

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 9

TNTC

GALATIANS

To
my brothers and sisters
in the church
of South-East Asia

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 9

GENERAL EDITOR: LEON MORRIS

GALATIANS

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

R. ALAN COLE



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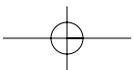
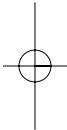
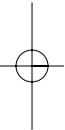
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GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed at providing help for the general reader of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They sought to avoid 'the extremes of being unduly technical or unhelpfully brief'. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. A series that has served so well for so long is perhaps not quite as relevant as when it was first launched. New knowledge has come to light. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. When the original series was commenced it could be presumed that most readers used the Authorized Version and one could make one's comments accordingly, but this situation no longer obtains.

The decision to revise and update the whole series was not reached lightly, but in the end it was thought that this is what is required in the present situation. There are new needs, and they will be better served by new books or by a thorough updating of the old books. The aims of the original series remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not discuss all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the problems that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Where it is felt that formal consideration should be given to such questions, they are discussed in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes.

But the main thrust of these commentaries is not critical. These

books are written to help the non-technical reader to understand the Bible better. They do not presume a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek words discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and their comments are made on the basis of the originals. The authors are free to choose their own modern translation, but are asked to bear in mind the variety of translations in current use.

The new series of Tyndale Commentaries goes forth, as the former series did, in the hope that God will graciously use these books to help the general reader to understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The Epistle to the Galatians is spiritual dynamite, and it is therefore almost impossible to handle it without explosions. It has often been so in the history of the church. The great spiritual awakening of Martin Luther came as he expounded and studied this Epistle, while it was a sermon on Galatians that brought peace of heart to John Wesley. Small wonder that both of these men dearly loved the book; it spoke directly from Paul's experience to their own. But this letter is not one with a message simply for those of centuries earlier than ours, nor is it an Epistle that can be read in comfortable detachment without personal involvement. At every point it challenges our present-day shallow, easy acceptances and provokes our opposition. It was a controversial letter; and it is vain to expect any commentator, however humble, to avoid controversy when expounding it – especially when the issues are just as alive today. The only danger is that we may try to use God's Word as a 'big stick' wherewith to belabour our theological opponents instead of allowing the exegesis to search our own hearts and condemn our own cherished presuppositions.

What, then, is the Epistle to the Galatians? It is a statement of Paul's gospel, which is also that of the church universal. It is an *apologia pro vita sua* by the prince of apostles. So far, so good; but already we may be on dangerous ground. For Paul was a man whose 'orders' were not accepted by many of his fellow-countrymen. His claim to apostleship they regarded as unwarranted. More; in its

refusal to allow salvation to depend on anything save the work done for helpless man by God almighty, and enjoyed by a faith which is itself the gift of God, it is a cry for Christian freedom. True, this condemns those who make salvation depend on forms and ceremonies as well as on faith in Christ (for the crime of the Judaizers was not that they substituted something for Christ's work, but that they tried to add something to it). But it equally condemns those earnest Christians who subconsciously make salvation depend, not only on faith in Christ, but also on the observance of negative moral laws ('There are three things I will not do ...', in the words of the old negro spiritual). Which of us can throw the first stone?

Furthermore, at the risk of being accused of an anachronism, it could be said that Galatians is a passionate appeal for Inter-Communion. The table-fellowship for which Paul fought at Antioch was certainly not restricted to the Lord's Table, but it is hard to see how it could have failed to include it. On a matter like this, it is painfully easy to allow our own pet theological or ecclesiastical prejudices to blind our eyes; but Paul's reaction is obvious. He cannot conceive the possibility of two groups of Christians in one place who refuse to eat with each other because of theological scruples (for we wrong the Judaizers if we fail to realize that, whatever we may think about the 'playacting' of Peter and Barnabas, this was a real theological scruple with them).

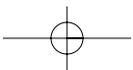
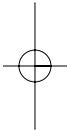
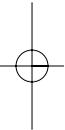
Again, there seems to be here a recognition that it is possible for the church of God to be one without being uniform in custom, habit, or sphere. Paul never seems to have compelled the Gentile churches to act like Jews; indeed, this is precisely the charge that he brings against the erring Peter. Now those of us with a 'Reformed' background find this congenial and easy to understand. But it remains equally true that he does not expect Jewish churches to act like Gentile believers; he never says that it is wrong for them to be circumcised, or to keep the law, or to observe the festivals. All he insists is that these things have nothing to do with the gift of salvation. Not only so, but here is also a glad recognition of differences of sphere appointed by God: Paul is to go to the Gentiles; James and the rest are to work among the Jews.

This involves full mutual recognition, which is symbolized, not by any supplemental ordination, but by the offering of the 'right hand

of fellowship'. Mutual trust, mutual acceptance, mutual recognition: was this a slender platform on which to work? Yet it was on such a basis that the whole Mediterranean basin was won for Christ.

These are hard sayings for all of us; and who can hear them? Yet, if this is indeed the message of Galatians for today, surely we neglect it at our peril.

R.A.C.



PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The literature on Galatians, which aroused such attention in the heady days of the Reformation, is immense. It would be pretentious, in a work of this limited size, to attempt to refer to all the commentators of the past. Any modern commentator on this letter is only a dwarf on the shoulders of giants, and happy is the one who has absorbed, sometimes unconsciously or even at second hand, the quintessence of the wisdom of the past.

I have refrained from quoting Luther and Calvin, or later giants like Ramsay and Lightfoot: but I would not wish that to be taken as a failure to acknowledge their worth. Among modern commentators, particular tribute must be paid to Burton (ICC), with his careful and exact linguistic approach, although this now needs to be modified in some areas because of further linguistic evidence. Bruce (NIGNTC) is, as always, careful and erudite, a mine of information, with many historical, linguistic and theological gems especially in his footnotes. Ridderbos (NICNT) is solid and theological, in the 'reformed' pattern, although somewhat succinct. Guthrie (NCBC) is painstaking and thorough, with a particularly good introduction. Cousar (Interpretation Series) has many penetrating insights. But the prince of them all is Betz (Hermeneia Series), and on him I have drawn particularly heavily, especially for his keen theological interpretations, and his suggestions as to the factors that left the Galatians particularly open to new false teaching.

Other commentators will be mentioned by name for specific points as they occur, but most, for obvious and praiseworthy reasons,

tend to repeat one another over much of the area, and there is nothing therefore to be gained by simply piling up names.

The text chosen as basis for this revision of my commentary is the RSV. The source of other translations is noted in brackets immediately after the quotation. Throughout the Commentary, I have also included my own paraphrase of the text of Galatians, usually section by section, and this is printed within single quotation marks.

It is a joy to write this Second Edition from the midst of an Asian church, facing many of the same problems as the Galatians. It is my humble hope that readers will find its relevance to their own situation too.

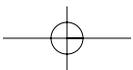
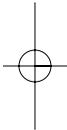
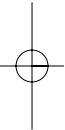
R.A.C.

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

- Abbott-Smith G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960 edition).
- AV Authorized Version (King James' Version), 1611.
- BAGD *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, a translation and adaptation of Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*; second edition revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- BDF F. Blass, A. Debrunner and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
- Betz H. D. Betz, *Galatians: a Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).
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- Teaching and Preaching*, Interpretation Series
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- Davies W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London:
SPCK, 21955).
- Ellis E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*
(Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957).
- ET English translation.
- GNB Good News Bible, 1976.
- Guthrie Donald Guthrie, *Galatians*, NCBC (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, and Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and
Stott, 1982).
- IBD* *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Leicester:
Inter-Varsity Press, 1980).
- ICC The International Critical Commentary.
- IDB* *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols.
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979).
- IDBS* Supplementary volume to *The Interpreter's Dictionary*
of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979).
- JB The Jerusalem Bible, 1985.
- Judge E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups*
in the First Century (London: Tyndale Press, 1960).
- Lightfoot J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London:
Macmillan, 1900).
- Luther Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to*
the Galatians (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,
1979 [reprint of 1575 English edition]).
- LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of
the Old Testament).
- Marshall I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and*
Commentary, TNTC (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press,
1980).
- mg. margin.
- MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the*
Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 edition).
- Moffatt J. Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible*, 1926.

MT	The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Old Testament.
Munck	J. Munck, <i>Paul and the Salvation of Mankind</i> (ET, London: SCM, and Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959).
NCBC	The New Century Bible Commentary.
NEB	The New English Bible: Old Testament, 1970; New Testament, ² 1970).
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament.
NIGNTC	The New International Greek New Testament Commentary.
NIV	The New International Version, 1973, 1978, 1984.
O'Brien	P. T. O'Brien, <i>Colossians and Philemon</i> , Word Bible Commentary (Waco: Word Publishing 1987).
Ridderbos	Herman N. Ridderbos, <i>The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia</i> , NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).
Ropes	J. H. Ropes, <i>The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians</i> , Harvard Theological Studies (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1929).
RSV	The Revised Standard Version: Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, ² 1971.
TDNT	<i>A Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, a translation by Geoffrey W. Bromiley of <i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament</i> , 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76).
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary.
UBS	United Bible Societies.



INTRODUCTION

Before we approach the exegesis of Galatians, there are three basic questions which we should ask, with some other minor questions which arise from them. The first is: Who were the Galatians to whom the letter was written? The second is: When was the letter written? The third is: Why was the letter written? Fortunately, there is no need to ask a fourth question: By whom was the letter written? Even extreme critics agree that it was written by the apostle Paul; indeed Galatians, along with Romans, Corinthians and Philippians, is sometimes used as a yardstick by which to judge the authenticity of other letters.

Basically, all of these questions must be answered from the evidence of the letter itself, with some help from Acts, and occasional assistance from other Pauline letters, notably the Corinthian letters and the letter to the Romans, though sometimes these other sources solve one problem at the expense of creating another.

Nevertheless, any problems thus created are minor, and the main answer seems clear in each case. In fact, it would not be unfair to say that some at least of the problems are of our own making, for the

questions have at times been made unnecessarily complicated by a reluctance to accept simple solutions that will satisfy the available evidence.

Some theories propounded as explanations in the last thirty years have been so artificial and convoluted that they are unlikely to be correct. While it is a basic rule of textual criticism that 'the more difficult the reading, the more likely it is to be correct', this is not necessarily true in more general study of the New Testament. Several such theories will therefore be mentioned briefly in this commentary, but not seriously argued since (with all due deference to their learned proponents) they do not seem to merit it, especially not in a work of this size. Those who are curious are referred to lengthier commentaries for discussions, after which they can make their own judgments.

A further point to be made is that, while the three questions mentioned above are both interesting and relevant, it is not necessary to solve them completely before one can read and appreciate the message of the letter. Indeed, it might be fair to say that solution of the first two problems should hardly affect exegesis, particularly because exegesis should never be based on an unproven hypothesis, however likely that hypothesis may be.

The third question, on the other hand, is very important and must be solved basically by referring to the letter itself. Interest in the first two questions, and therefore space and attention given to them, is by no means as great in modern commentaries as it was in earlier works. The third, however, with its associated questions, remains just as absorbing a topic today. This modern neglect may be because it is realized that the hypothetical answers to the first two questions do not basically alter the exegesis of this letter. On the other hand, it may simply be the recognition that absolute certainty on these two questions is impossible on the limited evidence that we have, and no new relevant evidence is likely to emerge. In short, all that can be said has been said already, and said often. This shift of interest to the third question will also be reflected in the present commentary.

1. Who were the Galatians?

To whom was this letter sent? There are basically only two

possibilities. The letter could have been sent to the ethnic Galatians, three Celtic tribes akin to the Gauls, who had invaded and subsequently occupied central Asia Minor in the third century before Christ, as the 'North Galatian' theory of its destination asserts. The other possibility is that the letter in fact was written to the racially mixed inhabitants of the Roman province of Galatia, and that the name 'Galatians' was simply used as a handy common term to cover them all, as the 'South Galatian' theory asserts. For, if this was so, then the letter was almost certainly sent to the Christian churches of the non-Celtic south, of whose evangelization we read in Acts 14.

Much here depends first on the linguistic usage of Paul when describing or identifying an area, secondly on the composition of the Roman province of Galatia at various times, and thirdly on the probable extent of Paul's evangelistic journeys in that part of Asia Minor, to judge from the New Testament evidence. Can we then, on the basis of these, maintain the so-called 'North Galatian' position?

Despite much discussion on the subject (for which see larger commentaries), it now seems fairly well established that Paul in his letters (though not necessarily Luke in Acts) usually employed the title of the Roman province to describe an area and its inhabitants, rather than using ethnic or linguistic titles which might be more exact. This, if accepted, would support the view that, for Paul, 'Galatians' simply means 'inhabitants of the Roman province of Galatia'. It is therefore important to consider the composition of the province at various times.

The province of Galatia took its origin from the Celtic kingdom of King Amyntas, who willed it to Rome, but which, at its height, covered a much larger area between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, always including but not limited to the central area inhabited by the three Celtic tribes. In the time of Paul, after several modifications of frontiers, the province still included large sections of Lycaonia, Pisidia and Phrygia, and was certainly not restricted to the old Celtic heartland. Even there, the Celts seem to have settled as overlords of an original Phrygian population so that the inhabitants were not monochromely Celtic. Although centuries later some certainly still spoke a Celtic language akin to Gaulish (according to Jerome), yet the city dwellers of the area at least were so Hellenized that they were usually known as 'Gallograeci', or 'Hellenized Gauls'.

At first sight, this question of the racial origins of the recipients of the letter might not seem important, but, in past generations, some commentators (even the great Lightfoot) leaned heavily on supposed 'Celtic' characteristics of the recipients to explain the problems which led to the writing of Paul's letter, and thus to establish its destination. This however is sentimental rather than scientific exegesis. The Corinthian Christians, as it has been well remarked, show many of the same characteristics as these 'Galatians', whoever they were, and no scholar has ever tried to prove that the Corinthians were Celts. In short, we are dealing here not with racial characteristics, but simply with the characteristics of 'natural man' and 'natural woman': that is what gives to the letter its universal application and contemporary value. We cannot therefore solve the problem of the destination of the letter in this way, by isolating the racial characteristics, real or imaginary, of its recipients.

Does the history of Paul's evangelistic travels in the general area assist us to pinpoint the identity of the churches in question? So far from admitting the point that, if the letter is written to the inhabitants of the Roman province of Galatia in general, it could cover the northern Celts as well as other inhabitants in the south, many commentators have tried to settle the question summarily by claiming that Paul did not and could not have evangelized the northern area at all. In this case, of course, any other argument for a North Galatian destination would fall to the ground completely, for Paul seems clearly to be writing to his own converts. In all fairness, the letter itself gives us no direct clue as to the geographic area of Paul's evangelism. The only two possible references in Acts to evangelism in the north are vague, although Acts 16:6 and 18:23 could perhaps be stretched to cover evangelism and pastoral care by Paul in this area. However, in either instance it would have involved a break with what seems to have been Paul's general strategy of initial evangelism of the main cities of a district, and would also have involved considerable deviation from the most direct routes across Asia Minor, which he usually followed. Recent research on the system of Roman roads in Asia Minor has confirmed that communication (and therefore travel) in this northern area was much more difficult than in the south.

Other than these two passages, there is no reference in Acts

either to any evangelism in the northern area or even to the subsequent existence of churches there. This does not of course make the existence of such churches impossible: the 'silences of Acts' on other matters are well known and recognized. But when this silence is taken along with the fact that no North Galatian churches are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, and that even the 'delegates' from Galatia, Gaius and Timothy, who accompanied Paul on his financial mission to Jerusalem, seem to have come from the south of the Roman province (Acts 20:4), it becomes almost conclusive.

True, Lightfoot made great efforts to establish from inscriptional evidence the existence of an early Celtic church, complete with its early martyrs, in Ancyra (modern Ankara), one of the original three Celtic cities, but he has not usually convinced other scholars. Even if there had been such a church, in a large centre like Ancyra, it would have been so Hellenized in thinking and outlook that it would hardly have differed from any other Hellenized city church of the eastern Mediterranean. Celtic gods would long ago have taken Greek names, as older Lycaonian gods had done further south (Acts 14:12), and the resultant pagan syncretism would have been the same whether in the north or the south of the area. An original Celtic background would therefore have had little bearing on the main question of the destination of the letter, as determined by the supposed racial characteristics of its recipients, which is Lightfoot's argument: still more basically, if no such churches existed at the time, no letter would be directed to the area.

It is unconvincing to argue that Jewish influence, clearly a major factor among the 'Galatians', would have been as likely in the north as in the south. While perhaps not so numerous, there were certainly Jewish colonists in the larger northern cities, as shown by the tombstones discovered there, though, because of the difficulty of communication, these colonies were not so closely linked with Jerusalem and the mainstream of Jewish life as those further south were. That in itself, combined with the difficulties both of terrain and communication, would make pursuit of Paul by his opponents, the Judaizers, very unlikely in this northern area. If this is so, then the problem that gave rise to the letter could not have arisen there.

Lastly, it is sometimes argued that the supposed reference to the

initial evangelism of the 'Galatians' as being due to Paul's illness (4:13 – an uncertain interpretation) proves that the evangelism must have taken place in the 'healthier' area of the bleak northern plateau rather than in the southern area, with its supposedly 'malarial' climate. This is again in the area of speculation, not scholarship: would a sick man (if this is the correct interpretation of the passage) have deliberately tackled the rigours of the far harsher northern climate?

It is of course quite possible that Paul did evangelize the northern area, but, if so, we certainly cannot prove it from the evidence of Scripture, whether of Acts or the Pauline letters. The earliest patristic commentaries believed that this evangelism had taken place, but this is no proof. By their day, the older Roman province had shrunk once again to the original Celtic area in the north, with a few minor additions, so naturally they understood the name 'Galatians' in terms of the linguistic usage of their own day and took it to mean 'ethnic Galatians', living in the north, to whom they assumed that the letter had been sent.

To argue, with some advocates of the North Galatian theory, that to use the term 'Galatians' to describe Phrygians or Lycaonians would have been regarded by them as insulting is unfounded. The 'Galatian' was never a comic figure to the ancient world in the way that, say, the 'Phrygian' was, nor did the name in itself mean, as sometimes claimed, 'country bumpkin'. Besides, what other single collective term could Paul have used to cover the different groups, and what more appropriate term than one taken directly from the name of the province? It does not therefore seem that the term 'Galatians' can be limited to the Celtic inhabitants of the north, while it may possibly include them, if indeed there were churches among them at the time.

Let us now turn to the South Galatian theory, which seems both simple and neat, and certainly fits such evidence as we have. Again, this does not necessarily prove it to be correct, but it certainly gives it probability. This theory assumes that the 'Galatians' addressed in the letter are those groups in the south of the Roman province who had been evangelized by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13 and 14), and revisited by Paul and Silas on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:36 – 16:6). The 'Galatians'

would then be the converts of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, 'Pisidian' Antioch, and doubtless other small places whose names are unrecorded. We know the fact of their evangelization from the New Testament; we know of Jewish opposition (Acts 13:50; 14:19); and many other small details in the Galatian letter could be very well explained against this known background.

The triple mention of Barnabas in the letter (2:1, 9, 13) might confirm a southern destination, since Barnabas would have been well known to the southern Galatians (Acts 14:12), but quite unknown to the northern Galatians. If Paul did indeed evangelize North Galatia at the later date suggested, then Barnabas had long ceased to be his travel companion (Acts 15:39), in favour of Silas and Timothy (Acts 15:40; 16:3): why then mention him here? Admittedly, Paul also mentions Titus in the letter (2:1), one certainly unknown to the South Galatians: but there is a special reason in the context for this mention. In addition, it is only fair to say that Barnabas is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:6, although there is no biblical evidence to show that he had ever visited Corinth.

Other supporting points in favour of a South Galatian destination could be made, although they are certainly not decisive, but merely makeweights. For instance, the reference to the reception of Paul by the Galatians as 'an angel of God' (4:14) might possibly be a reference to the way in which he had been hailed at Lystra as Hermes, messenger of the gods (Acts 14:12). However, it has been pointed out that this 'angelic' identification was not sustained by the Lycaonians for very long (Acts 14:19), so that perhaps we should not build too much upon it.

Of course, opponents of the South Galatian theory will simply say that this argument from Acts is an example of 'drunkard's search'. If a drunkard has lost a coin on a dark street with only one light, he will search for it beneath the light, not because the coin is more likely to be there rather than elsewhere, but simply because it is the only place where he can see to search for it. In fairness, we must acknowledge the validity of this attack, but say in reply that, if the letter is not written to this particular known group of Christians in the south, then we can know nothing of its possible recipients, for we are completely ignorant of conditions in North Galatia and its assumed churches.

It will be noticed that, in these arguments, both sides build heavily on the historicity of the travel account in Acts, even allowing for selectivity in the narrative, and the possible omission of much material considered by Luke as irrelevant to his main purpose. While a number of modern commentators on Acts (unlike Haenchen) have returned to a high view of its historical reliability (see Marshall), and while this is certainly the position of the present author, it is not strictly necessary to the argument here, except that, if we reject the evidence of Acts, we have no evidence whatsoever on either side as to the foundation of these churches. All would become pure speculation, and, while this may be legitimate, it is certainly not profitable, for one cannot base a logical argument upon pure speculation. The question of the historicity of the account in Acts becomes more directly relevant when considering the relative chronology of Paul's various visits to Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts and Galatians respectively.

If then we return to the original question, 'Who were the Galatians?', we can only say that they were inhabitants of part or parts of the Roman province of Galatia, possibly including the Hellenized Gauls of the north, and certainly including the Hellenized Lycaonians and others of the south. It seems impossible that Paul would have written a letter directed to 'the Galatians' in general which excluded this latter group, particularly in view of his very close and early relations with them (Acts 13 and 14).

To put the matter in another way, it would be strange if we had a Pauline letter addressed to a group of otherwise unknown Christians in the north of the province, where Paul could have spent little time and about whom the book of Acts is strangely silent, but no letter to a familiar group in the south, of which we know much. Again, this is not a compelling argument, but it certainly increases the probability. All the rest of the 'Pauline' letters are written to churches whose early relationships with Paul are clearly spelled out in Acts: witness Thessalonians, Corinthians, Philippians and the 'Asian' letters. Romans is not an exception, for even Rome finds mention in Acts as an intended place of visit, if not of initial evangelism by Paul (Acts 28:16). It would be indeed strange if the Galatians were the only exception to this general rule.

2. Why was the letter written?

The simple answer to this question is that the letter was written because of some serious problems that had arisen in Galatia. Paul never wrote letters without good reason, or, if he did, none such have survived. Normally, his letters were written either in reply to questions received from a church (1 Cor. 7:1), or to disquieting news that he has heard about a church (1 Cor. 1:11), or both. Even a letter like Romans, which at first sight seems to be of a more 'casual' nature, on closer examination proves to be not only an exposition of the gospel, but also a treatment of certain well-defined problems, of the existence of which at Rome Paul either knew or guessed (e.g. Rom. 14:1-9).

Therefore, we are really asking: what was the problem in Galatia? That it was a serious problem, we can tell from the abruptness with which Paul introduced the matter, without his usual opening section of tactful commendation of the local church (Gal. 1:6; contrast 1 Cor. 1:1-9). The problem seems to have been some new line of teaching, probably introduced soon after Paul's departure (1:6), by an unnamed person (1:9) or persons (1:7).

Whatever its proponents believed or claimed, Paul utterly denies to this new teaching the title of a gospel (1:6): to him, it is only a distortion of Christ's true gospel (1:7). It certainly involved the acceptance of circumcision as a necessity for salvation (5:2). Whatever its proponents may have initially said, this acceptance of circumcision involved in Paul's eyes the obligation to keep the whole of the law of Moses (5:3). It is indeed very likely that the new missionaries themselves actually preached this total obligation, but there is no direct evidence in Galatians as to this, apart from a reference (4:10) to the new observance of 'days, and months, and seasons, and years' by the Galatian converts. These words, virtually a quotation from Genesis 1:14, are probably best taken as referring to Jewish festivals, but see the Commentary at 4:10 for alternate possible explanations of a more general nature.

Worse still, to Paul at least, this obligation to keep the whole law implied that salvation was to be attained by obedience to the law, not, as he had initially preached to them, by simple faith in Christ (3:2). That was what made it 'no gospel', an utter apostasy from Christ

(5:4). To Paul, this move was therefore an abandonment of Christian liberty in exchange for the old slavery under the law from which they had just escaped (5:1), and a rejection of the gift of the 'Spirit of freedom' which to him was the fulfilment of the great promise made by God to Abraham (3:14).

It was therefore to Paul just as complete an apostasy as that faced by the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 6:4–6), and, as such, its proponents came under a similar solemn curse (1:8 and Heb. 6:8). Admittedly, in the letter to the Hebrews it was a case of open abandonment by the converts of their new-found Christianity in favour of their old Judaism: but Paul seems to have seen the Galatian declension as being just as serious, since it made obedience to the law just as essential to salvation as trust in the crucified Messiah.

To Paul, it was unbelievable that such foolishness could have occurred so quickly (1:6): he cannot understand it. It was as though advanced scholars were deliberately returning to the kindergarten ABC, to the elementary lessons which no doubt once had their rightful place, but had long ago been superseded in God's plan ('weak and beggarly elemental spirits', 4:9). Whatever may be said about his later letters (see O'Brien on Col. 2:8), Paul does not seem to be referring here to 'elemental powers', much less to forces of evil, as the cause of their trouble or the object of their worship. It is the immaturity and futility of these observances to which Paul draws attention in this context. Indeed, he wonders if all his toil in evangelism of the Galatians had been for nothing after all (4:11).

Paul is so indignant and the matter is so urgent that we cannot expect a detailed account in the letter itself of the teaching brought by these new and unidentified missionaries. After all, both he and the Galatians knew well what the teaching was: why should he expand it? It is, however, fairly clear even from the limited evidence within the letter that the teachers were not simply Jewish missionaries, whether orthodox or sectarian, seeking to win Gentile Christian converts to the faith of Judaism, although, if some of the Galatian converts to Christianity had previously been Jewish proselytes, as in Acts 13:43, such an attempt at re-conversion would have been understandable. It is also most unlikely, as some have speculated, that they were simply local Gentiles who were attracted to Jewish forms of Christianity, or even that they were Jewish sectarians, tinged

with Gnosticism, philosophic speculation and magical practices. Ephesians and Colossians know such groups, but not Galatians. Rather, they were Jewish Christians who were insisting on circumcision, and probably also full observance of the law of Moses, on the part of Gentile Christians, as essential for salvation.

That was the point at issue: Jewish Christians might still continue to circumcise their children, and presumably might also teach them to keep the law, without compromising the gospel. According to Acts 21:21, although Paul was accused of opposing these general practices among Jewish Christians, he in fact did not. Indeed, when in a Jewish environment, he observed the precepts of the law himself (1 Cor. 9:20 and Acts 21:26), and of course he himself had been circumcised, and he had indeed circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3).

If all this is so, the teachers must have been the group often called by the handy, if coined, modern name of 'Judaizers'. Paul himself uses only the verb, not the noun (2:14), and he uses it in the slightly different sense of 'behave like a Jew'. Paul cannot be referring in Galatians to Jewish teachers attempting to proselytize Gentile Christian converts to Judaism, for that would have involved the complete rejection of Christ and his cross: and this the new teachers did not apparently do. Instead, according to Paul, they robbed the cross of all its importance (2:21), and removed its shame as a 'stumbling block' (5:11). Paul accuses them bluntly of doing this simply to avoid Jewish persecution (6:12). They may have been Jewish Christians desperately trying to accommodate Christianity to Judaism, as doubtless many did in early days, when, before the final breach with temple and synagogue (beginning with Acts 8:1), Christianity was still regarded by many Jews as a Jewish sect (Acts 28:22). No doubt this pressure for accommodation of Christianity to Judaism increased as the cataclysm of AD 70 grew steadily nearer, and national feelings mounted higher. But by religion these teachers were Christians, not Jews: that was what aroused Paul's anger.

Can we find any other hints in Galatians that help us to pinpoint the identity of the teachers? From the indignant outburst of the first two chapters, it is obvious that these teachers also belittled Paul's authority as an apostle: indeed, they probably denied him the title. Instead, they magnified the position of the Jerusalem apostles, particularly of the 'three pillars', Peter and James and John (2:9). That

may give us a hint as to their origin and nature, and indirectly therefore as to their teaching. To them, the authority of their gospel depended on the authority of its apostolic proponents, and they seemed to have claimed Jerusalem and the 'Jerusalem apostles' as the source of their 'gospel', as distinct from that of Paul.

This of course will be denied both by Paul and the Jerusalem apostles themselves, for both of whom there was only one gospel, although it had admittedly two different 'target areas' (2:6–9), but that is not the point at the moment. It seems to be mistaken exegesis to assume that 'the gospel to the circumcised' (2:7) means a gospel which also preaches circumcision: it means 'evangelism of Jews' and no more: 'the mission to the circumcised' (2:8), in spite of Betz.

There is one other passage in Galatians that may help us: it is the passage dealing with the confrontation between Paul and Peter at Antioch (2:11 onwards). At first, Peter and the other Jewish Christians there had eaten freely with the Gentile Christians at Antioch, whether the reference is to ordinary meals or to the Lord's Supper, or more probably to both. This would involve ignoring, for the time at least, the Jewish ceremonial food laws, for these were certainly not being observed by the Gentile Christians. However, when 'certain men came from James', Peter, along with the other Jewish Christians, stopped eating with the Gentile Christians, for fear of 'the circumcision party' (or possibly just 'the circumcised'), something which aroused both Paul's anger and his rebuke (2:14). Indeed, it is in this context that Paul uses the verb 'to Judaize' in the slightly different sense of 'to live like Jews' (2:14) with reference to Peter's present behaviour, in opposition to his previous propensity to 'live like a Gentile'.

It is important to note that, irritated as Paul may have been by the pre-eminence accorded by his adversaries to the three 'Jerusalem pillars', he, unlike some modern scholars, does not accuse either James or Peter or John of holding such 'Judaizing' views, still less of propagating them. Indeed, it is Peter's 'hypocrisy' (or 'play acting'), by behaving in a way which is contrary to his real beliefs, which annoys Paul particularly (2:13). How could Peter ever have believed this, after his experience with Cornelius, recorded in Acts 10? After all, this very matter of eating with non-Jews, and therefore presumably of eating ceremonially unclean food, had been the point at issue on that occasion too (Acts 11:3).

We may therefore assume that this ‘circumcision party’, in addition to insisting on circumcision and the observance of Jewish festivals, also pressed strongly the Mosaic food laws, whatever else they did about the rest of the Torah. After all, Sabbath, circumcision, and food laws were the three most obvious distinguishing features among the Jews of the Dispersion, and in that sense at least were the heart of the Torah.

The only other evidence in Galatians itself as to their teaching concerns again this basic demand for the circumcision of Gentile converts, of which we have already spoken, and which Paul had successfully opposed in the case of Titus (2:3). It seems wrong-headed exegesis to claim that Titus was indeed circumcised, but that he accepted it voluntarily rather than compulsorily: see the Commentary for details here. Titus, in fact, obviously represented everything that these new teachers opposed: he was an uncircumcised Gentile Christian, non-observant of the Jewish ritual law, yet fully accepted at Jerusalem as a brother.

All the evidence of Acts agrees with what we have gathered from Galatians so far. In Acts, Cornelius the centurion had been an uncircumcised Gentile like Titus, and yet the Spirit had come on him (Acts 10:44). He had been baptized (Acts 10:48), and Peter had thereafter eaten with him (Acts 11:3). This fact was bitterly resented by ‘the circumcision party’ at Jerusalem (Acts 11:2), a group clearly not simply equivalent to ‘the Jewish Christians’ in total, and equally clearly distinguished in the context from ‘the apostles and the brethren’ (Acts 11:1).

Who were the circumcision party, then? Almost certainly, they were the same as the ‘believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees’ (Acts 15:5), who had laid down at the very outset of the Council of Jerusalem the demand that Gentile believers must be circumcised and taught to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). If this is so, it is very reasonable to suppose that it was some of the same group who ‘came down from Judea’ to Antioch, and were equally bluntly teaching there that, without circumcision in accordance with the Torah of Moses, salvation in Christ was impossible (Acts 15:1). It is not surprising that teaching like this, in a mixed yet largely Gentile Christian church (Acts 11:20–21), caused a furore.

But if they were teaching like this in Antioch, it is also reasonable

to suppose that it was some of the same group, or at least those with similar views, who were the source of the troubles in Galatia (1:7), for the teaching seems to have been the same. Certainly, in Paul's later days, teachers spreading similar views seem to have travelled very widely in the wake of Paul (Phil. 3:2), and there is no reason why they should not have done so at an earlier stage also.

But if all this is true (and it is simple, consistent and likely), then, with apologies to Ropes and the title of his book, there is no 'singular problem of Galatians' to consider. The source of the teaching attacked by Paul is obvious, and its nature equally so. There is no need to postulate in Galatia (whatever the evidence of other places at a later period) Jewish-gnostic sects with their syncretistic teaching, or to suppose that the source of the Galatian problem was not Jewish Christians but Gentile Christians, possibly even some of the very Galatians themselves, in misdirected zeal for Jewish orthodoxy, as Ropes argues. Still less need we argue, with him, that there was also a 'radical' group of Gentile Christians in Galatia, who wished to reject the Old Testament roots of the gospel, and that Paul therefore had to fight on two fronts at once: in Galatians he fights on one front only.

3. When was the letter written?

If we start from the evidence of the letter itself, clearly it was written some time after the evangelization of the area by Paul. The duration of this gap is not certain, in spite of Paul's expressed surprise that the Galatians had turned 'so quickly' to another gospel (1:6). This phrase might cover a period of months or a period of years, for Paul, in his indignation, may be speaking figuratively, not literally.

Nevertheless, a shorter rather than a longer period is more likely, as being the simplest interpretation. If, as most scholars assume, *to proteron* in 4:13 should be translated 'on the former occasion', and not simply 'at first' (see RSV), then at least two visits by Paul to the region must be assumed, although BAGD denies that any distinction is being drawn here between an earlier and a later visit. In any case, although in this letter Paul tells us much of his early life and of his relations with the Jerusalem apostles, whether at Jerusalem or at