

## **The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context**

By Mark D. Nanos

Reviewed by Steven D. Burton

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In this volume Mark D. Nanos, Ph.D., continues the fine scholarship that won his prior work, *The Mystery of Romans*, the Jewish Book Council's 1996 Book Award for Jewish/Christian Relations. Once again Nanos has produced a book that while written to high academic standards, will inform and intrigue the educated lay reader.

As in his previous volume concerning the letter of the Apostle Paul to his followers in Rome, Nanos challenges many of the prevailing interpretations of this letter written to Paul's First-Century followers in Galatia, in Asia Minor. Central to the author's thesis is the principle that if we are to properly understand Paul's message his use of language must be viewed in the historical context in which it was written. In light of what he acknowledges to be Paul's use of "scathing rhetoric" the legacy of which has "often proven tragic for the Jewish people," the issue of historical context is clearly crucial.

Part of what makes Galatians pivotal to our understanding of the development of Pauline Christianity is the very fact that it directly addresses the issues that were dividing the followers of the "resurrected Jesus." Of course what limits our understanding is our lack of direct knowledge of the precise positions of the "opposing parties" to whom Paul was responding, and indeed who they were. The dispute in its essence involves the applicability of circumcision and Torah Law to the "Gentile" followers. It is in this letter that Paul vigorously argues that man achieves salvation by faith in Christ alone, and not by the performance of good works and ritual observance (Gal 2.16; 3.24-25; 5.1; 6:12-15).

Nanos devotes considerable time to arguing against what might be described as the consensus view of who Paul's opponents were and how they have been labeled. He takes specific issue with the use of the term "Judaizers," generally considered to refer to those who considered the Levitical laws binding on all Jesus' followers and not just those who were already Jews. Similarly he challenges the prevailing notion that those who opposed Paul's position were representatives of the Jerusalem, Jesus accepting, hierarchy.

Ultimately Nanos will conclude that those who opposed Paul in Galatia were neither believers in Jesus who taught a different Gospel, nor emissaries from Jerusalem. Rather he argues that they were representatives of "Jewish communities in Galatia that were concerned about the integration of these particular Gentiles" into the greater Jewish community. Nanos offers a well-constructed argument for his conclusions and in so doing makes another important contribution to our understanding of Christian development and its earliest interactions with First-Century Judaism.

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