

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS - PART I - INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE

I. Galatia was both an independent nation and then a province of the Roman Empire in what is now central and northern Turkey.

A. Celts from Gaul (roughly modern day France) came into the northern region of what is now Turkey in 278 B.C. after an unsuccessful invasion of Macedonia and Greece. After a series of battles, their territory was settled to be in the north-central part of the region.

B. In 189 B.C., Rome gained dominance over the area and Galatia came under its influence, but still as an ostensibly independent nation.

- The Galatians sided with the Romans in their ultimately successful war against Mithridates IV (the Great) of Pontus and his successors in the northern part of the region. As a result, they were in favor with Rome and eventually their region was expanded to include regions stretching into the south of Asia Minor.

C. In 25 B.C., the last Galatian king Amyntas willed the kingdom to Rome and it became an official province of the empire. The expanded province included Antioch, the third largest city in the Empire.

D. In the first century A.D., the ethnic Galatians (descendants of the Celts) still dominated the northern part of the province, and in fact the language there was generally a version of the Celtic tongue. The southern part was more mixed, and the general language would have been Greek. As a result, the term Galatia could refer only to the northern historical Galatia or to the whole province.

II. The Christian faith came to the southern part of Galatia early on, and St. Paul himself was involved in leadership there. St. Paul may have brought the gospel to the northern part of Galatia during his missionary journeys.

A. The southern part of Galatia received the faith early on, during St. Paul's first missionary journey, as he brought the Gospel to Antioch and the surrounding areas. St. Paul would go through southern Galatia on each of his missionary journeys. See Acts 13:13-15, 16:1-5, 18:23.

- Between the first and second missionary journeys, a dispute arose, especially in Antioch, over whether new Christians

had to adopt Jewish practices. As a result, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem and, in 49 A.D., the Council of Jerusalem decided that the old Jewish ritual law did not apply. The apostles then sent Paul and Barnabas back with this message. See Acts 15:1-35.

- It would be natural for the controversy over Jewish practices in Christianity to arise in the southern part of Galatia for there was a sizeable Jewish population, who generally lived in harmony with the rest of the culture.

B. It appears that St. Paul journeyed at least partially into the northern region of Galatia during his second and third missionary journeys, although the reference to "Galatian territory" may refer only to the southern region. See Acts 16:6, 18:23.

- This area was more culturally separate from the rest of the Empire, and there was not a significant Jewish population there.

C. The letter to the Galatians may have been written to either or both of these communities.

1. If the letter was written to the Christians in southern Galatia, it could date to as early as 49 A.D., which would probably make it the oldest book of the New Testament.

- Some scholars argue for this early date because the letter does not seem to refer to the Council of Jerusalem, as one would think a letter against depending on the Jewish ritual law would. In addition, the fact that the letter does not seem to concern itself with hierarchy or structure, as other letters would, see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12; Phil 1:1-2; Eph. 4:11-16, 1 Tim. 3; Titus 2:1-9, may indicate that it dates from an earlier era, when the structure of the Church was not as fully understood. See Zondervan Handbook to the Bible 711 (1999).

2. If the letter was written to the northern part of Galatia, it would presumably date to a slightly later time, probably in the mid -50s, after St. Paul had visited that region.

- Some argue for this view because, while St. Paul is arguing against the incorporation of Jewish ritual law into Christianity, he seems to be addressing converted pagans, who only heard of the Jewish ritual law second hand. See Gal. 4:8, 5:2-3, 6:12-13. Scholars defending this view argue that the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem would have been known in the southern part of Galatia, and thus St. Paul would not as likely have written to the

Christians there about this issue. See Joseph Fitzmeyer, "The Letter to the Galatians" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 47:5 (1988.)

III. In either case, at least two related issues seem to have arisen: (1) whether the new Christians, especially those who converted straight from paganism, had to adopt Jewish ritual law before becoming Christian, effectively meaning they would become Jewish to become Christian; and (2) whether the old Jewish ritual laws still apply to Christians.

A. Sometime after St. Paul has left Galatia, new Christians have apparently come and told the Galatians that the Jewish ritual laws, including circumcision and the Jewish feasts, were either necessary or at least desirable for salvation. See, e.g., Gal. 4:10, 5:2.

B. St. Paul believes that the instruction he gave on the previous visit or visits to the Galatians should have made it clear that the old ritual law was unnecessary. And so he considers it to be the height of folly to adopt the Jewish ritual law. See, e.g., Gal. 1:6, 3:1-2, 5:7-8. He describes the two approaches as so different that they are different gospels altogether, and that the interlopers are proclaiming a false gospel, one that would render the sacrifice of Christ moot. See, e.g., Gal. 1:6-10, 2:21, 5:2-6.

C. The false teachers may in fact have been impinging St. Paul's credibility, saying that he omitted the ritual law because he wanted to be more popular. See Gal. 1:10, 4:16-18.

- St. Paul has felt a particular connection to the Galatians because of their warm reception of him and the Gospel, which makes him all the more disappointed at their lapsing from it. See, e.g., Gal. 4:12-20, 5:11, 6:18.

D. The moral section of the letter in chapter 5 indicates that, as with the Christians in pagan territories generally, there was also a moral decadence that St. Paul had to take on. See Gal. 5:19-23.

IV. The letter has a fairly clear overall structure that flows along traditional classic argumentative style.

A. Between the opening greeting in the first five verses and the concluding benediction, there is an argument that proceeds along a classic rhetorical pattern with: (1) a statement of the issue; (2) the historical background and justification of the speaker's qualification; (3) the speaker's proposition; (4) a series of arguments for the proposition; and (5) the application of the arguments to the listener's life.

B. The first five verses form the greeting, which is a bit curt for St. Paul's larger letters.

C. The next five (or six) verses state the issue, i.e. that some false teachers have persuaded many or most of the Galatians to abandon the true gospel for a different, and therefore, false one.

- The letter does not at this point directly state what that different gospel is. The reason may be either: (1) that the differences were obvious; or (2) that St. Paul wanted to shock the readers into listening further.

D. From verse 11 (or 12) of chapter 1 through verse 14 of chapter 2, the letter gives the overall background of St. Paul and the issue at hand.

1. First, St. Paul describes his own calling, emphasizing that it was a calling from God and not from any human. St. Paul conferred with Cephas (i.e. Peter) and James, but he emphasizes that the calling was not from them, but directly from God.

- St. Paul also emphasizes that, before his conversion, he was as good a Jew as any, and thus would have no reason to abandon their practices if they were helpful.

2. St. Paul then describes how he went to Jerusalem to confer with the Apostles in order to ensure that his mission was in fact right. And he describes the Apostles' approval of this mission.

- It is not clear whether this event was the Council of Jerusalem, or an

earlier, more informal council. See Acts 15.

3. St. Paul then describes how St. Peter (and Barnabas) started disaffiliating with the Gentile converts (who presumably did not adopt Jewish practices) and how he took him on for this lapse.

- Acts of the Apostles does not record this event, but St. Luke does not claim to be giving a comprehensive history

of the early church.

E. Then verses 15 to 21 of chapter 2, St. Paul states the central theme, i.e. that it is through faith in Jesus, not works of the law (here meaning the ritual law) that we are saved.

F. Chapters 3 and 4 then give five arguments for this proposition.

1. In the first five verses he points out to the Galatians that they received the Spirit already when they first accepted the gospel, without any reference to the law.
2. The next thirteen verses argue that Abraham received the promises of God well before the ritual law was given. Thus, the promises cannot depend on that law.
3. Verse 23 of chapter 3 through verse 11 of chapter 4 argue that the law was given as a kind of governess, or teacher of small children (paidagogos) to guide the Jewish people until the fullness of grace was revealed. But now that the fullness of grace is revealed, Christians no longer need that disciplinarian.
4. Verses 12 to 20 of chapter 4 argue from St. Paul's previous mission and the glory of that time. He tells that they know he cares for them and would never leave out a crucial part of salvation.
5. Verses 21-31 of chapter 4 then argue by analogy to Sarah and Hagar, the wife of Abraham and her handmaid who eventually became Abraham's concubine.
 - He says that the child of Hagar (Ishmael) paradoxically is an image of the Jewish people, who came before Christians, as Ishmael was before Isaac, but who are children of slavery, loved but not fully God's children. He argues that Christians are like Isaac, children of the promise.

G. Chapter 5 and the first half of chapter 6 then apply these principles to the Christian life.

1. The first twelve verses passionately argue that the Christians of Galatia should not be bound to the Jewish ritual law.

- He does not argue that that law is wrong, but rather that "circumcision or uncircumcision mean nothing," i.e., it is now irrelevant. However, if the Gentile Galatian Christians adopt this law, they will effectively be rejecting Christ.

2. Verses 13 through 26, however, counteract any notion that the behavior is irrelevant to the faith. St. Paul points out that there are certain actions that proceed from the Spirit and others that come from the flesh (here meaning slavery to desires) and that those who act according to the flesh will not inherit the kingdom.

3. The first five verses of chapter 6, however, call also for humility in judging others and an effort to bring those who are erring back to the law of Christ.

4. The next five verses then conclude with a general exhortation to respect teachers, persevere in good works, and maintain unity in the family of God.

H. The conclusion then contrasts St. Paul's deep concern for the people with the vanity of the interlopers.

- The emphasis again is on the cross of Christ and on His people as the "new Israel."