaching. They are clearly not circumcised (5:2-3) and had come out of paganism (idolatry) into the community of Israel (4:8). While Paul expects that all will hear the words of this epistle (Jew and non-Jew alike), and he writes with this in mind, his primary audience is the non-Jewish membership, and it is to them that the bulk of exhortations are directed.

#### *The Use of Irony in Galatians*

Mark Nanos, in his recently published *The Irony of Galatians*, makes a strong case for the use of irony in this epistle. He notes that irony was a literary tool well known in the 1st Century, used to make strong judgments and assertions without unduly distancing the reader from the author. The common elements in ironic style of the ancient world had the author expressing a mood of disappointment and reproach, but in an indirect way, and thus without direct condemnation of the readers. The use of the word "amazed" (θαυμάζω, *thaumazō*) is

typical of ironic style (cf. 1:6). Paul used the word this way—it is clear he is not so much surprised as disappointed or even disgusted. Yet in using ironic rebuke, he avoids the sense of publicly shaming the reader while at the same time communicating his dire concern at the situation. Nanos has shown that such a style of writing was not uncommon in Paul's day.

The style of ironic rebuke may also be noted in the bold (almost crass) expressions which Paul uses. For instance, he suggests, by way of word play, that those who are encouraging the non-Jews to undergo the ritual of a proselyte ("get cut"), might actually castrate (entirely cut off) rather than merely circumcise (5:12). This shows the intensity with which Paul is approaching the primary subject, tempered (as it were) by the use of irony.

We should keep this in mind as we study through the epistle. Paul's rapid, ironic style in places gives rise to less-than-perfect connections between his thoughts: he is "speaking" rapidly and with such intensity that at times he foregoes a full explanation, expecting his readers to "fill in the gaps." Some of the passages that have caused no undue amount of trouble for commentators might be better understood within the sphere of ironic rebuke.

### *The Purpose of the Epistle*

The proposed backgrounds to the epistle, given thus far, would yield the following scenario, and thus the purpose for Paul's writing this epistle:

- a) Paul had helped to establish congregations in Galatia comprised almost entirely of non-Jewish believers in Yeshua. They were following the commandments of God and living out their faith within the context of Torah life as they studied the Scriptures.
- b) By Paul's teaching, they were not concerned to become proselytes since they had come to believe that faith in Yeshua, the indwelling Spirit, and the Tanach, along with Paul's instructions were sufficient for their life of righteousness.
- c) Some Jewish members of the congregation, however, could not envision the possibility of non-Jews being received as covenant members apart from their submission to the ritual of a proselyte (being circumcised). These members were influencing the non-Jewish members to accept the erroneous doctrine that apart from their submission to rabbinic halachah, they were not full "sons" in the covenant.
- d) Paul therefore writes to outline the means by which God brings sinners into the covenant, and to expose the erroneous teaching that adherence to man-made halachah (particularly the ritual of proselytizing) was necessary for full covenant membership.
- e) The freedom that Paul enjoins upon the believing non-Jews is not freedom from the Torah, but freedom to live within the protection of the Torah as prescribed by God, not man.

### *The Use of the Word νόμος (nomos, "Law," "Torah") in Galatians*

There is no doubt that the issue of the Torah takes center stage in Paul's epistle to the Galatians. The Greek word νόμος (*nomos*) is found 32 times in the book (2:16,19,21; 3:2,5,10-13,17-19,21,23-24; 4:4-5,21; 5:3-4,14,18,23; 6:2,13). If one calculates percentages based upon occurrences per thousand