

PARALLEL GUIDE 24

The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

Summary

The Letter of Paul to the Galatians takes up the question of Paul's relationship to Judaism after his experience on the Damascus road. This letter speaks to the relationship of Christians to Jewish law. Paul presents his turning to Christ as the completion of Judaism rather than the abandonment of the faith.

Learning Objectives

- Read the [Letter of Paul to the Galatians](#)
- Explore the theories of the origin of the Letter of Paul to the Galatians
- Identify the God-fearers and the Shammaites

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. The author avoids calling Paul's experience on the road to Damascus a "conversion." What do you think is the difference between a "conversion" and a "prophetic call" or a "call to ministry"?
2. When one speaks of call and conversion, how are the external manifestations different from the internal changes? What is the relationship of action and belief?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The relationship between the Law and faith is a continuing tension for all of us. How does this manifest itself in your life or the life of your EFM group? What does salvation mean to you in this tension of obedience and freedom?

Works Cited

Gunther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience* (London: SCM; New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

Additional Source

Frank D. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina 9 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

335

Page left blank

336

Further Thoughts on Paul's Call

Older books about Paul—and sometimes even young preachers—often begin with talk of how, before his conversion, he felt “frustration” and “dissatisfaction” with the Judaism he had inherited. On the surface, we are told, Paul may have seemed a confident upholder of the Law, but inwardly he was already troubled and confused. As a Pharisee he knew that obedience must include the mind and heart: “A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical” (Rom. 2:28). Yet he found that as much as he might discipline himself regarding the Law’s outward requirements, he could not control the thoughts of his heart. He found in the Law an impossible burden from which in his secret self he sought deliverance. Outwardly he may have been the uncompromising upholder of Law who set out from Jerusalem for Damascus, but inwardly he was already almost broken.

There is much here that scholars now question. Whatever Paul may have come to think, after his conversion, of his former life in Judaism, and whatever may have been going on before his conversion in the inner recesses of his psyche (something we are not in a position to know), there is actually very little in the letters or in the traditions about him in the Book of Acts to suggest that, before his experience on the Damascus road he felt other than fulfilled by the Judaism he had received, or that he was particularly burdened by conscience. As Gunther Bornkamm, a German scholar, says, when Paul speaks of his pre-Christian Jewish life, it is “in a tone of pride, not contrition” (1969, 93). Paul himself says, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors” (Gal. 1:14).

Later Paul counted everything that had been gain to him in Judaism as “loss” (Greek: *zemia*) for the sake of Christ (Phil. 3:7); nonetheless, the point of his remark is that it had apparently once been “gain” (*kerdē*). There is still the note of pride to which Bornkamm points: “as to right-eousness under the law,” Paul says, he had been “blameless” (Phil. 3:6-7). There is nothing here to justify talk of discontent or “burdens of conscience.”

No doubt many people look back to earlier stages of spiritual growth and experience and regard them as “loss” in comparison with gifts that were given later. That does not mean we felt that way about them at the time. Looking back, we may also see that they were necessary stages on our way. In 2 Corinthians, Paul compares Judaism with Christianity and naturally, since he is now Paul the Christian, the comparison is to Judaism’s disadvantage. Yet he still says only that “what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory” (2 Cor. 3:10). If we are to take this seriously as testimony to how Paul saw his Christianity, we must also take it seriously as to how he saw his pre-Christian Judaism. Far from being a burden, it “once had glory.” If the earlier Jewish experience were not perceived even now as good, the argument would collapse.

337

Even the tradition preserved in the third account of Paul’s conversion in the Book of Acts—“it hurts you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14)—says nothing about discontent with Judaism or a sense of guilt. It may speak of a mounting, though previously denied, attraction to Jesus and Jesus’ followers, but that is a very different thing.

Whether Saul had previously been drawn to Jesus or not, at the moment of his call he believed that the God in whom he had always believed, “the God of the ancestors,” called to him and overwhelmed him through Jesus and that his whole life had been a preparation for this: “God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Gal. 1:15-16).

Conversion or Call

The attentive reader may have noticed that we do not use the word “conversion” to describe what happened

on the Damascus road. As Paul himself describes his experience, it hardly seems to have been that of “conversion” from one religion to another. His language is not the language of conversion but of prophetic call. Echoes of the accounts of the calls of Jeremiah and of Jonah are, indeed, fairly obvious, as we can see by comparing Galatians 1:15-16 with Jeremiah 1:5 and Jonah 1:1-2. Paul did not regard his turning to Christ as Judaism abandoned but as Judaism completed (see Rom. 3:21-22). In his letter to the Galatians he seems to speak of having moved from a limitation to things “rudimentary” to a more mature sense of being God’s child (cf. Gal. 4:1-7).

What happened to Paul on the Damascus road was then, as he describes it, a prophetic call, analogous in some ways to Jeremiah’s call (Gal. 1:15; cf. Jer. 1:5) and in other ways to Jonah’s (Gal. 1:16; cf. Jon. 1:2). God, “the God of the ancestors,” called to Saul and overwhelmed him through Jesus. The call demanded that he acknowledge God’s revelation of “the Son,” and implicitly, therefore, showed Saul to be himself a sinner, for he had previously rejected Jesus. It also showed him to be a sinner forgiven by that same Jesus. The call further demanded of Saul that he “proclaim [Jesus] among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:16). Implicit in this was yet another awareness: that as God offered reconciliation to Saul the persecutor “in Christ,” so God also offered reconciliation to Gentile sinners “in Christ,” not by way of “works of the Law” (which, as a Jew, Paul would already know was absurd; see below on Gal. 2:15-16). “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets” (Rom. 3:21).

As we approach Paul’s letters it is important to remember that his commission was to preach to Gentiles and that he explicitly distinguishes this from the task of preaching to Jews, which was given to Peter, James, and John (Gal. 2:9). His letters are therefore mostly concerned with the problems of Gentiles, rather than of Jews, although his letter to the Romans is something of an exception to that.

Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

We may now look at the Letter of Paul to the Galatians, written to one of the Gentile churches. It has a direct bearing on the questions we have been considering. We must begin by noting, however, that this letter also has particular problems of its own.

338

There is considerable debate among scholars about who the Galatians were, and whether the letter to the Galatians was written early or late in Paul’s ministry. According to one view (the “North Galatians” theory) Paul was writing to the Galatai proper—the descendants of Gallic invaders who had established a kingdom in Asia Minor in the third century BCE. According to another view (the “South Galatians” theory), it was written to the inhabitants of the Roman province of Galatia, which included in the south many who were not of Gallic descent at all, specifically in the churches of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. According to the Book of Acts, Paul first visited these places with Barnabas (Acts 13:14-14:23), then visited them again after the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 16:1-6; 18:23). The “South Galatians” theory is much more likely to be correct, not least of all because it seems to be Paul’s practice to refer to territories within the empire by their Roman names (see, e.g., Rom. 15:19-26).

The debate about the Galatians letter is further complicated by the relationship between the Jerusalem visit described in Galatians 2:1-10 and the Apostolic Council of Acts 15. Are they the same or not? If they are, how do we explain that the Galatians letter speaks of only one previous visit by Paul to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18-24), whereas the Book of Acts speaks of two (Acts 9:26-30; 11:27-30)? Or is the visit of Galatians 2:1-10 actually the “famine visit” of Acts 11:27-30? Or is the Book of Acts simply unreliable on these points?

The reader needs to be aware of these problems, which are considered (if not solved) in all major commentaries. For our purpose it is enough to note what is obvious. The letter is written to Gentile Christians who have been persuaded that they ought to undertake some “works of the Law,” namely, circumcision of

males, in order to insure their standing before God. Paul's letter is an impassioned rejection of that idea.

Salutation 1:1-5

Paul begins with a salutation stressing that his apostolic authority is dependent upon none save God. His salutation also summarizes the gospel.

Paul's Apostolic Authority 1:6-2:21

In a departure from his usual practice, Paul does not proceed to thanksgiving for his recipients but to an abrupt declaration that betrays his anxiety and signals the mood of the letter. Expressions of amazement and astonishment (see 1:6) are a common feature of Hellenistic letters of blame and reproach and were recommended for such letters by the literary theorists.

There is, Paul says, no gospel but the gospel (1:6-10). Perhaps, because he does not insist on the circumcision of Gentile men, Paul's critics are jeering at him as a "people pleaser" who makes things easy. If they are, Paul will have none of it (1:10). And what of Paul's authority to preach the gospel? The attack on Paul's gospel was probably accompanied by the further jibe that he was not one of the original Twelve. He proceeds to speak also of his authority as an apostle of Christ, personally commissioned by him to go to the Gentiles (1:11-16). Paul says he has been dependent for his gospel on no human agent (1:16), yet in fact his preaching has had the approval of those human agents who might expect to be held in highest regard in the church (1:18-2:10).

Questions

What was the occasion of Peter's visit to Antioch (2:11)? Who were those who "came from James" (2:12)? Which James is meant—the son of Zebedee or the Lord's brother? If the latter, then what is the relationship between the views reflected here and those expressed in Acts 15? Is this event earlier than the Council, so that Acts 15 represents a later change of mind? Or is this the later event, in which case the letter to the Galatians represents a change of mind? The answers to all these questions remain in doubt. What is clear is that someone persuaded Peter to give up table fellowship with Gentiles, presumably including the common Eucharist (2:12b), and other Jewish followers of Jesus were also led astray by this "insincerity" (2:13). From the strict viewpoint of Paul, the Shammaite Pharisee, Peter's Judaism, even before he became a follower of Jesus, had hardly prevented him from living much like a Gentile. (Perhaps we see reflected here some elements of that scorn of the learned for the unlearned of which we spoke in an earlier chapter.) Why then, Paul asks, would Peter, the Galilean *am ha-arets* who had never lived up to Pharisaic standards himself, now expect Gentiles to adopt Jewish customs (2:14)? In any case, we ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, knowing that one is not justified by works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have put our faith in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faith of Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law "no flesh shall be justified." (2:15-16, quoting Ps. 143:2; NRSV alt.)

We note that it is precisely because Peter is Jewish (even if not a Pharisee) that Paul expects him to understand that salvation can only be a matter of God's grace, as the above translation makes clear. (The translation just given represents the most likely meaning of the best available Greek text; the NRSV, by the insertion of "yet" at the beginning of verse 16, obscures this, making it appear that Peter's and Paul's knowledge is in spite of their Jewishness.)

What does Paul mean by "faith" (Greek: *pistis*)? For the ancients, *pistis* spoke of relationship and commitment—of (as we say) "sticking by" something or someone. Hence it combined in itself two elements

that we sometimes separate. It spoke of what we sometimes call “faithfulness”—the kind of “sticking by” someone that endures through thick and thin, and perhaps regardless of their merit. It spoke also of what we sometimes describe as “having faith in someone”—the type of “sticking by” a person does, and perhaps continues to do, despite the evidence to the contrary! Here and elsewhere (cf. 3:22), the attentive reader will also note that Paul’s Greek means “by the faith of Jesus Christ” (cf. KJV) rather than “by faith in Jesus Christ,” as in the NRSV. This is because the former phrase seems to catch much better the ambiguity of Paul’s Greek, which (as Paul was presumably well aware) could be taken to imply both Jesus’ own faithfulness—his “sticking by” God and God’s people—and the faithfulness that he elicits from us in return—our “sticking by” God’s promise given and ratified in Jesus.

340

It is hard to be sure what verse 17 means when we do not know precisely what charge Paul was refuting. Possibly it was the same charge as in Romans 3:5-8; 6:1. At any rate, his response is the same: “Certainly not!” “God forbid!” (cf. KJV). In Paul’s view, for one who follows Jesus to assert any basis or condition for hope in God other than Jesus is to be “a transgressor” (3:19). It is on the basis of the Law that he knows he must in a sense “die” to the Law (2:19; cf. Rom. 3:21). His hope and his very being are involved in identification only with the crucified Son of God, who met him on the Damascus road. To place one’s trust in anything else is “to nullify the grace of God” (2:21).

Gentile Christians and the Law: 3:1-5:12

Reflection on this leads Paul to a further passionate outburst:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! (3:1)

How can those who have been shown the dying Savior and have embraced the vision of the suffering love of God that is the heart of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2) now turn to some other imagined source or means of salvation or hope? It is ridiculous, Paul continues more coolly, for those who have received the Spirit by “hearing with faith” (NRSV “believing what you heard”) now to seek security in “works of the law” (3:2-5).

The Galatians’ “hearing with faith” has actually put them, says Paul, in the same position as Abraham, who also “believed,” as the Law tells us: Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” [Gen. 15:6] so, you see, those living “by faith” [Hab. 2:4] are the descendants of Abraham. The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify [acquit] the Gentiles who were living “by faith,” declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you” (Gen. 12:3). For this reason, those who live “by faith” are blessed with Abraham who believed. (Gal. 3:6-9, NRSV alt.)

What Paul is saying is that the great thing Abraham did was to stick by God in the sense of trusting in God’s promise that God would be faithful. To live “by faith” means therefore to live not on the basis of our own merits or achievements, but on the basis of God’s faithfulness to us—a faithfulness that invites us (as it did Abraham) to be faithful in return.

Paul continues:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all things written in the book of the law” [Deut. 27:26]. Now then, it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith” [Hab. 2:4]. But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them” [Lev. 18:5]. (Gal. 3:10-12, NRSV alt.)

In other words, although the Law does indeed teach us about God, it remains for sinful humankind as a whole also a sign of human disobedience, and therefore it is a curse to us. Nonetheless, there was one person who did fulfill all the Law's demands, and who could not, therefore, be held by its curse.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Gal. 3:13, quoting Deut. 21:23). In Paul's view Christ's willingness to be obedient even to the point of a cursed death (cf. Phil. 2:6-11) is a sign of the Messiah's union not only with God's people Israel but even with the sinful Gentile world, so that through such a union, “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (3:14).

Note that Paul's claim is not merely that in this union “you Gentiles” shall receive the promise, but that “we” might receive it, Jews and Gentiles alike. The promise of unity, that in Abraham's descendants all the nations should be blessed, is a promise that is as much needed by God's people as by those not of God's people. What is at issue is the restoration of the world—as Paul will speak of it later in the letter, “a new creation” (6:15). Naturally that promise, which was made to the Messiah long before the giving of the Law, cannot be annulled by the Law, but rather the Law takes its place within the promise (3:15-18, 21). The Scriptures indeed “imprisoned all things under the power of sin,” but only so that finally “what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (3:22, NRSV alt.).

Within this overall argument there is one detail that is very hard to understand, and has long caused scholars difficulty. Did Paul teach that the Law was given by angels? Or did that somehow feature in the teaching of his adversaries (3:19-20)? It is impossible to be sure, although our understanding of the main thread of Paul's argument is not greatly affected in any case. What is important is what Paul says next: that he regarded the Law as a “disciplinarian . . . until the faithfulness [of Christ] should be revealed” (3:24, NRSV alt.), that is, until the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham's offspring. A “disciplinarian” or “custodian” (Greek: *paidagōgos*, which means “leader of a child”) was a personal slave-attendant who kept a freeborn male child company from the time he left his nurse's care until his coming of age. If necessary, the “custodian” would discipline the child. But now with the coming of Christ, those Gentiles who “put on” Christ have come of age. In Christ the old distinctions of Jew/Gentile, slave/free, male/female, can no longer be allowed force (3:28). Those who are identified with Christ are, by that fact, “Abraham's offspring” (3:29). It is likely that in verses 3:26-28 Paul alludes to a Christian baptismal formula. For Paul, the equality before God of which the formula speaks is not simply an eschatological hope but also a social program to be reflected in the life of the church now. That clearly is his view of the Jew/Gentile relationship. Establishing that view is a major purpose of the Letter of Paul to the Galatians. Since he—or at least the formula he chooses to quote—places the concepts of slave/free and male/female in parallel with Jew/Gentile, we may suppose he would have felt similarly about those relationships, too.

A child who is a minor has no more freedom than a slave until the “coming of age” (cf. 4:1). It is the same, Paul says, with all of us, Jew and Gentile alike. “While we were minors, we were bound to rudimentary notions (Greek: *stoicheia*) of the world” (4:3, NRSV alt.). The translation offered in the NRSV (“elemental spirits”) reflects the view of many interpreters that Paul means that he, as a Jew, had been enslaved to astral demons. This is a possible translation of the Greek word *stoicheia* in verse 4:9, had that stood alone. In verse 4:3, however, “rudimentary notions” is clearly required to fit the overall metaphor of growth from childhood to maturity (cf. OAB footnote). It is in any case absurd to imagine that Paul would have regarded Jews as under the dominion of astral demons. He is simply saying that from his present point of view, his time “under the law” (4:5) appears to him like being in a kindergarten class learning his ABCs.

Now something new has happened: in Christ Jesus the promise to Abraham has begun to find fulfilment. This means not only redemption from the childhood bondage of which Paul has been speaking but also “adoption” as God’s children (4:5). Were not all Jews already children of God? Certainly they were (Rom. 9:4). In his calling to Christ, Paul seems to have felt a new sense of his own sonship. That sense is rooted in the Christian experience to which he now refers when he says the prayer, “Abba! Father!” It is, Paul says, because God has “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” that we can utter such a prayer (4:6).

If this is true for Paul, how much more so for his converts from paganism! “Formerly, when you did not know God [notice how Paul now uses “you,” clearly distinguishing his experience from that of his converts], you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods” (4:8). But now the Galatians have come to know the true God “or rather to be known by God” (4:9; cf. 1 Cor. 8:3). If Paul will not choose to return even to those gracious “rudiments” that he received in Judaism, how much less should the Galatians choose to return to the “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” that were theirs as pagan Gentiles (4:9-11)?

In verses 4:12-20 Paul appeals passionately to his converts to remember their relationship with him. He then appeals again to the Law itself: “Will you not listen to the law?” (4:21) The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is treated allegorically, somewhat in the manner of Philo. Not every detail of Paul’s allegory (4:24) is clear, but its general sense is. Those “in slavery” (4:25) seek, then and now, to oppress those who are “children of the promise” (4:28). Those who are “in” reject or oppress those who are “out,” and so, whether they know it or not, they are themselves “in slavery” with their children (cf. 4:25). The gift of Christ is freedom: the Galatians should not again submit to a yoke (5:1-2). “Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law” (5:3). In other words, they are placing themselves once more under the very curse from which God in Christ has delivered them. They are acting as if Christ had never lived or died at all (5:4).

Paul concludes with a passionate appeal to his converts to continue on the good path on which they have embarked; he bitterly denounces those who are confusing them (5:5-12).

Christian Liberty and Christian Obedience 5:13-6:10

As always, the gospel leads to responsibility. In his defense of Christian freedom it seems that Paul may have found it particularly necessary to stress this. “Freedom” in the Christian sense is not freedom “for the flesh,” that is, for “license for your lower nature” (NEB), but rather freedom to be truly human. “Through love become slaves to one another” (5:13). As Hillel and Jesus had both declared, the essential fulfilment of the Law is to love your neighbor as one like yourself (5:14). The rest is commentary. It is important to realize that for Paul “sins of the flesh” does not mean what is “sensual” or “physical” but rather refers to any action that is pursued on a merely human level, as if humans were not subject to the sovereignty of God. As Paul proceeds to list “works of the flesh” (5:16), we notice that a good many of them are not “physical” or “sensual” at all, such as enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit [that is, faction], and envy (5:19-20). To be identified with Christ is essentially to be identified with a different Spirit whose fruits are the love Christ showed to us (5:22-25). In the Christian community even those who fail will be treated with compassion. Each will look to do good for others, “especially” (though thereby, we note, not exclusively) “for those who are of the family of faith” (5:26-6:10).

Closing Salutation and Prayer 6:11-18

A Christian has nothing of which to be proud save Christ’s cross: nothing matters save the new life opened through this cross (6:15). Paul prays for “peace . . . and mercy” upon those who “will follow this rule, . . . and upon the Israel of God” (6:16). In verse 6:17 Paul refers to the physical effects of his work as an apostle for

Christ and perhaps even to actual scars. The custom of branding or otherwise marking slaves was certainly familiar to the Galatians, and to think of himself as a “slave” of Christ was a favorite metaphor with Paul (cf. Rom. 1:1). It is likely that the apostle intends here to speak of himself as the branded slave of Christ.

Concluding Note

As we have seen throughout our studies, Christianity was from the beginning a form of Judaism—experienced by Jews, proclaimed by Jews, taught by Jews, and defended by Jews. Not for one moment did those who proclaimed it wish or believe that the coming of Jesus negated the Law. On the contrary, as every strand of the NT makes clear, the coming of Jesus was seen as both vindicating and being vindicated by the promises of the Law.

An early theological problem for the Christian movement was to discover how and on what conditions the Gentiles could become part of the people of God. Paul engaged himself passionately in this problem, and the solution he perceived was that Gentiles who became Christians did not first have to become Jews. This is the view he defends in the letter to the Galatians. Whether or not that decision involved an actual abandonment of the Law is perhaps a matter of legitimate debate. On the other hand, that Paul himself did not intend to reject the Law is clear. He himself saw the welcome that the gospel received when extended to Gentiles as fulfilling the promise of the Law. In line with this, while not imposing halakhah on Gentiles, he does not seem to have envisaged that, for himself or for any other Jew who confessed Jesus as Lord, there should be any abandonment of that detailed obedience to the Law that was Israel’s special glory (see 1 Cor. 7:18; cf. Acts 22:3).