An Exegesis of Galatians 1:13-17

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Paul (formerly known as Saul) is writing to “The Galatians” whom he had previously evangelised (Gal 1:11) and they are organised as a number of churches (Gal 1:2). The occasion for the letter is outlined in vv 6-9: the Galatian converts had been troubled by subsequent preachers who, as expanded later in the letter, saw the need for strict adherence to the Jewish laws of the Torah (Pentateuch) and the subsequent accretions in the Talmud, for full membership of the Christian church. Paul had preached that justification is by faith in Christ alone and writes to re-emphasise this as the true gospel, given to him not through man but through direct revelation of Jesus Christ (vv 11-12). In vv 13-17 he relates his spiritual history to defend this position, in preparation for point by point confrontation in the later chapters of the criticisms by the subsequent preachers.

The precise identity of the Galatians and the region in which they lived is unclear. Roman Galatia was a band reaching through Asia Minor from the Black Sea almost to the Mediterranean, following the merging of the northern “Old Galatia” with the Hellenised region in the south in 25bc (Gathercole, 2011) The term “Galatians” suggests the ethnically Galatian north and that is the traditional view (Brown, 1997). There is, however, no direct evidence of Paul visiting the region (though Acts 16:6 leaves the possibility). Acts directly recounts visits to Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe during the first (46-49ad) and second (50ad) missionary journeys and this more recent “Southern Theory” makes for easier interpretation of chronology and theology (Mikolaski, 1970). Paul also normally used Roman imperial names (Gathercole, 2011).

In either case, the audience, members of the churches in Galatia, was not exclusively, perhaps even predominantly, converted Jews. In southern Galatia on the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabus initially preached in synagogues in Antioch and Iconium (Acts 13:4ff, Acts 14) and as a Jew the synagogue of the diaspora was probably an obvious port of call in any town he visited (Phillips, 2004). We hear however that both Jews and Gentiles responded (Acts 13:43, 14:1, 14:18), but in Galatians there is no indication that any of those to whom he was writing were Jews (Brown, 1997, p. 475). Through local (Acts 13:50, 14:2, 14:19) and later incoming (Gal. 1:7) influences, converts and potential converts would however have been made aware of Jewish teaching from the Torah and the Talmud (generally “the law”), particularly concerning circumcision (Gal 2:3) and calendrical feasts (Gal. 4:10) which are central issues in the letter.

The Galatians had presumably heard of Paul’s “former life in Judaism” and how he “persecuted the church of God” (v 13) from Paul himself, though it is possible that others, including those from outside who were “troubling” the Galatians (Gal 1:7, 6:13) had reported it to them as well. Paul is later reported as saying that his “Manner of life … is known by all the Jews” (Acts 26:4). Our evidence of persecution comes from the Book of Acts. 7:54ff reports Saul present at the stoning of Stephen (possibly through mob violence or by order of the Sanhedrin before which he had appeared (Gathercole, 2011)) 8:1-3 notes Saul’s approval and his role in the ensuing “great persecution” against the church. When brought to the barracks in Jerusalem, Paul speaks of persecuting “this Way to the death” and of working for the Sanhedrin to capture brothers (Acts 22:4-5). In Acts 26:10-11, before Agrippa, he speaks of voting for the death of prisoners and of attempting ensnarement. That Saul persecuted the church is reported in epistles (1 Cor. 15:9, Gal 1:13, 23, Phil. 3:6, 1 Tim. 1:13). We can assume that the recipients of the letter would be well aware of the central role that Saul had within Jewish opposition to Christianity, of the extent and ferocity of his persecution of Christians and therefore of the immense change in his stance before he first came to them.

The “Judaism” of Paul’s former life (v 13) would have referred to “the government, laws, institutions, and religion of the Jews” (Phillips, 2004, p. 43), covering both beliefs and practices. Paul says he was born a Jew (Phil 3:5) and Acts knows him as “a man of Tarsus” (9:11) and reports him saying that he was born there (21:39). As a Jew of the diaspora, he might be expected to have a clear and detailed understanding of Jewish identity and separateness. Paul says he was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), and in Acts 22:3 we are told that he studied under Rabbi Gamaliel. As such he would be heir to the works of Hillel, “the father of rabbinical hermeneutics” and hence to the *Mishnah*, the written version of the oral tradition of the law (Phillips, 2004). Paul’s quotes are usually from the Septuagint, rather than the original Hebrew, suggesting training in Tarsus (Hooker, 2003), but he was clearly well versed in the traditions of the Jews and claims to be so. He claims to be zealous for “for the traditions of my fathers” and would have been committed to keeping all the details of the law: the 613 commandments of the Torah and the many rulings and traditions added by rabbis (Phillips, 2004). “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people” might suggest a brilliant scholar destined for high office (Phillips, 2004) or at least a commitment, far ahead of his contemporaries, to upholding Pharisaic traditions (Mikolaski, 1970). Paul does not renounce his “Israelite” background (elsewhere he reminds his listeners of it - Rom 11:1, Phil 3:5, Acts 22:3) but is obviously keen to distance himself from it (Gathercole, 2011) and from his pre-conversion understanding and actions. Paul here is reminding the readers of the immense distance he travelled, from one who fervently believed in justification by close adherence to many and detailed laws to one for whom “simple” faith is the true and only way.

Paul sees himself “set apart” by God for his particular ministry from before his birth (v 15a). This is therefore an initiative by God – not a result of his own efforts in life (Gathercole, 2011). There are two other references to his identification by God for his ministry: in Acts 9:15 the Lord says to Ananias that Paul is “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel”; in Acts 13:2 the Holy Spirit says “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Paul has a sense of personal identification by God for particular work, despite his initial rejection of Christ, but recognises that it is only by grace that he is called. What did Paul mean by grace? Grace is the unearned, undeserved love and mercy of God, given only because he wants us to have it. Paul was, as he describes, working against the God, persecuting Christians and hindering the spread of the Kingdom and deserving of wrath (Phillips, 2004), but instead he was given the revelation of the Son (v 16a).

We have no direct account from Paul of the revelation. Acts contains three very similar accounts: a third person narrative (Acts 9), Paul’s reported speech at the barracks after his arrest (Acts 22) and Paul’s speech before Agrippa (Acts 26). Paul is said to have heard the voice speaking to him by name and identifying himself as Jesus – the Jesus whom he was persecuting by persecuting his followers. Here in Galatians and in 1 Cor. 15:8 there is a suggestion that Paul actually saw the risen Christ, before being blinded. Acts 9:27 has Barnabus reporting that he had “seen the Lord”. In Acts 9 and 22, his companions are reported as hearing a voice, but seeing no one, suggesting it was not a matter of his imagination (Gathercole, 2011) and the revelation was clearly very powerful and real to Paul himself. The Greek of v. 16 can be rendered as “reveal his Son *in* me”. Paul realised that the one who died for us can, through the Holy Spirit, live in us (Phillips, 2004). The grace of the revelation was for a specific reason; “that I might preach him among the Gentiles”. The commission to the Gentiles is also reported in Acts 26:17. The revelation had direct relevance to Paul’s audience – of Gentiles – and is revolutionary (Gathercole, 2011) since is goes against the Old Testament focus on Israel as the chosen nation.

After his conversion, Paul did not feel it necessary to “consult” with anybody (vv 16b, 17a). Instead, he moved away, presumably for a period of reflection and self-development. He recognised that he had been set apart, saved through grace by his new faith and commissioned to take the message to Gentiles. He felt no need of teaching by fellow Christians: he had his Bible, he had met the risen Christ and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. What could God not teach him directly (Phillips, 2004).

Paul therefore concludes his justification of the Gospel he had originally taken to the Galatians as one revealed directly to him. He has rehearsed with them his conversion and his faith and thereby reminded them of theirs and of ours.

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