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the

NEW TESTAMENT

Exploring

volume 2

THE LETTERS
AND REVELATION

Exploring

the NEW TESTAMENT

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THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

In this chapter we shall investigate:

- the circumstances leading to the writing of the letter;
- the structure of Paul's argument;
- the way in which Paul develops his argument;
- the success or otherwise of the letter.

We shall also have to discuss matters that are less important for understanding the contents of the letter but are of interest to historians:

- just who were the 'Galatians'?
- was this Paul's first extant letter, or should we place it later?

Paul's letters appear in the New Testament in an order that seems to be determined by three factors: arrangement in descending order of length, so that Romans (the longest letter) comes first; arrangement by identity of destination, so that 1 and 2 Corinthians come together; and arrangement by nature of the addressees, so that letters to congregations precede letters to individuals. This gives us a rather arbitrary order that has no particular merits for studying them. The alternative is to look at them in chronological order. This procedure has its own difficulties, because there is

considerable uncertainty about the order of composition and the reader is dependent upon the judgements made by the author of this part of the book. Right at the outset I am assuming that the balance of probability favours the view that Galatians is Paul's earliest surviving letter rather than 1 (and 2) Thessalonians, and in doing so I am siding with what is probably a minority opinion on the matter. If I am mistaken, the consequences are not too serious. But you will need to consider carefully whether the majority view, that the letter comes from somewhere in the middle of Paul's letter-writing career, may not be the correct one.

WHAT LED TO THE WRITING OF THE LETTER?

Galatians is a highly important letter because it is one of the main first-hand testimonies to a serious problem in the early church. The question arose as the Christian outreach began to move out beyond born Jews and Jewish proselytes to include Gentiles who did not follow the Jewish law and way of life. At its beginnings Christianity appeared to be a sectarian group within Judaism. Jesus and his followers were Jews, and Jesus himself

had very little contact with Gentiles. To his followers Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jewish people and through him they were incorporated into a group of people who had received the outpouring of the Spirit promised for the last days. Thus they were essentially Jews for whom the promise of the coming of the Messiah had come true. It was entirely understandable, therefore, that they would continue to keep the Jewish law, even if Jesus' interpretation of it was different from that of the Pharisees, and that any Gentiles who joined their group would thereby become part of the Jewish people and would have to follow the usual steps to do so. But from an early date some Gentiles associated with the followers of Jesus and yet did not take up circumcision and the other requirements of the law.

This caused a double problem. First, there was the obvious inconsistency involved in people accepting Jesus as the Messiah but not accepting the Judaism within which belief in the coming of a Messiah was at home. Second, there was the very practical problem that law-observing Jewish Christians could not eat with Gentile Christians or share their food since it had not been prepared according to Jewish requirements. Consequently there was a difficult period for the Christians as they strove to find the right solution to the problem.

On the one side were the more traditionally minded Jews who insisted on:

- circumcision
- observance of Jewish festivals
- the observance of Jewish food laws.

These three points sum up the main areas of contention. On the face of it they had the stronger case.

On the other side were those who began to question whether believing Gentiles needed to keep the Jewish law. They could point to the way in which various converts had become believers without submitting to Jewish requirements. According to Luke's account in Acts these included: the converts in Samaria (Acts 8:5–25); the official from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–40); Cornelius (a Roman army officer; Acts 10:1–11:18). Somehow the movement took off in Antioch where there were large numbers of Gentile converts, and it could be that sheer weight of numbers had its effect (Acts 11:19–30).

At some early point Paul became convinced that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. We cannot reconstruct the process of thought that led him to this conclusion: did he know, for example, about the story of Cornelius (Acts 10–11)? How did he defend it to his own satisfaction? Certainly by the time that he wrote Galatians he had a well thought out position on the matter.

But so too had the other side. Their position was obvious and reasonable. They may have felt threatened by the large numbers of Gentiles who were becoming believers in Jesus and yet continuing to live as Gentiles. Moreover, every Jew knew that Gentile morality was far inferior to their own, and some Gentile converts found it hard to shake off their former way of life (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–11). How could people live holy lives if they ignored the Jewish law? Added to this there was very probably a strong element of outside pressure on them. At a time of growing nationalist feeling against the Romans and foreigners generally, Christian Jews who consorted with Gentiles were the objects of suspicion, and if their contacts went against the accepted conventions by

eating with these 'unclean' people the attacks on them would be all the stronger. It is, therefore, not surprising that there were Christians who felt it to be their duty to urge Gentiles to conform to accepted Jewish practices, and who felt this sufficiently strongly to follow Paul around and pressurize his converts. From the letter it is clear that this was happening even in Galatia and that the pressure was having some success. It may not be too much to think of Paul's opponents (as we must probably call them) as propagators of a missionary campaign with the 'true' version of the gospel.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER

Galatians is different from the other Pauline letters to churches in that it plunges straight into its subject without the typical thanksgiving to God for the spiritual growth of the readers. Attempts have been made to discern in it the rhetorical structure of a speech designed to persuade the readers of the truth of Paul's argument. In his pioneering application of this approach H. D. Betz analysed the letter as follows, using the Latin terms that were employed by Roman writers on rhetoric:

| | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|--|
| 1:1–5 | EPISTOLARY PRESCRIPT | (introduction to letter) |
| 1:6–11 | EXORDIUM | (introduction to the argument) |
| 1:12–2:14 | NARRATIO | (statement of the facts) |
| 2:15–21 | PROPOSITIO | (the point to be defended) |
| 3:1–4:32 | PROBATIO | (arguments for the 'proposition') |
| 5:1–6:10 | EXHORTATIO | (more emotional appeal to the readers) |
| 6:11–18 | EPISTOLARY POSTSCRIPT | (concluding remarks) |

This analysis is not altogether persuasive; it is tweaked by more recent commentators who think that Betz has seen the letter too much in terms of forensic (lawcourt) speech making, whereas it is more mixed in character. It is also quite a formal analysis; it does not indicate the content of what Paul is saying at each point, but it does indicate how the letter broadly follows the pattern of a speech in court or a public assembly and uses oratorical devices. It is helpful to recognize the types of argument and persuasion that are employed.

What we also need to understand the letter is some appreciation of the actual content of the argument. A somewhat different analysis yields the following outline:

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1:1–5 | OPENING GREETING |
| 1:6–6:10 | BODY OF THE LETTER |
| 1:6–12 | <i>Theme</i> The message of the Judaizers is not the gospel of Christ. |
| 1:13–2:14 | <i>Historical sketch</i> Paul's gospel came from God and was approved by the apostles. |
| 2:15–3:18 | <i>Scriptural argument</i> Experience and Scripture attest that people are saved by grace and not by keeping the law. |
| 3:23–4:7 | <i>Grace and law</i> The law was a temporary measure until Christ came and brought the possibility of being sons of God rather than slaves. |
| 4:8–6:10 | <i>Appeal</i> Don't go back to the law, which entails bondage, but enjoy the freedom that the Spirit gives to live a new life. |
| 6:11–18 | FINAL PLEA Paul's autographical concluding comments. |

This outline is not entirely satisfactory because it cannot do justice to the subtlety of

Paul's thought and to the way in which the different parts of his appeal flow into one another without sharp transitions.

PAUL'S ARGUMENT IN THE LETTER

The broad lines of the argument and the way in which Paul develops his case can now be discerned.

What do you think?

Before you read my attempt to analyse what Paul is saying, read through the letter for yourself; try to identify what Paul's opponents must have been saying and then how Paul's reply can be understood as a response to their arguments. In a classroom situation set up a debate with different speakers taking the role of Paul's opponents and his sympathizers so that both sides of the argument are given a full and fair hearing.

1. Paul argues that the message of his opponents cannot be another 'gospel' with divine authority (1:6–10). His own message has more than human authority; it came by a revelation of Jesus to him and not from any human body. This is seen from the fact that after his conversion he did not discuss his calling with the apostles. Only after three years did he briefly visit Jerusalem (1:11–24). Only after another long period did he revisit Jerusalem, and this time in order to see whether the leaders accepted his work among the Gentiles – which they did, without qualification (2:1–10). On the basis of this recognition Paul felt able to oppose Peter when he refused to have fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles in Antioch (2:11–14).

SOME PUZZLING TERMS

- **Justification** (2:16–17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4) is Paul's term for the action of God in not reckoning up sins against those who have committed them but rather forgiving them and entering into a positive relationship with them.
- **Flesh** (3:3) is Paul's term that is used widely to cover the perishable material of which human beings are made, hence to refer to them on a physical level (2:16, 20). It also refers to them in their human weakness and inability to resist temptation, and thus comes to refer to the sinful state from which they cannot escape by their own power (5:13, 16–19, 24; 6:8). Modern translations tend to substitute other terms such as 'lower nature' or 'human effort' to bring out the varying significance of a term which can be misleading when literally translated into English.
- **Law** (2:16; 3:10–13; 4:4–5) refers normally to the system of commandments given to the Jews through Moses (3:10, 17; 5:14), with a focus on males being circumcised (5:3), and all Jews observing various religious festivals and dietary rules that marked them out as different from other people (4:10). These laws had been considerably elaborated by the Pharisees. Paul could also speak about a 'law of Christ' (6:2).
- **Elemental spirits** (Gk. *stoicheia*; 4:3, 9) can refer to elemental units (such as the letters that make up words) or to the physical elements out of which the world is made (earth, fire, air and water) or to the heavenly bodies that were often associated with spiritual powers (as in astrology). Paul appears to regard the commandments of the Jewish law as being used by these powers to keep people under their control. For Gentiles to accept the law, then, would be to come under a fresh bondage to the powers from which they had been delivered when they were converted.

(All of these terms can be followed up in the relevant articles in *DPL*.)

2. It was common ground between Paul and Peter that Jews are treated by God as if they had not sinned because of their faith in Jesus. So too are Gentiles. If they then go back to trying to keep the law they will be condemned as sinners (because they cannot keep it perfectly). If keeping the law is required of them, Christ died in vain (2:15–22).

This is confirmed by their fundamental Christian experience: the readers had received the gift of the Spirit without keeping the Jewish law (3:1–5).

3. Paul then proves his point by appeal to the OT (3:6–14). Abraham was justified by faith before the law of Moses had been given. Reliance on the law and the inevitable failure to keep it place people under a curse from which Christ has released them by his death. So the law cannot annul the earlier covenant with Abraham; rather it had its own place in God's plan by making people aware of their sin and so leading them to seek justification through Christ (3:15–22). This puts people in a better position than they were under the law; for then they were like slaves but now through Christ they are sons and daughters of God with God's Spirit living in them (3:23–4:7).

4. For Gentiles to accept the law, then, means going back to the tyranny of what Paul calls 'elemental spirits' (4:8–11). He makes an emotional appeal to them to continue to recognize him as God's messenger to them whose only desire is that they mature as Christian believers (4:12–20).

5. Using an allegorical treatment of Scripture Paul argues that the true descendants of Abraham (Christian believers, both Jewish and Gentile) enjoy freedom, but the physical descendants

(the Jews) are in slavery (4:21–5:1). He regards acceptance of the law as a form of slavery, since the law comes as a 'package', all of which must be taken on board: there is no freedom to obey some parts and ignore others (5:2–12). Christian freedom is not, of course, freedom to do what you like. It is rather deliverance from the power of 'the flesh' so that people are free to do what God requires. It does not lead to sinful licence but rather enables people to love one another and so to fulfil the real requirement of the law (5:13–15).

6. There are thus two ways of living. One is to live by the 'flesh' and that results in sinful behaviour. People who live under the law are not able to control the flesh because the law does not help them to do so; it can only condemn their failure. The other way is to live by the direction and power of the Spirit of God, which results positively in moral behaviour and enables people to kill their sinful passions. What is fatal is to try to live both ways at the same time; that route leads to an impasse in which you cannot do what you want to do (5:16–26).

7. Finally, Paul urges his readers to support one another in their struggles to live godly lives and to show love in forgiving one another's failures (6:1–6). He reminds them that life according to the flesh and the Spirit lead to spiritual death and life respectively (6:7–10). Then he takes the pen in his own hand and issues a last appeal to them in which he attacks the inconsistency and dubious motives of his opponents and insists that in the end it does not matter whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised but whether you place your confidence in the cross of Christ. For Paul only the cross and the Christ who died on it ultimately matter (6:11–18).

WAS THE LETTER EFFECTIVE?

Certainly in the long run the position defended by Paul gained the day. But it was a long and hard struggle, and the problem of 'judaizing' can be seen to lie behind other letters, notably Romans and Philippians. It would seem that the church in Judea and Jerusalem was under constant pressure from non-Christian Jews, especially with the increasing growth of Jewish nationalism in the period up to the war with Rome. It probably became more inward-looking and lost its sense of mission to the Gentiles. Meanwhile, the centre of gravity in the Christian movement shifted to the churches outside Judea and by the end of the century, as was natural, the Christians in the capital city of Rome were becoming increasingly influential.

Was Paul right? The verdict of history is clearly on his side, but it cannot have been so obvious at the time. What Paul stood for, and what the conflict helped to bring out clearly into the open, is that it is only and entirely through God's action in Christ that people are justified. Justification is by grace and by grace alone (see p. 53).

Digging deeper

Paul's teaching in Galatians has been summed up under the two main themes, 'the cross and the Spirit'. Assemble the references in the letter to the cross and death of Christ and to the Spirit, and note the key points that Paul makes about them. In the light of your survey is the proposed characterization of the letter accurate and adequate? Does it fail to cover any significant themes in the letter?

What do you think?

Was Paul right to be so uncompromising in this letter? Might not a little flexibility have been more effective?

But wait a minute. The converse of this statement is that justification is by works, by things that people do, specifically by 'works of the law'. But was that what the Jews believed? A long tradition of interpretation has assumed that in the eyes of Paul the Jews of his time held that justification was by keeping the requirements of the law, and that this was why the Gentiles were expected to keep the law. Then, it is claimed, justification was a matter of gaining a good reputation with God that would counterbalance the sins that had been committed. This view of things has been strongly contested over the last thirty years or so by scholars reminding us that the Jews were God's accepted people through his gracious election of them to be his people, and that they fulfilled the law because they were God's people rather than in order to become God's people. First came the covenant, and then came the law. So keeping the law was what Jews did in order to stay in God's favour rather than to acquire it. (Some hold that Paul did not entirely understand this and offered a misrepresentation of Judaism that has persisted to this day.)

This reinterpretation of Judaism does not really alter the picture all that much. Granted that God had made his covenant with the Jewish people, they still had to keep the law in order to be his people. And many Jewish groups insisted that the Jews by and large had fallen away from God and needed

THE NEW LOOK ON PAUL

Probably the most influential contemporary writer on Paul and his relation to Judaism is an American scholar, E. P. Sanders. He attacked the widely held view that the Judaism of Paul's time was a legalistic religion, in the senses that keeping the law was central to it and that observance of the law earned people 'merit' which could put them in the right with God despite the sins that they had committed. Sanders showed that much Jewish literature of the period attests what he called 'covenantal nomism' (Gk. *nomos*, 'law'), i.e. that Jews stand in a covenantal relationship with God in which they enjoy his favour by reason of his gracious 'election' or choice of the Jewish people to be his people. A covenant is an agreement, usually between a superior and an inferior power in which the superior offers certain advantages to the inferior and makes certain demands in return. On this view, then, the Jews are 'in' God's covenant solely because of his favour, and they stay in provided that they respond by fulfilling his law; failure to obey is covered by the sacrificial system elaborated in the Old Testament. Sanders' fundamental insight has been modified by other scholars, such as J. D. G. Dunn, who argues that the 'works of the law' were the outward actions that distinguished those who were 'in' the covenant people from those who were outside (the Gentiles). On this view keeping the law was not a means of gaining merit with God.

Sanders' 'school' of thought has not been universally accepted. A growing number of scholars emphasize that for many Jewish sects the people as a whole had so failed to keep the law that they were now effectively outside the covenant and needed to find their way back in – usually by joining the particular sect and following its way of life. It should also be noted that Judaism was still a 'legalistic' religion in that keeping the law stood at the centre of it.

See further Sanders (1977); Dunn (1998). See also the note in vol. I, p. 30.

to undergo a spiritual reformation in order to get back into his favour, usually by joining their particular group and following its interpretation of God's requirements. The community at Qumran (see vol. I, p. 42) could speak a language very like Paul's in which they extolled the grace of God and his pardon for sinners. Even so, what stands out in Paul's writings is his remarkable emphasis on grace that transformed a persecutor of the church into a missionary (1 Cor. 15:8–11).

THE GRACE OF GOD

The key term in Paul's understanding of how God puts sinners right with himself is 'grace'. The word, which he took over from the Old Testament (Gen. 6:8; Exod. 33:12–13; Prov. 3:34), expresses the undeserved favour that God shows to people, specifically to sinners, in forgiving their sins and incorporating them in his family of sons and daughters. Their standing with God rests entirely on his attitude to them and not on anything that they have done to deserve it. It is true that they have demonstrated faith towards God, but faith is not a 'work' in the sense that it is something that they do that places God under an obligation to them in the way that a parent might be constrained not to punish a child who has done some good action to compensate for a misdemeanour. Grace is the fundamental basis for Christian existence (1:3, 6; 2:21; 5:4; 6:18).

So it may be the case that Paul's attack was particularly focussed on specific groups of Jews (such as the Pharisees). But above all he was opposed to the view that Gentiles must keep the law in order to be justified. His argument was intended to show that the way of the law and the way of Christ are opposed to one another. To be sure, there was no reason why believing Jews should not continue to live by Jewish customs (laid

down in the law) if they wanted to, but religiously these were entirely a matter of indifference (Gal. 6:15), and they must never become actions on which people rested their confidence that they would be justified.

The issue then broadens out to cover whatever human qualifications or achievements people may regard as the basis of their good standing with God, whether racial superiority, or moral behaviour, or belonging to the right church, or whatever. The principle

WHERE WAS GALATIA?

Paul wrote this letter 'to the churches of Galatia': but to what area of country was he referring, and whom was he addressing when he called his readers 'you foolish Galatians' (3:1)?

The term 'Galatia' was used in Paul's time for two areas. Originally it was the name for the area round Ancyra (mod. Ankara) in the north of Turkey settled by Gallic tribes (c. 250 BC). These were peoples who had begun some time previously to move out of their homeland in central Europe, some westwards to Gaul (modern France) and the rest eastwards. Prevented from entry into Italy and Greece, they finally crossed over into Turkey and settled there, speaking their own form of Celtic language until at least AD 400.

Like many others, their kingdom eventually passed into the hands of the Romans (25 BC) and became part of a larger administrative area (Latin *provincia*) which the Romans named 'Galatia'; the new province was much larger and included the regions of Pisidia and Lydia together with parts of the regions of Phrygia and Pontus (see map, p. 55).

This situation with the same names sometimes being used for local regions and also for Roman provinces is the cause of our problem.

enunciated by Paul in Galatians is of wider applicability to all that people put their trust in rather than in Christ.

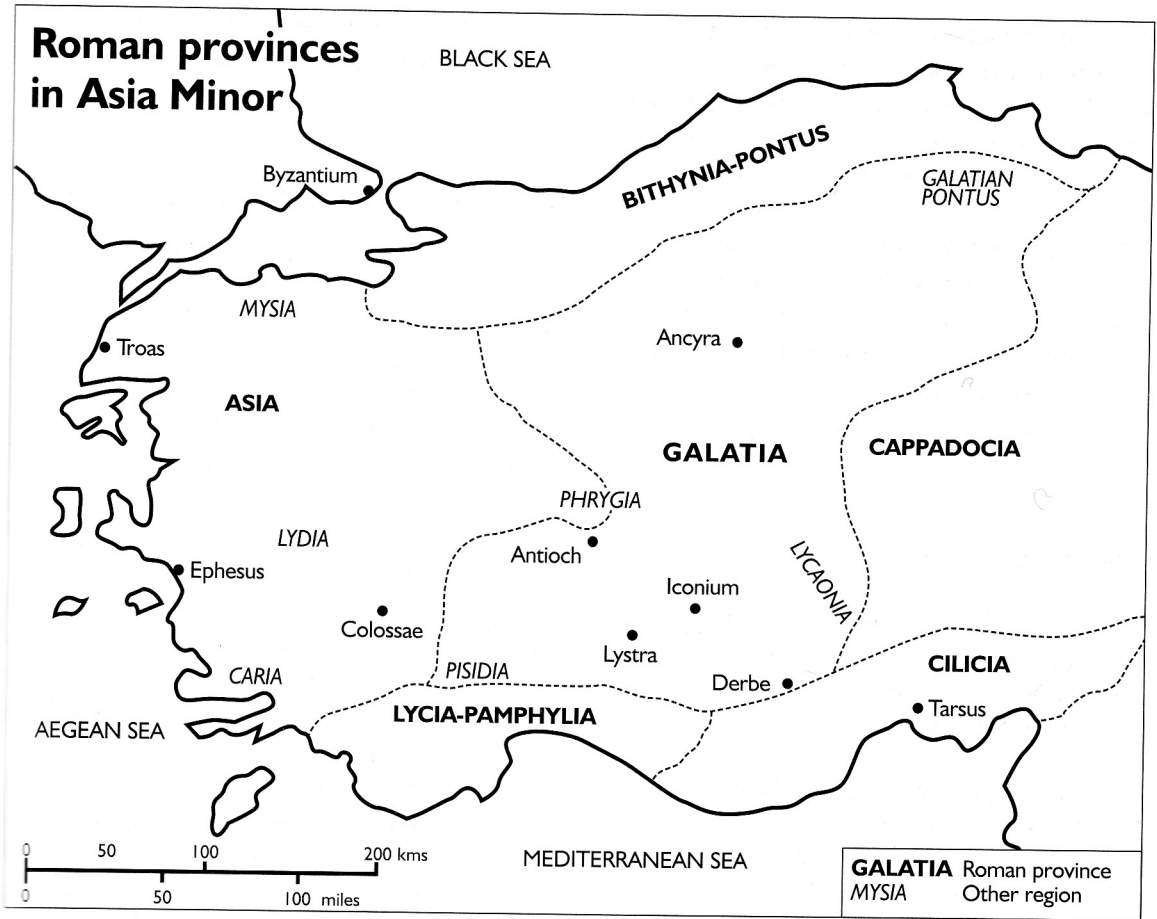
TO WHOM WAS THE LETTER SENT?

The most important questions to be discussed in introducing this letter are manifestly those concerned with understanding its contents, but we must also attempt to clear up the question of its geographical destination, which is also tied up with the question of its date.

Was Paul's letter addressed to the inhabitants of the old kingdom or the new province? Since the kingdom was in the northern area, the hypothesis that Galatians was sent to it is often called the *north Galatian theory*. By contrast, the alternative hypothesis, that the letter was sent to some location in the province, is called the *south Galatian theory*. This is because we know that on his first missionary campaign (Acts 13—14) Paul visited the towns of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, and then revisited them on his second campaign en route to Troas and so across the Hellespont to Macedonia (Acts 16:1–5) and again on his third campaign (Acts 18:23). It is natural to assume that the congregations in these towns in the south of the province of Galatia were the addressees of the letter.

However, a number of considerations could favour a different solution.

- It is argued that the address 'Galatians' used by Paul (3:1) would properly apply only to the native Gallic people and would be inappropriate for the very mixed population of Lycaonians, Phrygians and others who lived in the rest of the province. If this argument holds, then it



would rule out the south Galatian theory and demand that Paul was addressing the north Galatians.

- But did Paul in fact visit the Gallic area in the north? According to Acts 16:6 and 18:23 Paul travelled through 'the region of Phrygia and Galatia' and 'the region of Galatia and Phrygia' on his way further west. It is argued that this route would have taken him through the region where the Gallic people lived, and it can be assumed that, being Paul the missionary with a burning passion for evangelism, he would have missioned in the area and planted churches.

If these points hold, then we are forced into

the north Galatian theory. However, neither of them can be upheld.

- Inscriptional evidence demonstrates that the term 'Galatians' could be used of people living outside the narrowly Gallic region.

F. F. Bruce (1982), p. 16n, refers to an inscription (datable to AD 222) in which a man from Apollonia in Phrygia Galatia thanks Zeus for bringing him back safely 'to my home in the land of the Galatians'. The interpretation of the various fragmentary pieces of evidence is extremely difficult, but the balance of the argument appears to favour the statement above (Hemer 1989, pp. 277-307).

- The two references to Paul's travels most probably refer to the part of Phrygia within Galatia (Acts 16:6) and to the areas previously evangelized in the south (Acts 18:23) rather than to the Gallic kingdom. In any case the Gallic kingdom was rather remote and inaccessible and off the route that Paul was following westwards.

Other arguments help to support the southern hypothesis.

- One small but significant point is that Paul raised a collection of money to alleviate the poverty of the Christians in Jerusalem from the congregations that he had founded, including the churches of Galatia (1 Cor. 16:1). Now in Acts 20:4 we have a list of people who accompanied him on the journey to Jerusalem with the money; in all probability these were representatives from the congregations that gave the money. Even if they were not, however, it is significant that the list includes people from Macedonia, southern Galatia and Asia, but nobody from north Galatia.
- There is also the matter of when the letter was written; it will be argued below that it could have been written before Paul's journey in Acts 16:6 and thus before he could have visited north Galatia, but since this is a controversial point, too much weight should not be placed on it.

WHEN WAS THE LETTER WRITTEN?

We are fortunate in that the letter to the Galatians contains a certain amount of information about the preceding events, which helps us to 'fix' it in relation to Paul's career. Paul found it necessary in the letter to relate the relevant events in his life as a Christian missionary. He therefore describes how he was a persecutor of Christians before

his conversion experience in which he received his calling to be a missionary to the Gentiles (1:13–14, 15–17). Three years after his conversion he went up to Jerusalem where he met Peter (or Cephas, as he calls him), and then he went into 'the regions of Syria and Cilicia' (1:18–24). Then after fourteen years he went up to Jerusalem again, this time to discuss the validation by the Christian leaders there of his mission to the Gentiles (which was called in question because it did not require the circumcision of Gentile converts to Christianity). An agreement was reached (2:1–10), which was taken by Paul to allow Jewish and Gentile Christians to eat together in congregational meals. This practice was followed at Antioch until 'certain people came from James' and practised separation at meals; this nearly caused a severe rupture between Paul and Peter and Barnabas who yielded to the pressure imposed by the visitors. At that point the narrative stops and gives way to Paul's arguments on the matter. These arguments then flow imperceptibly into his address to the readers (2:11–14).

Now Paul's narrative can be compared with the account in Acts to see if the latter covers the same ground and, if so, whether this helps us to plot the position of the letter against Luke's fuller story. Paul's conversion and his first visit to Jerusalem are recounted in Acts 9; there are some minor discrepancies between the two accounts, which basically

What do you think?

Compare Paul's account of his conversion in Gal. 1:13–17 with the account in Acts 9. Do the differences matter?

reflect the fact that each account is fragmentary and has a different purpose.

Acts further reports that after Paul's first missionary campaign there was a meeting in Jerusalem at which the legitimacy of the mission to the Gentiles was discussed and it was agreed that they did not need to submit to circumcision but should conform to some Jewish customs that would ease fellowship (Acts 15). However, Acts also reports an earlier visit by Paul from Antioch to Jerusalem on which he brought some financial assistance for the Christians there during a period of famine (Acts 11:30 with 12:25).

It is tempting to identify the two meetings in Galatians 2:1–10 and Acts 15. But there are some residual problems that cause some disquiet.

From the way Paul tells the story in Galatians, in which he is emphasizing his independence from Jerusalem, it seems probable that he is giving a complete account of his relationships. Yet he has apparently not mentioned the visit in Acts 11:30.

What do you think?

Go through the two accounts of the meetings (Acts 15; Gal. 2:1–10) and make a note of the common features in them. Who took part? What was decided?

Go through the two accounts again and see if there are any significant differences between them. What kind of meetings were they? Are any important features missing from either account?

There are essentially two ways of dealing with these discrepancies (See vol. 1, p. 287–8).

One meeting: Gal. 2 = Acts 15

These two narratives are variant accounts of the same meeting.

- The differences between the accounts are not sufficiently serious to call in question the fact that they describe the same meeting. The differences can be put down to such possible factors as:

Luke's inaccurate historical knowledge of what happened.

Paul's shaping of the story to favour his own position.

The possibility that Luke has run together the account of this meeting and an account of a later agreement, including the 'apostolic decree' of Acts 15:19–21, 29, that was made when Paul was not present.

- As for the visit in Acts 11:30 it can be argued:

Paul just did not mention it because he saw no need to do so.

Or it is misplaced in Luke's record and really happened at some other time.

Or Luke invented it and it never took place.

Two meetings: Gal. 2 = Acts 11:30

The second approach is to argue that the meeting described in Gal. 2:1–10 actually took place on the occasion of the visit mentioned in Acts 11:30, and that this was followed by the dispute at Antioch described in Gal. 2:11–14; as a result of the dispute it was necessary to go over the ground again,

and so a second meeting was held in Jerusalem, as described in Acts 15.

In favour of this interpretation it can be argued that:

- provision for the poor figures both in Acts 11:27–30 and in Gal. 2:10;
- both meetings are associated with prophecy or revelation (Acts 11:27; Gal. 2:2);
- the meeting in Gal. 2 was a private one, whereas that in Acts 15 was a larger assembly.

The difficulties with this view are that:

- Luke has not indicated that the Acts 11 visit included such a meeting. But in view of the evangelism of Gentiles that was already going on in Antioch, it is inconceivable that the topic was not being discussed in Jerusalem.
- essentially the same subject was discussed twice before a final agreement was reached.

This is hardly a difficulty, as anybody who has tried to steer a difficult proposition through a tricky committee can testify.

Scholars are divided between these two types of solution. Some variants of the ‘One meeting’ solution reflect badly on Luke’s competence as a reliable historian. It also faces the difficulty that the *volte face* of James and Cephas and Barnabas is perhaps less likely after the formal decision in Acts 15 than the less formal private agreement in Gal. 2. These and other considerations incline me to favour the ‘Two meetings’ solution.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DATE OF THE LETTER

After this lengthy discussion we can see that on the ‘One meeting’ solution, the date of Galatians will be not long after the decision reached in Acts 15. On the ‘Two meetings’ solution, the date will be after the decision reached in Acts 11 and after Paul’s

THE TWO ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

Scenario 1 – One meeting

| | Galatians | Acts |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Paul's conversion | 1:13–16a | 9:1–22 |
| Visit to Arabia | 1:17 | |
| FIRST VISIT TO JERUSALEM | 1:18–24 | 9:26–30 |
| SECOND VISIT (FAMINE RELIEF) | | 11:29–30; 12:25 |
| THIRD VISIT (CHURCH COUNCIL) | 2:1–10 | 15:1–35 |
| <i>Composition of Galatians</i> | | |

Scenario 2 – Two meetings

| | | |
|---|----------|-----------------|
| Paul's conversion | 1:13–16a | 9:1–22 |
| Visit to Arabia | 1:17 | |
| FIRST VISIT TO JERUSALEM | 1:18–24 | 9:26–30 |
| SECOND VISIT (FAMINE RELIEF and LEADERS' MEETING) | 2:1–10 | 11:29–30; 12:25 |
| <i>Composition of Galatians</i> | | |
| THIRD VISIT (CHURCH COUNCIL) | | 15:1–35 |

missionary campaign in south Galatia but before the meeting in Acts 15 (since it is not mentioned in Galatians although, had Paul been able to appeal to it, it would have settled the argument). Moreover, it will be the earliest extant letter of Paul (since 1 Thessalonians was not written until after the second missionary campaign was under way). It is on the basis of this weighing of the evidence that Galatians is treated here as the first of Paul's letters (c. AD 48–49), but the case is a finely balanced one.

FOR TODAY'S GALATIANS

What relevance can a letter that is concerned with matters like circumcision and Jewish festivals have for readers today? Are there issues that are still alive today?

- In what ways, if any, can what appears to be a first-century issue about the Jewish law have counterparts in the contemporary church and society? Is 'justification by works' still an issue today?
- 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love' (5:6); 'Love God and do what you like' (Augustine, fifth century AD); 'All you need is love' (The Beatles). Many people think that loving is all that we need to do: but what do different people mean by 'love'? Why does Paul put faith in the first place?
- There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:28). But clearly people still were Jews and Greeks . . . ; so in what sense did these distinctions no longer exist, and in what ways might the principle be extended and applied to the problems caused by distinctions in modern society, not least between rich and poor?

ESSAY TOPICS

INTRODUCTORY

- Explore the way in which Paul uses the Old Testament to develop his argument in Galatians. (For general discussions of how Paul uses the Old Testament see, for example, M. Silva in *DPL*, pp. 630–42; A. T. Hanson *The Living Utterances of God: The New Testament Exegesis of the Old*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983, pp. 44–62.)

INTERMEDIATE

- Show how Paul uses different types of approach and argument in attempting to persuade his readers of his case in Galatians.

FURTHER READING

*denotes books assuming knowledge of Greek; most can be used by all students.

INTRODUCTORY

- C. K. Barrett *Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians*. London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985 (good exposition of the teaching of the letter).
- J. D. G. Dunn *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993 (more detailed summary of the theological message).

Commentaries

- G. W. Hansen *Galatians*. IVPNTC. Downers Grove: IVP, 1994 (a combination of explanation of what Paul was saying to his readers and of what the relevance of the letter for modern readers might be).
- J. Ziesler *Galatians*. EC. London: Epworth/Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1992 (like his *Romans*, exposes the problems clearly).

INTERMEDIATE

J. M. G. Barclay 'Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter. Galatians as a Test Case' *JSNT* 31 (1987), pp. 73–93 (an important methodological discussion of the pitfalls in attempting to reconstruct the situation behind a letter from ambiguous clues in the letter).

J. M. G. Barclay *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991 (fresh study with emphasis on the ethical teaching of the letter).

J. D. G. Dunn *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998 (the most comprehensive recent treatment).

P. F. Esler *Galatians*. New Testament Readings. London/New York: Routledge, 1998 (pioneering study from a social-scientific angle).

C. J. Hemer *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*. Edited by C. H. Gempf. Tübingen: Mohr, 1989 (technical study of the background to Acts).

B. W. Longenecker *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark/Nashville: Abingdon, 1998 (what might it mean for somebody to accept the message of the letter?).

J. L. Martyn *Theological issues in the Letters of Paul*. Nashville: Abingdon/Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997 (essays by a major commentator on Galatians).

E. P. Sanders *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM Press, 1977 (the classic work that founded the 'new perspective').

E. P. Sanders *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983 (the implications of Sanders' view of Judaism for understanding Paul).

Commentaries

*H. D. Betz *Galatians*. Herm. Philadelphia: Fortress. 1979 (very technical, but important for its pioneering rhetorical analysis).

*F. F. Bruce *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*. NIGTC. Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 (standard treatment of the Greek text by a major Pauline scholar).

J. D. G. Dunn *The Epistle to the Galatians*. BNTC. London: A. and C. Black/Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993 (good exposition of the 'new perspective' on Paul).

*R. N. Longenecker *Galatians*. WBC. Dallas: Word, 1990 (fuller than Bruce on Greek text; pays more attention to rhetorical structure).

*J. L. Martyn *Galatians*. AB. New York: Doubleday, 1997 (detailed, with new insights)

B. Witherington III *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St Paul's Letter to the Galatians*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998 (very full on the English text).