

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

Review in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003) pp. 131-33

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In Hans Christian Andersen's fable "The Emperor's New Clothes," the universally held admiration for the emperor's vesture is dispelled by a single voice that announces, "The emperor is naked." A similar service may well have been performed by Mark D. Nanos in his impressive new volume on Galatians.

The "new perspective on Paul" has been convincing readers that Paul's letters do not reject the Jewish Law but address the complex problem of Jewish-Gentile relationships among the early followers of Christ. What N. does is apply this conviction in a dramatic way to a letter that has traditionally been understood as Paul's strongest case against the Law.

To N., Paul is a "Torah-observant Jew, known as such by his addressees when he had lived among them" (p. 3). The cornerstone of N.'s argument is that the Galatian churches were still in relationship with the synagogues in Galatia, for the letter "predates . . . any division which could be characterized as Christianity versus Judaism" (p. 7). Although N. posits this relationship without supporting argumentation, he effectively exposes the tenuous basis for the opposing position that would see the Galatians churches as independent of Judaism. Carrying over a position from his earlier book on Romans, N. understands Paul's gospel as one that proclaims that the addressees *as Gentiles* have been made a part of a new community consisting of Israel and the nations worshipping together.

It is in this setting that N. believes the contingent situation of the letter emerges. After Paul's departure from Galatia, the addressees begin to interact with *non-Christian* Jews who are

charged with welcoming Gentile guests into the Galatian synagogues. Nanos calls these Jews the “influencers” of the letter. The influencers are surprised to find Paul’s converts claiming a righteous position before God and an equal status with Israel simply through their faith in Christ. They therefore seek to correct this peculiar view by inviting the addressees to become full members of Israel through proselyte conversion. The addressees are inclined to accept this invitation because they want to assure their position as righteous ones and also benefit from the protection given to the Jewish cult within the Roman Empire. When Paul hears of the addressees’ inclination, he writes Galatians insisting that becoming Jewish proselytes will not assure their righteousness before God—because they already possess it—but will betray the gospel, which proclaims their equal status as Gentiles.

Notice how many established assumptions of Galatian research shift in N.’s thesis. The influencers are not opponents of Paul or missionaries. They are not from outside Galatia nor associated with Jerusalem. Most importantly, they are not believers in Christ. Traditional interpretations assume that the dialogue between Paul and the influencers is an *intra-Christian* debate, a disagreement over what is necessary for a person to be a follower of Christ. When Christ is the shared term, the dispute must be located in some other issue: the law, dietary restrictions, earning salvation. N. insists that the dialogue is an *intra-Jewish* debate in which the disagreement is precisely over Christ. Therefore, the issue of Galatians is not about the Torah per se; Paul does not denounce Jewish identity or behavior for Jews or even for Gentiles seeking proselyte status who are not connected with the faith in Christ. However, because the addressees do believe in Christ, Paul insists that they are righteous *as Gentiles* and cannot become Jewish proselytes.

Nanos reads Galatians as a letter of “ironic rebuke” and gives priority to the sections of the letter that directly engage the addressees rather than the sections of narration (1:11—2:21), midrash (3:6—4:7), or allegory (4:22-30). His viewpoint offers largely satisfying solutions to many of the problematic verses of the letter. The *stoicheia* of 4:9 are the pagan public cult

practices to which the addressees are tempted to return now that the influencers will not support their shelter within the synagogue. The influencers “do not themselves obey the law” in 6:13, because they do not seek the welfare of the addressees but their own, thus disobeying the Torah’s law of love. “Another gospel” in 1:6-9 does not mean the influencers also believe in Christ; it is an ironic statement by Paul to shock the addressees into realizing that following their influencers will divorce them from Christ.

The style of the book is difficult and prolix. Frequently sentences run sixty to seventy words. (N. should get an editor!) Yet N.’s arguments successfully undermine centuries of untested assumptions which have governed the interpretation of this letter, making this book a necessity for any student of Paul. Having read it, you might not agree that Galatians, which once ruled over the antinomian reading of the Pauline corpus, stands naked before you; but, I assure you, you will never see the old emperor in the same way again.