The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context. Mark D. Nanos. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. 288 pp.

Mark Nanos's socio-rhetorical study opens up new horizons for reading Galatians. Challenging the traditional pattern of interpretation, his questions concerning the concrete historical location of the letter go far beyond the standard introductory remarks about "South" or "North" Galatia. Not only the Jewish, but also, most importantly, the civic and imperial contexts of the letter are seriously examined. The implications of this approach are far reaching, both with regard to the "Jewishness" of Paul's gospel and for understanding the ramifications of his message within the political framework of the Roman empire.

The much debated "opponents" of Paul, who must have initiated the whole controversy about circumcision in the Galatian congregations, play a key role in Nanos's investigation. In a very careful and extensive analysis of the prevailing scholarly views, the textual statements, and the probable situational background, Nanos arrives at a conclusion that substantially departs from the current scholarly consensus. The "influenzers," as Nanos calls them, were neither Christ followers nor Jerusalemites, nor were they associated with any kind of "Jewish Christianity." They were, rather, Nanos believes, local Jews—probably proselytes. These "influenzers" strongly disagreed with Paul's belief that in the new messianic age, uncircumcised Gentiles could, "in Christ," become fully integrated into Israel and, hence, enjoy equal status with circumcised Jews in the community (Gal. 3:28). Instead, Paul's opponents offer to the Galatian Jesus groups the established ritual of proselyte conversion: namely, circumcision, as the orderly (male) way of becoming Jewish. In this way, the "influenzers" offer the community a way to clarify the ambiguous status of gentile Jesus-followers for those both inside and outside the Jewish community.

The implications of these conclusions are that, contrary to the traditional Christian interpretation and its supersessionist consequences, the whole debate of Galatians is not about "Christian" versus "Jewish." Such interpretations are anachronistic as the context in which the letter was written predates any institutionalized Christian identity; the controversy takes place inside Judaism where two groups, a dominant and a marginal one, wrestle about the proper definition of Jewish boundaries, identity, and status. Both groups represent an "inclusive Judaism" with regard to the Galatian gentiles. But whereas the "influenzers" are "ethnocentric" and rely on the Law to negotiate the terms of integration, Paul—who according to Nanos was a fully Torah-observant Jew—sees the Christ event as the decisive entrance offer for gentiles to become part of Israel.

Nanos draws largely on sociological and ritual studies about proselyte conversion, liminality, and group formation, as well as on literary theory and rhetoric, to make his reading of Galatians as an inner-Jewish correspondence compelling. What I see as the most innovative and challenging part of his exploration is where his analysis moves beyond the realm of "purely religious" concerns and situates the circumcision debate within the wider civic context of a dominant pagan society in Asia Minor under Roman rule. Nanos shows that very concrete socio-political constraints regarding Jewish identity and group boundaries existed that made awarding full Jewish status to Paul's uncircumcised Galatians highly problematic for all parties involved.

From the side of the non-Jewish authorities, Paul's converts would be seen as "righteous gentiles" who could enjoy guest status vis-à-vis the synagogue—a status that still required their ongoing participation in public expressions of civil religion, including the manifold observances associated with the imperial cult, from which full Jews were exempt. For the Jewish community, on the other hand, any refusal to comply with such idolatrous practices, which were tolerated and even expected from uncircumcised sympathizers not fully integrated into the synagogue, was potentially dangerous. If gentiles affiliated to the synagogue (such as Paul's Galatians) failed to participate in civil religion, this could revive the old controversies about why the Jews, in general, were exempted from the patriotic obligations that were mandatory for everyone else. The Jews, as a minority group within the Greco-Roman cities, with an always threatened special status granted by Rome, were, at that time, too vulnerable. They could not afford to support a "subversive policy, such as would be the case if they sought to justify the exemption of Paul's pagan addressees from their proper pagan social obligations" (p. 263). The "influenzers," whom Nanos views as "control agents" of the Jewish community, therefore try to persuade the Galatians that they can avoid a lot of problems, both for themselves and for the community, if they become Jewish "by law," namely, through circumcision.

This historical construct helps Nanos to read several of the notoriously "difficult" passages of the letter with fresh eyes. Gal. 4:8-10 is one such passage. With the help of Nanos's hypothesis, the seemingly self-contradictory behavior of the Galatians who, on the one hand, want to become circumcised as Jews, but also feel inclined, on the other, to turn back to pagan practices, now makes sense: In terms of *realpolitik*, either "proper Jewishness" or worship of the civic and imperial deities are the

two options available to the converts if the Jewish community is to stay out of trouble. Another case in point is Gal. 4:17. The strange tactics of the "influenzers" who want to "exclude the Galatians" in order to make them "zealous" for their own course, is rendered coherent when the Jewish exemption from civil religion is seen to be at stake in Galatia. The "exclusion" of the Pauline groups could, then, be seen as making the statement that Paul's converts are not yet properly Jewish unless the advice of the "influenzers" to get circumcised (i.e., to become "zealous" for them) is followed. In this way, the converts are given an opportunity to shed their marginality and ambiguity. By undergoing the lawful procedure of transition, they become fully honored members of the Jewish community and are protected in their non-observance of the imperial cult: an outside oriented face-saving gesture that Paul, in Gal. 6:12, denounces as a tactical move to avoid persecution.

The explanatory power of this hypothesis for the theology of Galatians cannot be emphasized enough. Its further textual and historical exploration will be a collective task for theologians and biblical scholars alike. Nanos himself, while he exposes the imperial cult and the dominant order of the Roman empire as one of the decisive backgrounds of Galatians, at the same time strangely tends to bypass it in his actual reading of the letter. For, if "concern to maintain the appearance of the *pax Romana* would logically be shared by local elites, including those representing the interests of local Jewish communities" (p. 257f), then couldn't we expect Paul to aim his theological criticism much more directly right at the heart of this "historical compromise" between Jewish law and imperial law, the One God of Israel and the idols, rather than just attacking selfishness, lacking love of the neighbor, and pragmatic concerns, as Nanos suggests? This would add another layer of meaning to the accusation that the advocates of circumcision "don't obey the law themselves" (Gal. 6:13), and that by insisting on the letter of the Jewish law they, in fact, follow the law of Caesar rather than the law of Christ. From this perspective, the *real* "irony of Galatians" would turn out to be even more ironic: The "other gospel" so harshly rejected by Paul in Gal. 1:6 not only is "no gospel" at all, but is one which implicitly contains much more of *Caesar's* "glad tidings" about a world ordered by the laws of empire, rather than the good news of worldwide grace and peace born at the cross of a marginal Jewish martyr executed by Rome.

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