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Author’s Preface

You are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)
I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. (Gal 2:20)

In modern Pauline scholarship these days, the ultimate invective is to label an approach “Lutheran.” The pejorative label implies that something is “passé,” uncritical, and void of historical and scholarly rigor. Although confessional perspectives are grounded largely in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, raging discussions in Pauline scholarship have gone for decades unaddressed within conservative Lutheran ranks. Tragically, the scholarly discussions have been at a fairly technical level and are of great value for understanding the biblical text. If Martin Luther considered Paul’s Letter to the Galatians the biblical equivalent of his Katie von Bora, then the time is ripe for a Lutheran commentary on Galatians that takes into account the full range of modern scholarship on the letter. The length of this volume and the relative brevity of Galatians (six chapters) permit extended discussions of exegetical problems that simply are not possible for those writing on longer biblical books. The reader may therefore engage this commentary at whatever level is fitting for his or her needs, whether the layperson who ignores the textual notes and goes right for the conclusions, the pastor who is concerned with matters of translation and meaning, or the scholar who wishes to scrutinize my position on a particular text or exegetical debate. With respect to that last audience, this “Lutheran” commentary is intended to be overheard.

Paul wrote Galatians from within a Mediterranean cultural milieu roughly two thousand years ago. He targeted his letter to the Galatians. J. Louis Martyn, the renowned Pauline specialist and commentator, has emphasized over the years the importance of taking one’s seat within the original congregations. This is the task not just of the scholar. Every person who encounters Paul’s letter, to read it rightly, must take an imaginary seat within the congregations originally addressed. Proper interpretation is a demanding labor. Pastors, who have been called to teach the Word of God, have an obligation to assist each member to come to appreciate how to engage the ancient text. Every sermon and Bible class is an opportunity to transport the modern congregation back in time to Paul’s first audiences. Seminaries must, first of all, teach pastors to be skilled interpreters of the Word. Only in this way will pastors and their congregations be equipped to resist the errors that plagued even Paul’s own churches.

Systematicians distinguish the norma normans from the norma normata, that is, the Scriptures as the “norming norm” from the Confessions as the “normed norm.” In other words, the cart must always follow the horse. The biblical text must be allowed to speak with its own voice and to inform the confessional discourse lest one reverse the proper relationship between the “norming norm” and the “normed norm.” The Lutheran Confessions do not act
as a hermeneutical or exegetical lens to interpret Scripture. One could justify any confessional position were that position presupposed in the interpretation of the ancient text. Too often, the modern is tempted to read into the biblical text a preconceived conclusion. Lutherans are not immune from this perennial temptation. Luther confessed the perspicuity of Scripture. Scripture, when read on its own terms, should render the doctrines clear, if they are worthy to be confessed.

To offer a more specific example, Lutherans distinguish Law and Gospel as the central pillars of their theological discourse. I have written at length over the years on Paul’s view of the Mosaic Law. In fact, one of the unique contributions of this commentary is its fuller exposition of my “newer perspective” on Paul and the Law. The Mosaic Law, however, is not to be equated with the Law of Lutheran doctrinal categories. The Mosaic Law contains much that a systematician would include under the heading of Gospel. The danger is to read Paul’s word “Law” (nomos) in terms of the sixteenth-century confessional use of “Law.” What does Paul mean by the term “Law”? Once we understand how he is using his terms, we can compare his discourse to the later sixteenth-century categories. Krister Stendahl, Harvard’s late former professor of biblical studies, a Lutheran, liked to distinguish what the text “meant” from what it “means.” Pastors and their people must become practiced in the art of translating the ancient text for their lives afresh. They must subordinate their patterns of thought to the biblical text.

Sometimes the answers to Pauline exegetical questions may not be obvious. I have tried to lay out the interpretive options fairly and to give the rationale for the positions I have taken. I have also endeavored to be honest when I think the available evidence does not permit a firm conclusion. Only with the ultimate hubris could an exegete fail to affirm the truth in 2 Pet 3:16: “There are some things in them [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand.” May these pages avoid any unstable twisting that, as Peter warns, could lead to destruction.

I am grateful to three pastors who read large portions of this commentary: the Rev. Edward L. Bryant of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Rev. Brad Smith of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the Rev. Nathan Cordes of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. All three offered helpful suggestions and feedback. Pastor Smith suggested that a glossary be appended to the commentary as a helpful convenience for the busy pastor who may not recognize a word or two in the discussions. My wife, Susan, and my mother, Rebecca J. Das, read through the commentary and offered suggestions for prose and organization. Any flaws that remain are my own doing.

Henceforth let no one continue to cause me troubles, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus! (Gal 6:17)

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Lent 2013
The Situation at Galatia

“Yet even if we or an angel from heaven preaches a Gospel to you contrary to the Gospel we preached to you, let him be accursed! As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches a Gospel to you contrary to the Gospel you received, let him be accursed!” (1:8–9). The outburst of curses at the beginning of the letter is not the last time the “foolish Galatians” (3:1) would encounter such harsh language. At one point Paul blurts out: “Would that those who trouble you also let themselves be mutilated” (5:12). The Jews were often slandered and ridiculed in antiquity for their practice of circumcision.1 Ironically, this time the slander comes from the lips of one who is himself circumcised. The apostle is seething with righteous anger and indignation over the events at Galatia even as he conveys his hope that the Galatians might be coaxed back to the true Gospel. This fiercely passionate letter offers a rare glimpse into the very early history of the emerging Christ-believing movement. The young faith was grappling with issues that would prove to be a watershed for its relationship with its Jewish roots. Did these gentile Christians understand themselves in continuity with the Jewish people?2 Were the gentiles to be a distinctive community? Were they to adopt Moses’ Law and be circumcised as Jews in order to worship the God of the Jewish Savior?3 Across the divide of two thousand years of time and cultural space, the letter to the Galatians is a witness to the struggles in the very early years of the Christian faith.

The Necessity of a Critical Methodology for Mirror-Reading

J. Louis Martyn, who authored a major commentary on Galatians, has stressed to his students and colleagues over the years that to hear Paul’s letter aright a person must take his or her seat within the original congregations of those being addressed. Paul was writing his letter to address a concrete situation within the Galatian gatherings two thousand years ago in a very different culture. Unfortunately, the modern reader of the letter possesses only one side of this exchange. Even the ancients lamented that a letter is only half of a dialogue.4 No independent witness of the Galatian congregations or of their rival teachers has survived. The other side of the conversation at Galatia has been

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1 See the references to circumcision in Stern, Greek and Latin Authors.
2 Throughout this commentary the word “gentile” is in lowercase since, unlike “Jew,” the word “gentile” is not a proper name referring to a particular ethnic group but is rather a Jewish designation for the non-Jewish world; see Das, Solving the Romans Debate, 1–2, n. 3.
3 The Greek word νόμος should be consistently capitalized in translation—“Law”—since Paul consistently uses the term for the Mosaic Law throughout the letter, as the commentary will demonstrate.
4 E.g., Demetrius, Eloc. 223; Cicero, Fam. 12.30.1 (Letter 417).
irretrievably lost. An understanding of the issues and the exchange is impossible without a reconstruction, insofar as is feasible, of views now only accessible in a letter representing half of the discussion.\(^5\)

Biblical scholars have responded to these challenges with an imperfect process known as “mirror-reading.” In the heat of an exchange, a position may end up being distorted. Paul may be exaggerating and caricaturing the rival position, and the modern reader may mistakenly take the exaggeration at face value. The apostle employs specific rhetorical devices designed to persuade that may be not be familiar to modern readers, who may consequently misinterpret or overemphasize the words. At times without clear indication, Paul may be responding to someone else’s vocabulary or thinking, or he may employ his rivals’ terminology in entirely new ways that may obscure how that language was initially used. For example, when Paul refers to “still preach[ing] circumcision” in 5:11, is he answering a charge leveled against him? Perhaps. Perhaps not. When Paul admonishes the Galatians in 5:13 not to use their “freedom as a pretext for the flesh,” were some of the Galatians guilty of libertine excesses? Paul could be reminding the Galatians of something, preventing their misunderstanding, or merely offering a rhetorical contrast. The other side of the debate at Galatia needs to be reconstructed, but at the end of the day, it must be admitted, much inevitably will remain unknown.\(^6\) Paul’s response is hardly neutral or comprehensive.\(^7\)

John Barclay identified at least seven criteria for reconstructing the fuller conversation at Galatia: (1) An emphatic, urgent \textit{tone} signals a central issue even as a casual tone indicates a matter less critical. (2) The \textit{frequency} with which Paul returns to a motif indicates its level of importance. (3) Reconstructions should not rely on \textit{unclear} wording or phrasing, especially in the context of a heated exchange. (4) \textit{Unfamiliar} motifs relative to Paul’s overall theology may reflect the particular situation to which he is responding. (5) The \textit{type of utterance} Paul employs, whether a denial, a command, or an assertion, must be weighed accordingly. A denial may be in response to what someone has said or may be inclined to think. A command indicates a danger of neglecting something or behaving wrongfully. An assertion indicates an idea that may be overlooked or even denied. (6) The most likely reconstruction will offer a \textit{consistent} description of the other point(s) of view. (7) The reconstruction should be \textit{historically plausible}.\(^8\)

A few years after Barclay’s essay, Jerry Sumney developed his own set of criteria for mirror-reading: (1) Pauline opponents should actually be \textit{mentioned}.

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\(^{5}\) Barclay, “Mirror-Reading,” 73.

\(^{6}\) See the thought experiment offered by Barclay, “Mirror-Reading,” 77–78.

\(^{7}\) Paul has been to Galatia. Barclay, \textit{Obeying the Truth}, 38: “The confidence with which he speaks about the Galatians’ ‘apostasy’ probably indicates a reasonable amount of information.” In other words, he is not likely misinformed or misinterpreting the overall situation.

\(^{8}\) See Barclay, “Mirror-Reading,” 84–85, and also his \textit{Obeying the Truth}, 41.
in the letter and not merely assumed. (2) Paul’s assessments of the situation should be assumed to be true unless good reasons suggest otherwise. (3) Other Pauline letters should not be uncritically employed in the reconstruction, except when a shared conceptual framework links two passages. (4) Reminiscent of Barclay’s emphasis on clarity, Sumney emphasized clear and reliable references to opposing figures. (5) Explicit statements should take precedence over allusions or affirmations. (6) The thanksgiving section of the letter along with the didactic sections will be of greater value than statements gleaned from polemical or apologetic contexts. (7) Paul should not be assumed to be taking an opposite position to his rivals unless he says that he is doing so. (8) Clearer and more explicit statements should be starting points before incorporating the more difficult passages into the reading. (9) An opposing point of view can be confirmed if it is relayed in two different types of texts (e.g., didactic and polemical). (10) The dating of a letter could play a role in the issues involved. For instance, since circumcision was an issue at Galatia but not at Corinth, the Corinthian correspondence could be dated later. (11) Deliberative rhetoric is less heated than forensic rhetoric and will be more reliable for reconstructions.

The Galatians and the Rivals as Reconstructed from the Letter

Mirror-reading and reconstruction is inevitable in Paul’s letter to the Galatians since he explicitly refers to troublemakers (1:7; 5:10, 12; 6:12–13). He consistently distinguishes his audience with second person plural pronouns (“you,” e.g., 1:6–9) from another group for whom he employs third person plural pronouns (“some people,” 1:7; “they,” 6:13; see also “those,” 5:12). “You” Galatians (3:1; cf. 1:2) are former gentiles or non-Jews: “Formerly, because you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that are not by nature gods” (4:8).
Despite having been enslaved to pagan idols, the Galatians “welcomed” Paul “as if the angel of God, as if Christ Jesus” himself (4:14). The apostle describes himself in 4:19 as a mother who has given—and is giving—birth to the Galatians as his children. In 1:6 he is “astonished that you [Galatians] are so quickly turning away from the one who called you in the grace [of Christ] to a different Gospel.” Apparently it has only been a short while since he was “formerly” preaching a “Gospel” message to them (4:13), and already a new situation has arisen (1:6–9). Paul is concerned lest they “turn back again to the weak and shabby elements” (4:9; cf. 4:3). The Galatians are entertaining a position that would be the equivalent of a return to the same sad condition of slavery to the false gods and powers from which they had been rescued by Paul’s message.

Paul complains that “some people are confusing you and are wanting to pervert the Gospel about Christ” (1:7). In 5:12 he expresses this wish: “Would that those who trouble you also let themselves be mutilated.” In 6:13: “For the circumcised do not themselves keep the Law, and yet they want you to be circumcised in order that they might boast about your flesh.” The “they” group advocating circumcision was not content to stop there but was promoting adherence to the entirety of the Mosaic Law. Paul identifies the Galatians in 4:21 as people “who want to be under the Law.” In 3:1 Paul reprises the harsh language with which he had begun the letter: “O foolish Galatians, who bewitched you?” Paul asks if the Galatians received God’s Spirit by doing the works the Law requires or “by the hearing of faith” (3:2). The bewitchers were apparently urging the Galatians to consider the works prescribed by the Mosaic Law as the key to unleashing the power of God’s Spirit. Another clue that Paul’s rivals were advocating a more comprehensive approach to the Mosaic Law is the reference in 4:10 to the Galatians’ “observing special days and months and seasons and years.” The Jews celebrated Sabbaths, new moons, seasons of Pentecost and Passover, and sabbatical years. Paul’s audience would thus be adopting a Jewish liturgical calendar which corresponded to the pagan calendars of their past.

A Return to Paganism?

Troy W. Martin, who has written at length on Galatians, took 4:10 as his starting point to argue a very different thesis: The Galatians are returning to paganism because of the difficulty posed by the requirement of circumcision. The “special days and months and seasons and years” really do refer to their former calendar to which they are returning. Gal 4:21, however, suggests that the Galatians’ desire to be under the Law is serious and sincere. The issue is with the Galatians’ interest in Law observance and not paganism. Martin countered this point with the somewhat strange thesis that 4:21–5:6 is not actually addressing the Galatians but rather the rival teachers at Galatia. The careful distinction Paul makes between “you” Galatians (3:1; cf. 1:2) and “those” people

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11 See the discussion of the word “formerly” in the commentary on 4:13.
12 Martin, “Apostasy.”
(5:12) suggests otherwise. The apostle nowhere identifies 4:21–5:6 as a turn to “those” people. Gal 5:3’s warning that circumcision entails a comprehensive Law-observant lifestyle makes little sense if addressed to Law-observant rivals.\textsuperscript{13} Martin was not able to disqualify the more likely reading of 4:10 as an ironic equation of the days, months, seasons, and years of the newfound Jewish calendar with the calendars of the Galatians’ pagan past.\textsuperscript{14} Paul never addresses a problem with paganism in the letter. Martin is forced to take passages like 5:2–5, with its severe warning against circumcision, as addressing a merely hypothetical contemplation.\textsuperscript{15} No, the Galatians are seriously considering observance of Moses’ Law and circumcision.

Partial or Comprehensive Law Observance

Some interpreters have wondered if Paul’s rivals were only advocating circumcision and the Mosaic calendar (4:10) but not the entirety of the Law. Perhaps they had adopted a policy of gradualism as they pushed for circumcision but held off on the remainder of the Law until later, or not at all.\textsuperscript{16} One scholar, Michael Winger, proposed that the rival teachers at Galatia had adopted table fellowship with the gentiles as had Peter and the other Jewish-Christians before the arrival of the people from James in 2:11–14. For Winger, the rivals thought that they would never make inroads if they did not, from the first, eat with the Galatians.\textsuperscript{17} The rival teachers may have gradually introduced the other requirements of the Law. The rivals may even have been insincere or selective about the Law. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus contrasted the Jew Ananias’ non-circumcising witness to gentile King Izates with Eleazar’s subsequent insistence on circumcision.\textsuperscript{18} Whereas the Galatian rivals likely had adopted Eleazar’s approach and Paul Ananias’ position, Winger took Josephus’ account as evidence for his thesis that the rivals pressed initially for only a partial

\textsuperscript{13} Likewise also Hardin, \textit{Galatians and the Imperial Cult}, 129.


\textsuperscript{16} E.g., Sanders, \textit{Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People}, 29; also Brinsmead, \textit{Galatians}, 64–65, 119 (the opponents only observe part of the Law); Frederic R. Crownfield, “The Singular Problem of the Dual Galatians,” \textit{JBL} 64 (1945): 491–500, here 499–500: syncretists who were selective in their advocacy of the Law’s provisions.

\textsuperscript{17} Other interpreters, however, have argued the opposite. The rivals may have reinforced the necessity of circumcision by refusing to eat with the Galatians (2:11–14; 4:17). On the social impact of this sort of action, see Josephus, \textit{Ag. Ap.} 2.28 § 210; Juvenal, \textit{Sat.} 14.96–106.

\textsuperscript{18} Winger, “Act One,” 558–59; see the similar position of Howard, \textit{Paul}, 15–16.

\textsuperscript{18} Josephus, \textit{Ant.} 20.2.4 §§ 38–46.
Law observance by the gentile Galatians on the way to a more comprehensive obedience. Nevertheless, Josephus gives Eleazar the last word and indicates that Ananias’ initially piecemeal approach to the Law was deficient.  

Similarly, Paul reminds the Galatians that they must keep the entirety of the Law as an all-or-nothing affair (5:3).

In 6:13 the apostle faults the rival teachers for not keeping the entirety of the Law. The charge, however, reflects Paul’s polemic and is not likely how the rivals would have evaluated their own Law observance. Perhaps Paul made the claim in 5:3 about comprehensive Law observance for its shock value. More likely, after stating the impossible demand of the Law in 3:10, Paul intends for the Galatians and those in their midst to recognize the truth in his claim in 5:3. If the rival missionaries were not consistent in their advocacy of the Law and circumcision, the Galatians would wonder why they had not insisted on such requirements from the beginning were they truly necessary. A temporary neglect of the Law “for pragmatic reasons” would jeopardize the point.

Circumcision was the most formidable aspect of the Mosaic Law for a sympathetic non-Jewish male. To be circumcised entailed a costly stigma in Greco-Roman society. It was the mark of Jewish identity. Whether at the baths or during athletic competitions in the gymasia, everyone would recognize the circumcised man or boy. Many Jews sought to conceal circumcision rather than endure the inevitable ridicule. Strabo, the first century BC historian and geographer, thought well of Moses but considered circumcision a subsequent, superstitious corruption of the Jewish faith. He described circumcision pejoratively as a mutilation of the glans penis. Circumcised Jewish youths would

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\[19\] See also Josephus, *Ant*. 1.1.3 § 14; *Ag. Ap*. 2.13 § 144; 2.17 § 175; 2.21 § 187. For a discussion of Josephus’ Izares account, see Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 177–78. Josephus seems to have assumed that to take on circumcision meant to take on the entirety of the Law; *Ant*. 13.9.1 §§ 257–58; 20.7.3 §§ 145–46.

\[20\] Contra Winger, “Act One,” 559, n. 28.

\[21\] I am grateful to Baker Publishing Group for permission to adapt in these next few pages material from my book *Paul and the Jews*, 17–33.


\[24\] Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.37; 16.4.9. The Greek word for “circumcise” (περιτέμνω) was also used for the mutilation of body parts. When speaking of the mutilation/circumcision of the genitals, the verb would be further qualified (e.g., τῶν αἰδοίων). The privative ἀπερίτμητος therefore meant “unmaimed” (Plutarch, *Am. prol.* 3 [Mor. 495C]); Steven Mason, “Paul, Classical Anti-Jewish Polemic, and the Letter to the Romans,” in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in*
not have had the same opportunities in the gymnasia for social advancement as other youths.\textsuperscript{25} Gentiles sympathetic to the Jewish tradition would have had no problem with the remainder of Moses’ Law, but circumcision required the ultimate commitment since the procedure was painful, only partially reversible, and socially compromising in the gentile world.\textsuperscript{26} An individual would not likely undergo circumcision, the ultimate sacrifice, without being willing to abide by the rest of the Jewish Law.\textsuperscript{27} The rivals were encouraging circumcision and thus also a comprehensive observance of Moses’ Law on the part of the Galatians.

The Rivals’ Use of Scripture and Paul’s Response

The manner in which Paul employs the Jewish Scriptures in the letter offers further evidence that Paul’s rivals were advocating comprehensive obedience of Moses’ Law. In 3:10 Paul makes the point that “all who are of the works of the Law are under a curse.” He cites in support Deut 27:26: “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the Law to do them.” The Deuteronomy passage encourages Law observance through the threat of a curse for anyone who fails to do the Law. Paul’s point, on the other hand, is that those who rely on the Law are under a curse. He appears to be forcing the passage to say the opposite. Why would Paul employ a passage that is, on the surface, at odds with his own message? The passage does not appear to be of his own choosing but rather a proof text employed by the rival teachers. Deut 27:26 would be an outstanding text for their cause.

The same dynamic is at work in Gal 3:12. Paul cites Lev 18:5: “The one who does these things will live by them.” The Leviticus passage promises life...
for those who do the Law’s works. Once again, the quote from the Scriptures is seemingly at odds with the apostle’s own point: “No one is justified before God by the Law” (Gal 3:11). Paul is not using such a poor text for his position by choice. He is reinterpreting a passage employed by his rivals. The citation of Hab 2:4 in Gal 3:11 may, at first glance, be the exception to the pattern: “The righteous one by faith will live.” While the context Paul provides for 3:11 consists of Abraham’s believing faith in 3:6, the Jews of Paul’s day understood Hab 2:4’s “faith” as faithfulness. The faithful individual in the Masoretic Text of Hab 2:4 serves as a contrast to the arrogant person who is not upright. The faithful would endure difficult and trying times. The Qumran community at the Dead Sea interpreted Hab 2:4 as the community’s faithfulness in acting in accordance with their founding teacher’s interpretation of the Law (1QpHab VII.5–VIII.3). The Greek Septuagintal translators of the Hebrew Scriptures understood Hab 2:4 as referring to God’s faithfulness to promises. Paul has reinterpreted a passage typically taken to refer to faithfulness as a reference to believing faith instead.

Abraham served the rivals’ perspective as well (cf. 3:6–9, 14, 16–18, 29; 4:21–31).28 Jewish literature in Paul’s day emphasized Abraham as a model of gentile conversion to Judaism in having left behind the idolatrous household of his father. Many Jews thought that Abraham had obeyed the Mosaic Law in its as-yet-unwritten form.30 Philo celebrated Abraham as an example of faithfulness to God’s commands in bringing his passions under control through the circumcision of himself and his household (Spec. 1.2 § 9; QG 3.47 on Gen 17:10).31 The traditions about Abraham would be prime fodder for why the gentile Galatians need to adopt the path of Law observance. Paul therefore has to review the Abrahamic texts. He ignores any mention of circumcision to stress in 3:6 Abraham’s faith instead (Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:1–12). In Gal 4:21–31 Paul associates Mount Sinai not with Isaac, the child of promise in Genesis 16–22, but rather with Ishmael, the child of slavery. The association is rhetorically shocking, and so Paul is careful to signal that he is interpreting the Genesis texts in a non-literal fashion.32 The opponents at Galatia were drawing upon

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28 Paul sometimes employs his own Scriptural texts in response to the opponents’ texts. For instance, Gal 3:13’s citation of Deut 21:23, with its reference to a curse, appears deliberately designed to answer the curse invoked by Paul’s opponents in their use of Deut 27:26 (in Gal 3:10). Paul’s own use of Scripture bears the pattern of response to Scriptural texts employed by the outsiders.

29 Barclay (Obeying the Truth, 52–53) appealed to his own criteria of frequency, tone, clarity, and unfamiliarity as evidence that the rivals were drawing on Abraham’s circumcision in Genesis 17 (and on Gen 12:3) in their conversations with the Galatians. In view of Abraham, the Galatians should recognize the importance of circumcision; see also Josephus, Ant. 20.2.4 §§ 44–45.

30 See the discussion of these Jewish traditions of Abraham in the commentary on 3:6.

31 On the association of Abraham with the covenant of circumcision, see Jub. 15.9–35; Sirach 44:19–20; m. ‘Aboth 3.12; cf. 1 Macc 1:15, 60–62. To accept circumcision may have been the rivals’ proof that one had irrevocably turned one’s back on paganism (Gal 4:9; 5:1).

32 See the commentary on the individual Scriptural citations. The pattern is particularly striking in 3:10–12.
the Scriptures to inculcate not only circumcision but also full observance of the Mosaic Law, and the apostle apparently felt compelled to show how those passages are actually supportive of his Gospel message that the gentiles need not observe the Law.  

The consistency with which Paul raises passages that advocate Law observance or juxtaposes Scriptural passages in response to such passages indicates that the Galatians are learning the Scriptures from Paul’s rivals. He never reminds the Galatians of any Scriptural passages or instruction that he independently shared while still with them. The apostle apparently did not stop long enough in any single location to catechize his new converts in the Jewish Scriptures. If the gentiles are learning the Scriptures from the rivals after Paul’s departure, then they do not appear to have had any significant instruction in the synagogues. Paul does not assume that the Galatians are well-versed in the Scriptures. As Christopher Stanley has stressed, the Galatian audiences would not need to know the Jewish Scriptures in order to grasp Paul’s points.

The consistency with which Paul confronts a Law-observant message throughout the letter renders unnecessary many older proposals about the Galatian conflict. For instance, some scholars in a previous generation thought that Paul was confronting an early version of second-century Gnosticism in which circumcision served as a rite of escape from the body. However, did not emerge as a distinctive movement until the second century with precursors no earlier than the 90s. Also, the Gnostics did not treat circumcision consistently (compare Gos. Thom. 53 with Gos. Phil. 123). Irenaeus, the great opponent of Gnosticism, associated circumcision with Judaism and not Gnosticism. Wilhelm Lütgert and James Hardy Ropes took a different


34 This is a problem for a number of positions. For instance, A. E. Harvey (“Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy,” in Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study [ed. A. E. Harvey; London 1985], 79–96, esp. 86–88) thought that the Galatians used to attend the synagogue and that the local Jews were seeking to win them back and render their adherence to Judaism permanent through circumcision.

35 Stanley, Arguing with Scripture, 114–35. This does not prevent Paul from making his points from the Scriptures in a way that might nevertheless be pointed toward the Scripturally literate rivals in the Galatians’ midst, as will be argued at various points in the commentary.


38 Irenaeus, Haer. 1.26.2 (Ebionites); Brinsmead (Galatians, 145) concluded that Paul was confronting circumcision as an initiation rite into a powerful mystery cult. The Jews, however, never interpret circumcision in those terms. Barclay (Obeying the Truth, 49, n. 37) criticized Brinsmead’s marshaling of a “hotch-potch of unconvincing parallels.” Too much in Brinsmead’s approach depends on a particular reading, e.g., Gal 3:3 with “complete” in the sense of “perfected.” See the commentary on that verse.
approach in identifying in Galatians 5–6 a libertine faction at Galatia, but even these chapters remain consistent in opposing gentile observance of the Law and circumcision.

The Rivals as Christ-Believing Jews

While Paul is confronting advocates of gentile circumcision and Law observance in his letter, were these advocates Jewish-Christians, as most interpreters assume, or were they non-Christian Jews? Of course, “Christian” is a terribly anachronistic term after two thousand years of ecclesiastical development. Scholars continue to debate the degree of continuity between the early Christ-believers and first-century Judaism as well as the timing of the decisive parting of the ways between Judaism and early Christianity.

One scholar, Mark Nanos, has concluded that Paul’s rivals were non-Christian Jews. On the other hand, were the rivals not Christ-believers, as Nanos has theorized, Paul would have needed to address the crucial deficiency in their message with a renewed defense of Jesus as the Christ. The apostle never addresses any such deficiency. Furthermore, non-Christ-believing rivals would have downgraded or rejected the central features of Paul’s message about Christ and would not likely have made inroads among the Galatians “so quickly” (1:6). As Jewish-Christian teachers, at least in their own estimation and in their acknowledgement of Jesus as God’s Messiah, they could present their message as supplementing Paul’s.

In 1:6–7 the apostle condemns “a different Gospel” proclaimed by “some people.” Paul uses the term “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) for the saving message about Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom 1:1), as did other early Christian authors (e.g., Mk 1:1). The apostle immediately denies that this “different Gospel” message is really a “Gospel.” Why would he dignify the rival message as a “Gospel,” the label he uses for his own message, unless the rivals were also using the term for their message? They must have been declaring some sort of Christ-message. They must have been Jewish-Christians. Nanos disagreed. “Gospel,” he pointed out, is by no means a technical term for the message about Jesus Christ. Both Jews and gentiles use the noun (εὐαγγέλιον) and the cognate verb (εὐαγγελίζομαι)

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39 Lütgert, Gesetz und Geist, 14–15; Ropes, Singular Problem, 23, 38–42; see the discussion of their proposal at the beginning of the commentary on 5:13–15.
40 On this issue, I am relying on my earlier work in Paul and the Jews, 23–29, and I am, again, grateful to Baker Publishing Group for permission to draw on that discussion.
41 Most scholars continue to use the term “Christian” for these first followers of Christ. Those who see Christianity as a movement still within the larger Jewish community often employ the label “Christ-believing.” Both labels will be used here. For my own part (see Paul and the Jews), the seeds of that later split are already present in Paul’s claim that the gentiles need not become Jewish to worship the Jewish God.
42 See esp. Nanos, Irony.
43 See the discussion of Gal 2:15–16 that follows below in this section.
44 In 2 Cor 11:4, 22–23 Paul confronts another Jewish-Christian message as a “different Gospel” (ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον).
to refer to “good news” or “glad tidings.” The Septuagint’s Greek translation of Isaiah employs the “Gospel” or “good news” word group for God’s saving activity on behalf of the Jewish people (e.g., LXX Is 52:7–10). The Jews of Paul’s day could draw upon Isaiah’s prophecy to oppose yet another “good news,” that of the Roman Empire.\(^\text{45}\) Paul, according to Nanos, is using the word “good news” in 1:6–9 ironically: Others have brought their own form of “good news” to the Galatians. Their “good news” is actually different than the “good news” about Jesus Christ and really is not “good news” at all. Their “good news” is actually a perversion of the message about Christ, if anything was even said about Christ at all.

The flaw in Nanos’ reasoning is that the early Christians consistently employ the singular form of the noun “Gospel” as a technical term for the glad tiding or message of Christ.\(^\text{46}\) Nanos could find only one undisputed instance of the singular form in Jewish literature.\(^\text{47}\) The singular “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) is rare in Greek literature apart from early Christian influence (as Nanos conceded), and yet the NT writings regularly employ the singular form of the noun “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) with reference to the proclamation of Christ. The unusual and consistent use of the singular noun within early Christianity indicates that “Gospel” was a chosen designation by the early believers in Christ for their message. The opponents’ “Gospel” message most likely referred to Christ.

In 6:12 Paul describes the rivals as seeking to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ by encouraging the Galatians to be circumcised. The rivals were seeking to be faithful both to the cross of Christ and to their Jewish ethnic identity, or so most interpreters have concluded. Nanos thought, in response, that the uncircumcised Galatian gentiles were claiming “equal and full rights with Jewish people.”\(^\text{48}\) The larger pagan world would have noticed these uncircumcised people claiming the unique privileges of the Jewish community in their avoidance of pagan celebrations and the imperial cult.\(^\text{49}\) The Jewish community would have felt pressure from non-Jews and would have encouraged the gentile Galatians to become full members of the Jewish religion and community by circumcision, lest the gentile Christ-believers jeopardize the Jews’ legal and religious privileges. The “influencers” at Galatia, to use Nanos’ terminology,\(^\text{50}\) wanted to avoid the persecution that the gentiles’ adherence to Paul’s message might bring the Jewish community. In the words of 6:12: “As many who

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\(^{45}\) See Pss. Sol. 11.1; 11QMelch II.15–24; 4Q521 Frag. 2.II.12 as well as the discussion in Nanos, *Irony*, 290–91.

\(^{46}\) See, for instance, Martyn, *Galatians*, 310–12, and Dunn, *Galatians*, 9–10, 41. Dunn found the exclusive use of the singular of the noun “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) throughout the NT as the clincher.

\(^{47}\) Josephus, *J.W.* 2.17.4 § 420 (cited in Nanos, *Irony*, 296, n. 41). He also claimed Philo as support, but Philo uses verbal forms and not the singular form of the noun.

\(^{48}\) Nanos, *Irony*, 265; his full argumentation with respect to 6:12 is on 221–24, 257–71.


\(^{50}\) Nanos, *Irony*, 193–99.
want to present a good face with respect to the flesh—these people are trying to compel you to be circumcised, only in order that they may not be persecuted because of the cross of Christ.” The influencers did not themselves agree with this message of Christ.

Nanos has pointed to the Jewish community’s fear of persecution from the larger, pagan world if the Jews did not properly enforce their group’s boundaries.\(^{51}\) The Jewish influencers feared persecution for the cross of Christ precisely (and ironically) because they did not share faith in Christ. Nanos’ interpretation of 6:12, however, does not adequately account for Paul’s mention of persecution several times earlier in the letter. In each case, the apostle refers to persecuting activity by ethnic Jews and not by non-Jews such as Roman governing officials. In 1:13 Paul narrates how he, as a non-Christ-believing Jew, formerly persecuted the church of God and violently tried to destroy it. The fear of just such persecution from other ethnic Jews led Peter to withdraw from fellowship with the gentile Christ-believers at Antioch in 2:12. In 4:21–31 Paul contrasts the child born as a result of the flesh from the slave woman, the present Jerusalem, with the child born as a result of the Spirit from the free woman, the Jerusalem above; and in 4:29 the child born as a result of the flesh “was persecuting the one [born] as a result of the Spirit.” Paul speaks in 6:17 of the marks of Jesus that he bears in his body, marks which likely correspond to the list in 2 Cor 11:24–25 of the punishments he received from fellow Jews. In view of the entirety of Paul’s letter, the danger of persecution in Gal 6:12 stems from the Jewish community itself rather than from the outside world. Otherwise, he would have needed to explain that another entity is threatening persecution, an entity nowhere else mentioned in the letter. Furthermore, the Roman government did not go about enforcing certain strictures with respect to the various religious movements in the empire. The Romans were typically tolerant of varying practices unless a movement proved seditious. The Nanos thesis founders on the myths associated with the category of *religio licita.*\(^{52}\)

In the absence of any mention of the governing authorities, the influencers must be afraid of persecution from other Jews because of the influencers’ own adherence to the cross of Christ. This threat of persecution because of the cross of Christ is logically *prior* to their advocacy of circumcision. The influencers, according to 6:12, are advocating circumcision for the specific purpose of avoiding the danger of persecution. If the influencers were not Christ-believers,

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\(^{51}\) It is not entirely clear why the Galatian gentile Christians’ claim to share in Israel’s heritage would require their circumcision for the sake of the safety and preservation of the Jewish community when Nanos maintained (in *Mystery*) that there were uncircumcised God-fearers clinging to and accepted by diaspora synagogues in Rome and elsewhere. Why should the gentile Christ-believers at Galatia compromise the safety and status of the Jewish community, whereas gentile God-fearers in Rome did not?

\(^{52}\) See the discussion in Das, *Solving the Romans Debate,* 185–90; contra also Lütgert (*Gesetz und Geist,* 94–106, esp. 98–99), who thought that the rivals were responding to pressure from the local synagogues and that the Galatians sought protection within the *religio licita.*
there would be no danger of persecution from fellow Jews if they failed to com-
pel the Galatian Christians to be circumcised. Conversation and dealings with
Christ-believing gentiles would not, in most instances, cause other Jews to doubt
someone’s loyalty to Judaism.

The situation would be different for Christ-believing Jews whose identity
straddled the line between the Jewish community and an uncircumcised gentile
Christian community. Other members of the Jewish community could accuse
the Jewish-Christians of apostasy since the Christ-believers appeared in their
associations with gentiles to be advocating for a belief system that had aban-
donned Judaism’s central rite of circumcision. Jewish Christ-believers would
have keenly felt the pressure by others in the Jewish community to demonstrate
their allegiance to Judaism. In response, to relieve the pressure they could vig-
orouslly campaign for circumcision among their friends in the gentile Christian
community. Paul’s boasts of the persecution he received for his adherence to
the cross of Christ in Gal 6:17 serve as a foil for other Jewish-Christians who,
from his vantage point, are seeking to avoid persecution for their
adherence to the cross of Christ. The Nanos thesis remains unpersuasive: The rivals were
Jewish-Christians.

Gal 2:15–16 offers additional proof that Paul is interacting with a form of
Jewish-Christianity. These verses may represent Paul’s continued response to
Peter in the situation he describes in 2:11–14, or 2:15–16 may represent Paul’s
own reflections after the Antioch incident for the benefit of the Galatians. Paul
states what “we … Jews by birth” (2:15) would affirm, that is, those Jews who
profess Christ: “We know that a person is justified not by the works of the Law
but [ἐὰν μή] through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). The language to this point
in the verse is ambiguous, which is precisely how “we … Jews” could affirm
the statement, whether Paul, his Jewish-Christian rivals who were listening in,
Peter, Barnabas, or the others at Antioch. The shared affirmation could be taken
in a mutually exclusive sense: No one is justified by the works of the Law, but
rather a person is justified by faith in/of Christ. Paul would certainly take the

53 Nanos (Irony, 222) critiqued this approach to the letter as positing
Christ-believing Jews who transparently lack sufficient loyalty to the norms of the
Christ-believing coalition so as to avoid suffering for what they believe in, the crucified
Jesus, which conviction, at the same time, forms the basis for the concerted effort that
the influencers make toward the addresses in order to preserve the interest of those
who share this faith in the face of pressure from those who do not.

The problem with Nanos’s critique is that he (ironically) does not sufficiently recognize that
this is polemical language. The influencers believed that gentile Christian identity must be
accompanied by adherence to the Law of Moses. For Paul, this is a denial of the new state of
affairs that Christ has brought about for the gentiles. The influencers are effectively denying
Christ’s work. It is Paul’s claim that they lack sufficient loyalty to the norms of the Christ-
believing coalition (as he understood it!). The influencers themselves would have viewed the
situation differently.

54 Interpreters through the centuries have found the Christian identity of the influencers the more
natural reading. It is also the simpler reading since it does not require the positing of an addi-
tional group not mentioned within the text, namely, the pagan authorities.
affirmation that way. The affirmation could also be saying that no one is justified by the works of the Law _except_ through faith in/of Christ, and then one _is_ justified by the works of the Law. In that case, the Law and faith in/of Christ would be _complementary_. Paul’s rivals, in their emphasis on Law observance, would have taken the affirmation _that_ way. The ambiguity of the affirmation is precisely how Jewish Christians in the various camps could agree. By the end of 2:16, however, Paul clearly interprets the affirmation in a manner in which faith in/of Christ and the works of the Law are mutually exclusive. Gal 2:16 therefore comes across as a little redundant, but that apparent redundancy is a function of Paul’s need to clarify his initial formulation. To summarize the point, “we … Jews” are clearly Christ-believers: “Even we ourselves believed” (2:16).

Paul refers to the rivals in the third person (1:7; 3:1; 4:17; 5:7–12; 6:12–13) and the Galatians in the second person (e.g., 1:6, 11; 3:1; 4:12). He distinguishes the groups so sharply (e.g., 3:1) that one might get the impression, with many commentators, that the rival teachers are outsiders who have only recently entered into the midst of the Galatian congregations. Francis Watson even thought that the rival teachers at Galatia were the same “men from James” who had come from Jerusalem to Antioch (2:11–14). While Paul may give the impression that the rivals are outsiders perhaps associated with Jerusalem, that impression could be a consequence of the polemical language he is employing and may or may not reflect the actual circumstances. The apostle never identifies his rivals as non-Galatians. The same people need not be responsible for the events in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia. A connection with Jerusalem is uncertain for the people whom Paul is confronting at Galatia. He never links the Galatian rivals with James, whom he otherwise esteems (1:19; 2:1–10). Whether a group from other lands or from the synagogues within Galatia, Paul treats the rivals as outsiders relative to the Galatian Christians’ assemblies. Gal 4:21–31, however, offers some evidence that the rival missionaries were from outside Galatia after all. Paul refers to himself as a mother giving birth in 4:19 just before turning to two mothers who give birth in 4:21–31. He seems to be contrasting two missionary movements to the gentiles, his own and that of the rivals. Thus “you” are Galatians in 3:1, but the same is never said of “those” people (5:12).

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55 See the more detailed defense of this reading of 2:16 in the commentary.
56 Jewett, “Agitators,” 204.
57 Watson, _Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles_ (1986), 59–61. Watson (_Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles_ [2007], 113) has since recognized that his original thesis is not the most likely.
58 Barclay, _Obeying the Truth_, 43–44, n. 18; Barclay doubted Watson’s theory that James had sent the rivals to Galatia. Had that been the case, Paul would not have stopped at a potentially ironical comment about James as one of the “pillars” in 2:9; see also 2:2, 6. See the commentary on those verses in which the description of James need entail no denigration.
59 Such outsiders are more likely in south Galatia; see discussion of the north/south Galatia problem in “The Addressees of the Letter” below in the introduction.
60 On the more difficult question of whether “the circumcised” are Jews or Judaizing gentile converts to Judaism (perhaps even the Galatians themselves), see the commentary on 6:13.
Naming the Rivals at Galatia

Traditional interpreters of the letter viewed Paul as confronting legalists. For instance, the Lutheran interpreter Lenski virtually equated “Judaistic circumcision and … legalism.” He wrote:

At one time this was a great issue, namely when the gospel advanced from the Jews to the Gentiles; it is now dead save as it involves the great principle set forth by Paul that all legalism is abolished root and branch by gospel liberty. The church is still troubled on this score and men like Paul and Luther are needed to keep it free. The present-day Jews, of course, still circumcise, but they in no way affect the church.

Lenski later added: “At the heart of their fatal legalism is circumcision. If they could keep their legalism, if they could put into the cross something that is not atonement but only example, a great model, a so-called inspiration, the Jews would adopt the cross.”

Many interpreters in prior generations were of the opinion that Judaism, including the form of Jewish Christianity Paul opposed at Galatia, was a religion of “works righteousness” as the Jews sought to gain God’s favor by their good works. Paul, for his part, never identifies a problem with “works righteousness” as such. His concern is far more fundamental. The Law simply does not save (2:21; 3:21). God saves only through the work of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Jews of Paul’s day were of varying convictions on the role of works. Rarely, however, did they think that a person must obey God’s Law perfectly to be saved. One finds this perspective in a handful of apocalyptic documents either from the diaspora or after the war against Rome in AD 66–70.

The vast majority of Jews were of the position that God saved the people of Israel at the point of his election of the people. Their observance of the Law was simply a confession and response to God’s gracious election. They recognized that their obedience was not perfect but relied on God’s mercy in repentance and, perhaps also, atoning sacrifice. The Jews did not typically agonize over their sins. The rival teachers at Galatia viewed Moses’ Law and faith in/of Christ as complementary. They did not deny Christ’s saving work. Paul, however, realized that their pressure on the gentiles to observe the Law effectively rendered the Law as of the same importance as faith in/of Christ for salvation.

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62 Lenski, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 260; see also, esp., 254.
64 See the discussion in Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*, 1–69.
65 This was the point emphasized by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which built on the work of the Jewish scholars of Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism in the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.
66 See the discussion of these matters in the commentary on 2:16 and 3:10; see also Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant*, 145–70, and Das, “Paul and Works of Obedience.” On “soft” versus “hard” legalism, see Das, “Paul and the Law,” 102–3.
They were demanding that the gentiles observe the Law as somehow necessary. In doing so, they had, whether intentionally or not, denied Christ’s saving work as sufficient for a person’s salvation.⁶⁷ “Legalists” would not, in that case, be a good term for those influencing the Galatians.⁶⁸

Even as “legalists” is an inappropriate term for the people who have come into the Galatians’ midst, the term “Judaizers” must also be abandoned. “Judaizers” wrongly gives the impression that Paul’s struggle was somehow with Judaism. The letter to the Galatians is a testimony to a struggle between two different (and ultimately incompatible) Jewish understandings of Christ’s Gospel.⁶⁹ Of course, Paul would ultimately deny the label “Christian” to the outsiders at Galatia (1:8–9). They nevertheless understood their message as the “Gospel” of Jesus Christ. To “Judaize” in English also bears the sense of pressuring someone to accept the Jewish Law, whether in part or its entirety. The verb “Judaize” in the Greek (ἰουδαίζω, 2:14), on the other hand, means to adopt Jewish practices and not to force people to become Jewish. Those who “Judaize” in 2:14 are not converting others but are themselves adopting a Law-observant lifestyle. The Greek word may simply mean to “live like a Jew.” Furthermore, “Judaize” tends to convey in English a sense of legalism. The rivals were not legalists in the strict sense because they recognized faith in/of Christ as a necessity. They had combined Moses’ Law with a system of grace in Jesus Christ. Paul will dispute that combination as depriving faith in/of Christ of its significance and value. Again, Second Temple Judaism was incredibly diverse, and while some segments may justifiably be labeled “legalistic,” other Second Temple Jews operated with a profound sense of God’s gracious dealings. “Judaizers” is therefore too problematic a term as well for the rival teachers at Galatia.

J. Louis Martyn preferred the word “Teachers,” but Paul’s rivals were not just teachers.⁷⁰ They intended for the Galatians to become adherents of the Jewish way of life. The Galatians would have to leave behind their former social networks and adhere to the Jewish people. Nanos preferred the term “influencers,”⁷¹ and that is certainly true in what it affirms. They were attempting to persuade and influence the Galatians. Influence may be positive or negative.

⁶⁷ See the discussion of these matters further in the commentary on 2:16.
⁶⁸ The rival teachers were, however, cultural imperialists; with McKnight, Galatians, 304–5. Likewise Dunn, Galatians, 265: “Circumcision became, in effect, a means of Jewish ideological and nationalistic imperialism.” The rival teachers thought that all people needed to become Jewish in order to follow Christ and thereby be saved. Missionaries these days at times likewise can inadvertently be guilty of cultural imperialism. Sometimes the Gospel is shared with a healthy dose of Western culture. The missionary must recognize what is essential to the Gospel message and the Scriptural witness and what is cultural adiaphora, that is, matters of indifference.
James D. G. Dunn called them “missionaries.”\(^{72}\) Like Nanos’ “influencers,” this too is an unobjectionable proposal. Although the missionaries may well have viewed their message as complementing Paul’s teaching, the apostle nevertheless treats them as a rival missionary group. They are rival persuaders. They are rival influencers. Even those who use the terminology of “rivals” or “rival teachers” must, again, be cognizant that while Paul would certainly consider the Galatian outsiders his opponents, they may well have viewed their Law-observant message as supplemental and compatible with Paul’s previous teaching. They may simply have thought that they were correcting an oversight, albeit a critical one, on Paul’s part.

### The Attraction of the Rivals’ Message

The rivals’ Christ-plus-Law approach is in many ways an attractive position—not the least of which, they could point to the support of the ancient Jewish Scriptures. The Christ movement would have been perceived as a new-fangled superstitio, but the Jewish faith and its Mosaic heritage were respectively well-established and ancient.\(^{73}\) Repeatedly, Paul finds himself reinterpreting Scriptural proof texts that, on the surface and apart from a fuller context, appear to support the rival position. The Mosaic Law came from God at Mount Sinai and represents his will. Paul hesitates to admit as much in his response. In 3:19–20 Paul writes: “Why then the Law? It was added for the sake of transgressions, until the Seed for whom it had been promised should come, and it was arranged through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now the mediator is not of one, but God is one.” The apostle does not deny the divine origin of the Law (thus 3:21), but he nevertheless distances the Law from God as the product of mediation through a multiplicity of angels and a mediatorial figure.

Most attractive of all, the Mosaic Law offered a concrete approach to the Christian life to replace the structure provided by the Galatians’ former habits as a religious people, albeit non-Christian. In accepting Paul’s message, they had parted ways with the longstanding, accepted deities in their communities. They were departing from the religious convictions shared by family members, other members of their professional associations, and from the official, civic expressions of divine truth.\(^{74}\) Their former lives as pagans had been structured

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\(^{72}\) Dunn, *Galatians*, 11.


\(^{74}\) The Galatians had dissociated themselves from their family and friends in abandoning the pagan deities. This often led to the social ostracism of the Christians.
by ritual processions, ceremonies, and observances, but now they faced what A. D. Nock called “the ever-present loss of social amenities, club life, and festivals.”

Business, social, and civic loyalties had been compromised. The Galatian Christians would have been socially adrift. The rivals were filling the void with the concrete structure and direction of Moses’ Law. The structure would be similar to that practiced in the synagogues.

Honoring and responding to God in days, months, seasons, years, and rituals would simply have made sense to former pagans. The Jewish rites would have reinforced their sense of identity as God’s people.

Paul must therefore devote substantial space in the letter to how Christians are to live (5:13–6:10). He sandwiches these instructions between two sections that confront the demand for circumcision (5:1–12; 6:11–18). The positive instructions are likely a response to the rival guidance from Moses’ Law. The rivals may even have faulted Paul for inadequate instruction in the Christian life. Paul will respond in 5:13–6:10 with the power of God’s Spirit, the only effective solution to the power of the flesh. The apostle is not overly detailed in his comments, e.g., “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23). The point is that those living by the Spirit will thereby fulfill the Law (5:13–14), “the Law of Christ” (6:2). In response to the rivals’ teaching, then, Paul is not only concerned with how one enters a right relationship with God (2:15–16; the contrasting births in 4:21–31) but also with the nature of the ongoing Christian life. Sometimes interpreters phrase these emphases as an either/or, but Paul views both entry into a right standing with God and the Christian life as of importance. As heirs with Christ, the Galatians have received the benefit of the Spirit.

Paul’s Apocalyptic Message and Its Reception

God’s powerful Spirit is proof that a new age has invaded the cosmos. Paul’s thinking in this letter is ultimately framed by an apocalyptic perspective. The

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75 Nock, Conversion, 156; see also Barclay, Obeying the Truth, 58, 60.
76 Cf. Josephus, Ag. Ap. 2.16 § 171: “Religion governs all our actions and occupations and speech; none of these things did our lawmaker leave unexamined or indeterminate” (Thackeray, LCL).
77 So also George, Galatians, 356.
78 Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 130. Ebeling (Truth, 251) described a “deep sense of insecurity as to where to find a firm anchor for life, in the face of such totally unaccustomed freedom, after the chains were removed that held the Galatians captive but also provided support. The vertigo that could result from freedom understandably made them vulnerable to an offer to fill the void by means of the Jewish Torah.”
80 For a more thorough summary of Paul’s approach to ethics in the letter to the Galatians, see Das, “Galatians.”
The Situation at Galatia

rivals’ advocacy of the Law places them squarely in the age of Moses and in an age that has passed away with Christ’s coming. Christ’s saving work has radically altered the way Moses’ Law is to be understood in this new era.81 The benefit of being a co-heir with Christ includes the inheritance of the Spirit, and that is where the rivals failed. By not recognizing what time it is, that is, by not recognizing the new era that has come in Christ and his Spirit, they have deprived themselves of the crucial power to combat the flesh.

The Galatians will fail as well if they adopt the rival teaching. They will have compromised the saving value of faith in/of Christ. They will have surrendered their inheritance of the Spirit. Ultimately, they will have reestablished the boundary between Jew and gentile that was overcome by the Gospel message that Paul first brought them. The message that once included them will turn into a message that excludes as they return to “the present evil age” (1:4). The entire letter is therefore a response to the threat posed by the rival teachers.82

Some interpreters have concluded that Paul failed to persuade the Galatians. This conclusion is unlikely. The letter to the Galatians must have had an impact since it was treasured and preserved for future generations. The rivals’ insistence on gentile circumcision and Law observance does not seem to be an issue in Paul’s subsequent letters. Regardless of the outcome of the dispute at Antioch in 2:11–14 (also 2:15–21?), the issue seems to have subsided relatively quickly. Christian identity would be based solely on adherence to the cross of Christ. Paul may have lost some battles along the way, but he seems to have won this particular war.83

81 See excursus 1, “Paul’s Apocalyptic Worldview,” after the commentary on 1:1–5. At the same time, Paul is not antinomian; see the commentary on 5:14 and 6:2.
83 With de Boer, Galatians, 411.
Galatians 1:1–5

Epistolary Prescript

Translation

1 Paul, an apostle not from human beings, nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—2 and all the brothers with me, to the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory unto the ages of the ages. Amen.

Textual Notes

1:1 ἀπ᾽ ἀνθρώπων … δι᾽ ἀνθρώπου ("from human beings … through a human being")—Some commentators distinguish in meaning between the two prepositions (ἀπό and διά) since there is very little semantic overlap between them. Paul also varies the number of the noun. Perhaps he is distinguishing the source of authority ("human beings") from the agent ("a human being," e.g., Peter in 1:18?). On the other hand, Paul only employs διά ("through") to express the corresponding positive assertion (διά Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ … , "through Jesus Christ …"). "The use of a second preposition [διά, after ἀπό] may have been motivated by a desire to accent the denial rather than by a need to specify two aspects of authority." The context does not suggest any real distinction in the meaning of the prepositions.

1:3 πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου ("our Father and the Lord")—This reading is supported by A P Ψ 33 81 (see also Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Philemon 3), but several notable witnesses have πατρὸς καὶ κυρίον ἡμῶν ("Father and our Lord," ἐξέληται). Out of reverence, scribes may have shifted the pronoun to modify the "Lord," Christ.

1:4 ὑπέρ ("for")—External evidence supports both ὑπέρ (Ψ B H 33) and περί ("for," A D G K P Μ). ὑπέρ should be preferred on internal grounds since Paul will explicate Jesus’ saving work in 3:13 with that preposition. Although Paul employs both prepositions with the same meaning ("concerning, on behalf of"); BDF § 229 [1]), he uses ὑπέρ more frequently, and particularly with reference to Christ’s action on behalf of humanity.

ἐξέληται ("rescue")—The rescue or deliverance could refer grammatically to the future but also to the present. The emphasis in the letter is on potent, present realities

1 Silva, Explorations, 54. The two prepositions are likely an instance of "semantic neutralization" (pp. 53–54).

2 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 520. The external attestation for the omission of the personal pronoun (πατρός καὶ κυρίον, "Father and Lord") is weaker (none of the uncials). Two personal pronouns (πατρός ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίον ἡμῶν) is even more weakly attested (copeth).
(e.g., 4:1–6) but not at the expense of what is still to come (e.g., 5:5). The first person pronouns (“our Father,” 1:3; “our sins,” “us,” 1:4) include the Galatians in this deliverance from the “present” (ἐνεστῶτος) evil age.3

Commentary

A typical Greco-Roman letter would commence with (1) an identification of the sender; (2) an identification of the recipient(s); and (3) a greeting formula.4 The letter to the Galatians might therefore have begun “Paul and all the brothers with me, to the churches of Galatia, greetings.” Paul does not stop there as he places his own stamp on the epistolary prescripts of his letters:5

1. Sender formula
   a. Name of sender
   b. Title (e.g., “apostle,” “servant”) 
   c. Brief description of the source of the apostleship or servanthood (missing only in the Thessalonian correspondence)

2. Recipient formula
   a. Designation of the recipient(s)—usually with the word “assembly” (ἐκκλησία) along with the city or region where it is located
   b. Brief phrase describing the recipients’ relationship to God and/or Christ

3. Greeting formula
   a. Greeting—“grace and peace”
   b. Recipient(s) (“to you”)
   c. Divine source, including the Lord Jesus Christ

Since beginnings, like endings, are crucial moments in any act of communication, each Pauline letter bears its own unique features. Paul expands the Galatians epistolary prescript especially in the sender and greeting formulas. These theologically loaded expansions signal important emphases that will dominate the letter’s body.

The Senders and the Recipients (1:1–2)

1:1 Paul. Paul identifies himself by name in the sender formula. Luke’s book of Acts notes that Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37–38; 22:25–29). Many Roman citizens would have a Greek name as a cognomen or surname, as does “Paul.”6 Paul would also have had a family or clan name (his nomen) and a personal name (the praenomen), although he does not identify them. Had he also mentioned his nomen or praenomen, he would have betrayed himself as a Roman citizen. Paul may not want to draw attention to his status.

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3 De Boer, Galatians, 36.
5 The following outline is adapted from Weima, “Preaching the Gospel in Rome,” 338–39. On the programmatic nature of the Galatians opening, see also Cook, “Prescript.”
6 Longenecker, Galatians, 2.
in this “present evil age” (1:4) was of less importance to him than status in the
new age that had begun in Christ.\(^7\) Such a value system is worthy of emula-
tion today!

Luke further reports that Paul had a Jewish name befitting one born of the
tribe of Benjamin, “Saul” (Acts 9:1; see also Phil 3:5). Saul was also the name
of the first king of Israel who had hailed from Benjamin (1 Sam 9:1–2). Many
people wonder if the apostle changed his name since Luke refers to him as
Saul before Acts 13 and as Paul after that point. Although that is a possibility,
Luke never narrates an actual change of name. Paul may well have had both
names from childhood since diaspora Jews would sometimes bear both a Jewish/
Hebrew name and a Greek name (e.g., Jesus Justus in Col 4:11).\(^8\) The Greek
name would permit a Jewish person to function more effectively in the larger
society. “Saul” (σαῦλος) in the Greek language conveyed the loose, wanton
gait of courtesans or drunken Bacchantes, whereas the homophone “Paul” was
a very common and accepted Greek name.\(^9\) Throughout his correspondence,
Paul never refers to his Jewish name. In the book of Acts, the shift in names
coincides with the very first instance of the Jews’ rejection of Paul’s preaching
of Christ (Acts 13). That rejection forced Paul and his companions to turn to
the gentiles, who received their message with great enthusiasm. Luke narrates
the same pattern of Jewish rejection and gentile acceptance in Acts 18, 19, and
28. As Paul writes to gentile congregations (Gal 4:8–9: former idol worshipers),
how appropriate, then, that he should identify himself by his Roman cognome
men. He wanted to be known as “Paul,” the apostle to the gentiles, rather than
as Saul the Hebrew (Phil 3:5).\(^10\) “To the Jews I became as a Jew so that I might
gain Jews … to those outside the Law [I became] as one outside the Law … so
that I might gain those outside the Law” (1 Cor 9:20–21).

An apostle. Paul immediately identifies himself appositionally as an “apostle”
(ἀπόστολος), one who is sent (ἀποστέλλω). A technical use of the term
“apostle” is without precedent in Greek and Hellenistic Jewish literature before
and after the “apostolic” era.\(^11\) The dearth of non-Christian parallels has led
some to conclude that a Hebrew or Aramaic concept must stand behind the NT’s
use of the word “apostle.” The first Christians may have been drawing upon the
Hebrew word נְזָרָא, shaliach (or נְזָרְאָה, shaluach), which could be translated as
“apostle” (3 Kgdms 14:6 [LXX A; MT/ET 1 Ki 14:6]). The rabbinic Mishnah
states about such an envoy that “a man’s agent is like to himself” (m. Ber. 5.5
[trans. H. Danby]). An agent could act on his sender’s behalf in business trans-
actions (b. B. Qam. 102a–b), marriage agreements (m. Qidd. 2.1; m. Git. 3.6;
4.1), or even ceremonial rituals (m. Ter. 4.4). Perhaps the Jewish institution

\(^7\) See excursus 1, “Paul’s Apocalyptic Worldview,” after this pericope.

\(^8\) Martyn, Galatians, 82.


\(^10\) Dunn, Galatians, 24.

\(^11\) Longenecker, Galatians, 2.
of *shaliach* served as the basis for the early Christian notion of an “apostle.”

The first Christian churches were sending out “apostles” to act on their behalf (2 Cor 8:23; cf. Phil 2:25) even as the church of Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2–4; cf. Acts 14:4, 14). On the other hand, the Jewish *shaliach* was never used in a missionary context. The NT usage appears unique. The rabbinc texts that speak of the *shaliach* are also from an era long after Paul’s. Gal 1:1 remains clear with or without an allusion to the *shaliach*: Paul acts and writes as Christ’s own agent!

The uniqueness of early Christian usage may account for why Paul modifies “apostle” in his letters—with a genitive in 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 1:1 and with a participle in Rom 1:1. In Gal 1:1 he explains the word “apostle” by means of three prepositional phrases that draw attention to the verbal meaning of “one who is sent.” Paul stresses that he has been sent not through the agency of human beings but rather “through Jesus Christ and God the Father.” Luke tends to reserve the term “apostle” for the Twelve (e.g., Acts 1:26), but he does depart from that pattern in the case of the missionaries Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14). Paul, in his letters, uses the term “apostle” more broadly than the Twelve (see 1 Cor 15:7, 9). He is an apostle because he has seen the risen Christ (1 Cor 9:1–2) and has been directly commissioned to serve as the Lord’s messenger (Gal 1:15–17). To fail to heed the apostle’s message is to disrespect the one who commissioned and sent him. Paul is clear elsewhere that to receive his Gospel message properly one must recognize it for what it really is, the message not of a human being but of God (1 Thess 2:13)!

Paul also uses the term “apostle” for itinerant missionaries such as Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thess 1:1 [Paul, Silvanus, Timothy]; 1 Thess 2:7 [ET 2:6b; “we” “apostles of Christ”]; cf. Did. 11.3–6). He recognizes “apostles” who are messengers or emissaries of particular churches (e.g., Phil 2:25: “your” apostle; 2 Cor 8:23). The uniqueness of the term to early Christianity and Paul’s own flexibility of usage may have required that he clarify what he meant by the term. Indeed, such clarification quickly follows in Gal 1:1. The third Greek word in the letter to the Galatians is a negative, “not” (οὐκ). This negative is succeeded by yet another in the following phrase, “nor” (οὐδὲ). These negatives draw attention to themselves. What motivated this emphasis on what apostleship is not? Many throughout the history of interpretation have assumed that Paul must have been responding to attacks on his apostolic office or credentials as somehow dependent on those human beings who had commissioned him.

13 As Luther put it: “By the name of the office [the reader] should be drawn at once to Him who does the sending, to Him who authorizes it” (AE 27:163).
14 Although Hellenistic letter openings tended to be brief (Van Voorst, “Thanksgiving Period,” 167), Paul must digress to explain the term “apostle,” and that explanation is polemical only insofar as Paul wants his hearers to agree with his message in the face of a competing one; contra Van Voorst.
While this interpretation is possible, the assumption in 1:1 of an attack by his Galatian rivals is unnecessary. Paul simply had to describe what he meant by the term “apostle” for his gentile listeners. He is not functioning as an emissary of the church in Syrian Antioch or of the church in Jerusalem. His is not a limited or a specific or even a temporary commission. Paul, rather, is acting on behalf of none other than God and Jesus Christ.

Paul uses the noun “apostle” or one of its cognate forms only four times throughout the entire letter (1:1, 17, 19; 2:8). By way of contrast, he will employ the word “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) or its cognate verb form fourteen times in Galatians (1:6, 7, 8 [twice], 9, 11 [twice], 16, 23; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; 4:13). He uses the verb “gospelize” (εὐαγγελίζω)—to translate the verb similarly to the noun—six times in Galatians 1. In fact, seven of the nineteen Pauline instances of this verb are in Galatians. Such statistics suggest that Paul is not overly concerned about his apostleship. What is important to him is the Gospel message. A proper understanding of God’s revelation to him and his subsequent apostolic ministry is essential preparation for the Galatians to receive that Gospel message. Unnecessary and excessive mirror-reading has plagued Galatians scholarship through the years. One need not assume that Paul’s rivals at Galatia were impugning his apostolic credentials. Paul is not trying to demonstrate his independence of Jerusalem. If that were the case, he would be undercutting his own defense when he narrates his meeting in Jerusalem with the pillars, his laying before them his Gospel message, and his seeking their support lest he had run in vain (2:2). They recognized him (2:7–9), and he agreed to their request to remember the poor (2:10). All the talk of Paul’s “independence” betrays a modern, Western cultural value system that would likely have been alien to Paul. Further, had Paul’s rivals denigrated his dependence on Jerusalem, they would

16 Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 71. On the identity of Paul’s rivals, see “The Galatians and the Rivals as Reconstructed from the Letter” in “The Situation at Galatia” in the introduction.
18 Contrary to a venerable tradition going back to Chrysostom, Comm. Gal. (NPNF² 13:2–3; see Gaventa, “Galatians 1 and 2,” 310, n. 2); Schütz, Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority, 127–28.
19 See the discussion of Galatians in Das, “Pauline Letters,” to which I am here indebted. Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 71: “There is not a shred of evidence that the Galatians had ceased to recognize Paul’s apostolic authority, or even necessarily that the ‘agitators’ had questioned that authority”; contra, e.g., Schreiner, Galatians, 74. Wiarda (“Plot and Character,” 231–34) helpfully outlined advocates of the varying approaches. Paul may well be responding to charges, although the evidence for this position is not as strong as it may initially seem. Wiarda’s essay is a balanced assessment that tracks how Paul is not just presenting himself as an example but is especially clarifying for the Galatians the divine origin of his Gospel message. Paul is providing the necessary warrants to hearken to the content of the letter in the face of a competing agenda.
have simultaneously been denigrating their own ties to that center of authority. Paul is not shy about referring to attacks when he has experienced them (cf. 2 Cor 10:10–11; 11:5–6, 12–13). Excessive mirror-reading should not lead the reader’s attention away from what is central in this letter: the Gospel message!

Not from human beings, nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father. Paul is adamant that he was not sent by human beings but rather “through Jesus Christ and God the Father.” He expands the sender formula in order to issue a double negation followed by an affirmation. The anarthrous genitive nouns “human beings” (lit. “men”; ἀνθρώπων) and “human being” (lit. “man”; ἀνθρώπου) in the negations are qualitative; one might translate “of human origin” (as opposed to divine origin). This contrast of agencies is the first instance of a pattern discernable throughout the letter. Paul regularly juxtaposes and contrasts God’s action with the actions of human beings. The contrast of agency here in 1:1 foreshadows one of the chief problems for Paul in this letter, the matter of human activity or works taking precedence over God’s saving action. Paul’s twofold negation in 1:1 is reminiscent of Amos 7:14–15: “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son. But I am a herdsman … and the Lord took me …” According to Philo, Moses declares of his call: “Nor did I receive the office through appointment by some other of mankind, but when God by plain oracles … made clear to me His will …” (Virt. 10 § 63 [Colson, LCL]). Paul’s call appears to be analogous. Certainly his call is just as direct. The impression of a prophetic call is reinforced in Gal 1:15.

Jesus Christ’s agency in Paul’s call stands parallel to God’s agency and in contrast to human agency, any human agency. Jesus’ authority and agency therefore surpasses even Moses’ as a human being (3:19–20: via angels?). Note that Paul does not describe the call as “through [διά] Christ from [ἀπό] the Father.” As the earliest NT author, Paul already attests a very high Christology with Christ on par with God the Father. His apostolic call is “through” (διά) both “Jesus Christ and God the Father.” That one preposition (διά) governs both Jesus and the Father. Paul does not distinguish Jesus Christ’s call from God the Father’s. By identifying Jesus Christ before God the Father in 1:1, Paul reverses the order he typically uses in his letters (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Phil 1:2). Perhaps he is anticipating the narration later in the chapter of his

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22 On the dangers of mirror-reading, see “The Necessity of a Critical Methodology for Mirror-Reading” in “The Situation at Galatia” in the introduction.
23 Burton, Galatians, 4.
24 Longenecker, Galatians, 5. Vos, “Paul’s Argumentation,” 171: “The divine authorization of the apostle is the decisive argument against the other gospel [1:6]. Paul’s self-presentation in Gal 1:1 is the starting point not of a defensive but of an offensive sort of argument: he first strengthened his position as an envoy of God before he launched his attack on the opponents.”
25 Burton, Galatians, 4–5. Paul may have employed διά, “through” (and not ἀπό, “from,” or ὑπό, “by”) in order exclude the possibility of human mediation of a call that is directly from God; Lenski, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 23.
encounter with the risen Jesus. The attribution of his apostolic call to Jesus Christ as well is unique to Gal 1:1 in the Pauline corpus (cf. God alone in 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1). “Christ” functions at this point like a proper name and is not likely a titular reference to his messianic role. Paul’s call by Christ is surely the ultimate qualification to preach the Gospel of Christ. The Galatians should heed Paul rather than the rivals! Whereas the rivals derive their authority from the human leaders in Jerusalem, Paul derives his authority directly from Jesus Christ and God the Father—strong claims indeed placed at the very beginning of the letter.

Another emphasis of the letter is signaled in 1:1 by “God the Father.” Paul will refer to God the Father a second time in 1:3 (“God our Father”) and yet a third time in 1:4. The metaphorical kinship of the Galatians as children of God is a central organizing concept. The letter is filled with references to familial relations. The Galatian rivals had claimed that God’s children are to be identified with the children of Abraham and that the males must therefore be marked by circumcision. Paul disputes that claim. The Galatian gentiles are already the “sons” of Abraham and of God by virtue of believing as Abraham believed (3:6–7: υἱοί). “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed” (3:29: σπέρμα). The Galatians are no longer minors and heirs under guardians and trustees (4:1–3) but have come of age. They have inherited the full rights and privileges of sonship. The Galatian gentiles are the beneficiaries of “adoption” (4:5: υἱοθεσία) as “sons” (4:6: υἱοί) who may call God “Abba, Father” (4:6: ὁ πατήρ; cf. Jesus’ true family in Mt 12:46–50 || Mk 3:31–35 || Lk 8:19–21).

With the Galatians’ step backwards, Paul laments in 4:19 that he is again in the pains of labor over “my little children” (τέκνα μου). He proceeds to speak metaphorically of children birthed by the free woman and children birthed by the slave woman. These women and their children stand for his gentile mission as opposed to his rivals’ mission. The free woman is the Jerusalem above and she is “our mother” (4:21–26). The child of the slave will not share the inheritance (4:30; cf. the “false brothers” of 2:4). As “children of promise” (4:28), the Galatians should care for each other in love (5:16–6:10). They are members, after all, of “the household of faith” (τοὺς οἰκείους τῆς πίστεως, 6:10). Paul

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26 Longenecker, Galatians, 5.

27 On the degree to which Paul manifests a titular, messianic understanding of “Christ,” see excursus 2, “ ‘Christ’: Messianic Title or Proper Name? A Third Option?” after this pericope. Unfortunately, the modern reader of Paul’s letter to the Galatians does not have access to the apostle’s prior teaching at Galatia when he first introduced Jesus Christ.

28 Jervis, Galatians, 32.

29 Withington, Grace in Galatia, 73. Again, this need not imply an attack on Paul, just a strong reason why his letter should be heeded (Betz, Galatians, 39; Matera, Galatians, 41).

30 The organizing concept for Rhoads, “Children of Abraham.”
closes his letter to the Galatians with one last familial address to his “brothers (and sisters)” (6:18; cf. 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1). 31

How many Christians today find their true family and home among fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? Believers in Christ should view other Christians as their kin, their own family members. Surely such an understanding of “family” would lead to expressions of concrete, loving action toward fellow members of the family of faith (cf. 5:16–6:10). Christians share the same Father!

Who raised him from the dead. Jewish males prayed in the (pre-Christian) second benediction of the Amidah (or Shemoneh Esre, “Eighteen Benedictions”): “Thou art mighty … that livest for ever, that raiseth the dead, … that quickeneth the dead. … Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead!” 32 Paul shared this belief in the resurrection to come. In fact, that age to come had already dawned with the resurrection of Jesus Christ by God the Father (1:1; cf. the “new creation” of 6:15; cf. 1 Sam 2:6; Is 26:19; Ezek 37:1–14; Dan 12:1–3). For Paul, God’s raising of Jesus from the dead demonstrated life-giving power, the very same power already at work in the Galatians’ midst, quite in contrast to the life-sapping, deadening message of his rivals (e.g., 2:20!). Although Paul does not explicitly mention the resurrection elsewhere in his letter to the Galatians, his apocalyptic theology presupposes it. 33 God’s raising Christ from the dead was the initiating event for the “new creation” (6:15). 34 The very same power that raised Christ from the dead worked in Paul’s life to raise him from the darkness and death of unbelief. 35 Christ’s resurrection presages God’s powerful work on behalf of believers both in this life and at the Last Day. This epistle is full of acclaim for the saving power of God!

Paul can barely introduce God without immediately adding that he raised Jesus Christ from the dead. 36 God is first of all the Father of Christ (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–17; Ps 2:7–9; Gal 4:6). God first raised Christ from the dead. God’s action in Jesus Christ is “the primal mark of [God’s] identity” and self-revelation. 37 Christ is therefore the means by which God is to be understood and approached. Paul does not do “theology” in the abstract. The Pauline Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only valid approach to God.

31 God is Israel’s husband or father in Is 45:10; 63:16; Hos 1:10 (MT 2:1) (or mother: Is 42:14; 45:10; 49:14–15). Israel is a mother or the bride of God in Is 50:1–3; 54:1–10; Jeremiah 2–3; Hosea 1–3; see Darr, Isaiah’s Vision; Abma, Bonds of Love.
32 Ferguson, Backgrounds, 542–53; translation by Ferguson of the Palestinian recension.
33 See excursus 1, “Paul’s Apocalyptic Worldview,” after this pericope.
34 See the important corrective of Bryant, Risen Crucified Christ, 143–61. The living Christ is “in” Paul (2:20)—indeed in all believers!
35 Lenski, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 24. The risen Christ called Paul to be an apostle; Ebeling, Truth, 17; cf. 2:6 in relation to experience of the earthly ministry of Jesus.
36 Apart from Romans (1:4) and Galatians, Paul’s epistolary greetings do not stress Jesus’ resurrection. Paul is signaling a key emphasis of the letter.
37 Martyn, Galatians, 85.
1:2 And all the brothers with me. Paul identifies his co-senders as “all the brothers with me”; he uses similar language in Phil 4:21–22. These are most likely Paul’s missionary companions. Although Barnabas had helped found the Galatian congregations in Acts 13–14, the Antioch dispute that Paul narrates in Gal 2:11–14 may have left its mark. At Antioch Barnabas had sided with the men from James. Here Paul, as he writes, does not single out Barnabas among “the brothers” who are his co-senders. On the other hand, to name any of the other “brothers” who served as co-senders may have been beside the point. This is not Paul’s own Gospel message or any other human being’s. What is important is not the messenger but rather the Gospel itself. Certainly Paul will speak in 1:6–9 in the first person singular of the message he personally preached to the Galatians, but one should not draw the wrong conclusion from that. What he preached was not his own but the Gospel that even he himself must not contradict. This is a Gospel confessed by “all the brothers with me.”

Of course, if all the brothers stand behind this Gospel message, what about those who dispute the Gospel message? Would Paul call them “brothers”? In the very next breath (1:6–9), Paul pronounces a curse on any who would speak against the Gospel message. This emphasis on the Gospel message is at odds with any ministry that has devolved into a personality cult based on an individual. Genuine ministry is grounded primarily in the Gospel, and not in the charisma or charm of a minister. It is about the message, not the messenger! Egocentrism has no place in ministry.

To the churches of Galatia. Paul addresses the audience as simply “the churches of Galatia.” “Galatia” most likely refers to the churches founded in Acts 13–14 within the Roman province of that name. The plural “churches” (ἐκκλησίαι) is what one would expect to be used for the Christ-believing assemblies throughout that region. Paul’s circular letter would have been taken and read in the various gatherings for worship (note the autograph in 6:11). The translation “churches” may, however, be somewhat anachronistic. The modern person uses the word “church” on the basis of two thousand years of intervening history. Paul does not have buildings or organs or later forms of liturgy in mind. He is writing to “churches” in the sense of assemblies gathered in individual homes to worship Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Nevertheless, Paul identifies the Galatian believers precisely by their association with these gatherings “even when they are not actually in assembly.” Whatever else may describe their identity is penultimate to their association with fellow believers.

38 In Phil 4:21–22 Paul distinguishes the greetings of his companions (“the brothers who are with me”) from those of “the saints” in the location from which he writes (likely Rome). Such additional greetings (e.g., from “the saints”) are not present here in Galatians; Bligh, Galatians, 64.


40 De Boer, Galatians, 27.
in Christ. Paul’s greetings and doxology in 1:3–5 will therefore be fitting for a people whose lives are oriented around worship.

As people assembled to worship the true God, Paul frequently identifies his recipients as the assemblies “of God” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), the “beloved” (Rom 1:7), or the “sanctified/saints” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1). Paul says none of that here. He writes, unadorned, to “the churches of Galatia.”

The early church father Chrysostom noted this omission and concluded: “They were in danger of falling from grace.” A stern tone permeates this letter from the very beginning. Unlike Paul’s other letters, he will not offer thanksgiving for his addressees after the opening prescript (cf. Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Phil 1:3; 1 Thess 1:2). This lack of thanksgiving does not mean that all the members of the “churches” of Galatia have acted against the Gospel. Paul still addresses the Galatians as “brothers (and sisters)” in 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18, and he still seeks common ground with them by the use of first person pronouns (e.g., 1:3–4). Paul still hopes for the best, for a return to the Gospel message at Galatia.

Greetings and Doxology (1:3–5)

1:3 Grace to you and peace. Paul greets the Galatians in 1:3 with “grace to you and peace.” “Grace” (χάρις) is an adaptation of the Greek word for “greetings” (χαίρειν, 1 Macc 12:6; Acts 23:26). “Peace” (εἰρήνη) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew shalom (Hebrew: שָׂלום, 1 Sam 25:5–6; Aramaic: שלום, Ezra 4:17). Paul’s reference to both “grace” and “peace” may reflect the Aaronic benediction of Num 6:24–26, a benediction that continues to be used in Christian liturgical contexts:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance on you and give to you peace.

The Aaronic benediction was used in the worship life of ancient Israel and in the Dead Sea’s Qumran community, which was still standing in Paul’s day (Psalm 4; Psalm 67; Mal 1:6–2:9; 1QS II.2–10; 4QBer 2–5). The Septuagint translates the benediction this way:

(b) See also Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; Philemon 3

41 Bryant (Risen Crucified Christ, 116–17) pointed out that Paul uses the bare phrase “the churches of Galatia” (ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Γαλατίας) also in 1 Cor 16:1. He does refer elsewhere to “churches” or the “church” without qualification (Rom 16:4; 1 Cor 7:17; 11:16; 14:4, 5, 19; 16:19; 2 Cor 8:1; 11:28; 12:13). Nevertheless, these examples are not from the Pauline epistolary prescripts that typically bear greater adornment than is the case within the letter’s body. The letter opening of Galatians clearly differs from the apostle’s other letter openings, and the differences are not to the Galatians’ credit.


43 Bryant, Risen Crucified Christ, 116–17.

44 Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel, 329–34.
εὐλογήσαι σε Κύριος καὶ φυλάξαι σε,
ἐπιφάναι Κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ ἐλεήσαι σε,
ἐπάραι Κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δώῃ σοι εἰρήνην.

The Lord bless you and guard you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and have mercy on you;
the Lord lift up his face upon you and give to you peace.

The key words in the Septuagint are “have mercy” (ἐλεέω, translating יִשָּׁרָה) and “peace” (εἰρήνη, translating מַלּוֹד). Paul uses “peace” (εἰρήνη) but not “have mercy” (ἐλεέω). Clearly Paul is not quoting LXX Num 6:24–26. Any hypothesis of dependence on the Aaronic benediction must remain tentative. If Paul is drawing on the Aaronic benediction, then he has adapted the blessing of the God of Israel for the non-Jews.

The twofold greeting of “grace” and “peace” is particularly appropriate for the Galatian gentile assemblies. Grace and peace are both key concepts throughout the letter. Paul opens and closes this letter with references to God’s grace followed by a solemn “amen” (1:3–5; 6:18). “By bracketing his letters with these grace-wishes, the Apostle indicates that everything begins and ends with the unmerited favor and peace that God has bestowed on believers through Jesus Christ.”

God has graciously acted in Christ to adopt the gentiles into the family of Abraham and of the Son. God’s gracious action, to which Paul frequently refers (1:6, 15; 2:9, 21; 5:4; 6:18), is at the heart of the conflict with the rivals whose position elevates human works. The Galatians are in danger of falling away from grace (5:4)! Luther wrote: “Paul is so prolix and ardent in his praise of grace that he sharpens and aims every word against the false apostles” (AE 26:42). In their advocacy of human works as necessary for God’s salvation, the rivals are wittingly or unwittingly sowing seeds of discord at Galatia. They are troubling the Galatians (1:6–9). The Galatians are experiencing conflict and strife in their assemblies (5:15, 20). Paul would have there be peace, the peace of God’s “new creation” (6:15; cf. 5:22, the fruit of the Spirit; the “covenant of peace” promised in Is 54:10; Ezek 34:25; 37:26; cf. Ps 72:7).

From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul greets the Galatians with grace and peace in 1:3, he places the Lord Jesus Christ alongside God the Father. In 1:3 “God” is placed before “the Lord Jesus Christ” in a reversal of order from 1:1. Whereas 1:1 likely anticipates Paul’s call by the risen Christ to be narrated later in the chapter, in 1:3 the apostle prioritizes God (the Father). Placing Christ second in 1:3 does not diminish the importance of his being listed with God the Father. “Lord” (κύριος) was the usual manner of translating the Hebrew name for God, but in Paul the name refers to Christ (confessionally in Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11). The Jews in the Second Temple era often spoke of an exalted figure with God, a figure who

45 Frank J. Matera, God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 87.
shared God’s own attributes and glory. The Jews spoke of an exalted Wisdom or the divine-man Moses or even a powerful angelic figure. The new development in early Christianity was that the first Christians went beyond placing Christ alongside the Father. They took the unprecedented step of worshiping Jesus as God. In Paul’s letters, within decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Christ receives the worship that the Hebrew Bible reserved for God alone (e.g., Phil 2:5–11). Even as Jesus enjoys with the Father divine status, Jesus remains subordinate to the Father’s will. Jesus acts according to God the Father’s will to save humanity (Gal 1:4; cf. 1 Cor 15:27–28).

Paul’s language would have been striking for a gentile audience under Roman rule. Whereas the contemporaries of the first Christians thought that peace came through the pax Romana, true peace, Paul avers, can only come through Jesus Christ—thus the apostle’s greeting in 1:3. The letter draws not only on the imagery of the OT but also on the imagery of the Galatians’ own cultural milieu. Caesar demanded worship, not just taxes. Separation of church and state is a modern notion. The powerful Christology of Galatians is a reminder that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar! To the extent of the idolatrous claims associated with his office, Caesar remains part and parcel of “the present evil age” (1:4).

1:4  [The Lord Jesus Christ.] who gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from the present evil age. Paul does not praise his Galatian recipients. He does not focus on himself or the Galatians. Instead, he praises Christ’s saving work. In 1 Cor 15:3 Paul cites a prior tradition he received that expresses Christ’s work similarly. Is Paul citing traditional material also in Gal 1:4? Paul’s preferred term is “sin” in the singular, and yet 1:4 employs “sins” in the plural.

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46 For personified, exalted divine attributes, such as Wisdom, see, e.g., Prov 8:22–31; Wis Sol 6–10; Sirach 24:1–22. For divinely endowed angelic figures, see Jos. Asen. 14.8–9; Apoc. Ab. 10.3–10. For divine-like men, see Enoch in Gen 5:24; 1 En. 45.3; 71.14–18, Moses in Ex 4:16; 7:1; Philo, Sacr. 3 § 9; Philo, Det. 44 §§ 161–62; Philo, Post. 9 §§ 27–31; Philo, Mos. 1.28 §§ 158–59.

47 Hurtado, One God, One Lord; Bauckham, God Crucified; Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ. Phil 2:5–11 cites Is 45:23 in relation to the worship due Christ. The immediate context of Is 45:23—the verses just before and, indeed, the couple chapters preceding—emphasize worshiping God alone as Savior and Lord.

48 Klaus Wengst, Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 46–54. Christ’s elevated status is a difficult problem for those, like Jehovah’s Witnesses, who adopt the fourth-century Arianist position with respect to Jesus as a created being.


50 This would have been unusual in an ancient salutation; Bryant, Risen Crucified Christ, 118, followed by Van Voorst, “Thanksgiving Period,” 170. Van Voorst took the amplification as an invitation for the Galatians to add their “amen” to this praise of God. Paul still holds out hope for the Galatians.
(ἁμαρτίαι) in a manner that agrees with the tradition in 1 Cor 15:3. On the other hand, the language for Jesus’ self-sacrifice varies from passage to passage (cf. also Eph 5:2; 1 Tim 2:6; Titus 2:14). This variation defies the conventional wisdom that the apostle is quoting an early Christian confession in Gal 1:4.

In 1 Cor 15:3 Christ did not give himself but rather died. He acted in accordance with the Scriptures in 1 Cor 15:3 rather than according to the will of God the Father, as in Gal 1:4. Phil 2:8 adds an element of humility and does not mention Jesus’ acting in accordance with the will of God or the Scriptures. Firm evidence is lacking that Paul is citing pre-Pauline material in Gal 1:4. Even if he were, Paul would not cite such material unless it expressed his own sentiments, sentiments he could just as well have composed himself.

Had Paul employed the preposition ἀντί, he would have rendered Christ’s death “in our stead” clearer. Instead Paul employs the preposition ὑπέρ, “for our sins,” which may be translated with other senses. Nevertheless, “throughout the Koine period ὑπέρ [‘for’] began to encroach more and more on the meanings of ἀντί [‘in our stead’], though never fully phasing it out.” Paul is clear that Jesus’ death is the means by which God saves human beings from their sins. The epistolary prescript does not say how Christ’s death served to rescue from the effect of sins. The prescript does, however, signal the significance of Christ’s saving death as a crucial topic for the letter (cf. Gal 3:10, 13).

This is no mere pious martyrdom (e.g., 4 Macc 17:22). Jesus is dying “for our sins”!

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52 For other passages that summarize the benefits of Christ’s death, see Rom 5:6–8; 14:15; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14–15; Gal 2:20; 3:13.

53 Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 76.

54 Wallace, Greek Grammar, 387 (emphasis his). See the full discussion of this point on pp. 383–89. He offers a long list of papyri instances of the substitutionary usage of ὑπέρ, “for” (pp. 385–86, nn. 82–83): “The substitutionary use of ὑπέρ is well known to papyrologists, of course.” The value of ὑπέρ (“for”) is that this preposition may express both the sense of “in our stead” and “for our sakes.” The possibility remains that the preposition could have a causal sense (cf. LXX 3 Kgdms 16:18–19 [MT/ÉT 1 Ki 16:18–19]): Jesus’ sacrificial death took place because of human sin and was for the purpose of rescuing people from the present evil age.

55 Contra Furnish, “Paul’s Use,” 119, who denied any real importance for Paul of the traditional material’s recognition of Jesus’ death for sins.
If Paul is paraphrasing an earlier Christian tradition, he has clearly placed his own, apocalyptic stamp on that material. He expresses Jesus’ saving death in terms of “rescuing” (ἐξέληται, from ἐξαιρέω). Paul uses this verb only here in 1:4 (Luke employs it in Acts 7:10, 34; 12:11; 23:27; 26:17), but he adds that Jesus has “rescued” believers (ἡμᾶς) from “the present evil age” (ἐκ τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος πονηροῦ; cf. 1 Cor 3:19; 15:24; 2 Cor 4:4). Paul’s language parallels that of Second Temple texts emphasizing deliverance from the present evil age (e.g., 4 Ezra 6.9; 7.12–13; 2 Bar. 15.8; 44.11–15; CD VI.10, 14; XII.23; XV.7; 1QpHab V.7–8 (“the era of wickedness”; trans. F. García Martínez)). The Jews often divided the world into the present age of corruption and the age to come when God’s justice would finally be established (e.g., Is 60:1–22; 65:17–25; 4 Ezra 7.12–13, 50, 113; 8.1; 1 En. 91.15–17; 2 Bar. 14.13; 15.8; 44.8–15). Paul speaks similarly here of a “new creation” (6:15) invading “the present evil age” (1:4) and overturning the cosmos’ “elements” (4:3). Christ’s victorious, redeeming work sets people free from the enslaving powers of sin and the Law and ushers in a glorious new future (3:10, 13, 22; 4:2, 3, 5, 9; 5:1). The Christian therefore lives in an overlap of ages, but the decisive rescue from the power of evil has already taken place. Paul balances the “already” of the rescue with the “not yet” caused by the lingering “present evil age.” The emphasis is decidedly on the “already” with its powerfully effective rescue. The cross of Christ’s self-sacrifice therefore dominates the perspective of this letter. A failure to recognize the reality of the new age could lead to a mistaken valuation of this present age’s power or works, i.e., human works. Again, the “Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3) effected this rescue, not Caesar;

57 See excursus 1, “Paul’s Apocalyptic Worldview,” after this pericope.
58 Paul could have written ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος (lit. “from the evil age, the present one”), but in all likelihood he chose to place πονηροῦ last for emphasis: “the present age with all its evils”; Bligh, Galatians in Greek, 77; cf. Lightfoot, Galatians, 73.
59 Christ’s “act of rescue” also recalls God “rescuing” his people from Egypt (ἐξαιρέω in LXX Ex 3:8; 18:4, 8, 9, 10, as in Gal 1:4), a deliverance God promised to repeat (ἐξαιρέω in LXX Is 31:5; 60:16; Ezek 34:27).
60 Luther captured the sense of powerful forces at work in the cosmos that would enslave the individual were it not for a greater power in Christ (AE 26:33):
  Therefore this text concludes that all men are the captives and slaves of sin and … that sin is a very cruel and powerful tyrant over all men throughout the world, a tyrant who cannot be overthrown and expelled by the power of any creatures, whether angels or men, but only by the infinite and sovereign power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was given for it.
61 Cf. Rom 12:2; a renewal of the mind over against “this world”; see excursus 1, “Paul’s Apocalyptic Worldview,” after this pericope, and the commentary on 4:3, 9 for the powerful, enslaving “elements” from which the believer has been delivered!
62 The cross is Christ’s giving himself for the believer, but the cross is also a reality in which the believer participates as Christ who “gave himself” now “lives” in his own (2:20; see also 3:1).
not Cybele, the mother goddess of the Galatians; nor any other supposed power. Jesus Christ is Lord of this new age.

According to the will of our God and Father: Modern Western Christians with their typical stress on individualism speak far too much of personal, individual decisions of the human will. Paul does not. He stresses, instead, “the will of God.” The powers of death and sin hold sway over humanity. The sins that people commit cast long, paralyzing shadows over their lives. Luther noted the awful, oppressive effects that sins can have on the individual (AE 26:35; cf. Eccl 8:8). Only God’s rescue in Christ can salve the conscience, certainly not the action of a feeble and fickle human will. What a comfort that Christ delivered us from “our” sins (AE 26:38!)

In yet a third mention of God the Father in the epistolary precript of the letter, Paul alludes to the begetting action of a Father. God has initiated in Christ a rescue of those who are incapable of rescuing themselves. “According to the will of our God and Father” (κατὰ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν) most likely modifies the entire complex idea of Jesus’ giving himself for sins (everything from “gave” to “the present evil age” [δόντος … τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος πονηροῦ]). Even if the “according to” (κατά) phrase modified only the rescue (ἐξέληται) clause which immediately precedes, Paul would still be attributing that deliverance to the divine initiative. God has a plan.

1:5 [God the Father] to whom be glory unto the ages of the ages. Amen. Whereas Pauline precripts typically conclude with the greeting of the recipients, the letter to the Galatians’ precript concludes rather uniquely with a doxology of praise (1:5). Whereas other Pauline letter openings include a thanksgiving section for what God has done in the lives of the addressees, the doxology of 1:5 limits the focus exclusively to God. God deserves the praise, not human beings. The rivals’ insistence on a human role in salvation compromises the sufficiency of God’s own action and detracts from the proper praise of God. Christ’s deliverance from the present evil age invites eternal praise to God alone. The present evil age (1:4) has been overwhelmed by the One to whom be praise “unto the ages of the ages” (1:5). With the Psalter, “let all the people”—and certainly all the Galatians—“say, ‘Amen’” (Ps 106:48 [LXX Ps 105:48: γένοιτο, “may it be so”]; see the double “amen” in Pss 41:13 [MT 41:14]; 72:19; 89:52 [MT 89:53]).

63 The Galatians were familiar with the gods as enforcers of moral codes. They regularly came in wrath to punish “sin” (ἁμαρτία)—or so the Galatians thought; Arnold, “Anatolian Folk Belief,” 434–43. Paul’s message of a liberation from sin through Jesus’ death would have been a burden lifted from the Galatians’ shoulders; see the commentary on 5:1.

64 Burton, Galatians, 15.

65 Paul therefore stresses the “will” of our God and Father in 1:4. God therefore sent his Son at the moment of his good pleasure in 4:4–5 in his plan for the entire world; Cook, “Prescript,” 518.