

Review of Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians*, by Dieter Mitternacht, in the *Swedish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2003) 60-62.

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According to Mark Nanos, Galatians was not written to condemn or attack Jewish Christendom. Paul is not an apostate from Judaism: “in fact nothing I have encountered in Galatians has led me to question the working assumption that the Paul who writes this letter is a Torah observant Jew, known as such by his addressees when he had lived among them” (3).

The *Irony of Galatians* is a revised and enlarged version of a dissertation from the University of St. Andrews, 2000. The book has been selected Book of the Month by *Expository Times*, 114/5 (2003) 161-64. Already Nanos’ first book, published in 1996 (*The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* [Fortress]) has received much attention. In 1996 it was given the *National Jewish Book Award for Jewish-Christian Relations* in the United States. It has also caused debate among New Testament scholars (see e.g., the reviews in *CRBR* 11 (1998) 149-178, where Neil Elliott, Elizabeth Johnson, and Stanley Stowers interact with Nanos, and also James D. G. Dunn’s review in *JTS* 48 (1997) 599-602. The author has dedicated *The Irony of Galatians* to the victims of the Shoah, and declares openly that the shadow of the Holocaust that lies over his and his people’s lives has been a motivating force behind his efforts to reconstruct the historical context of Galatians (4). This existential commitment may account for the somewhat repetitive style of the book.

The first main section (“The Methodological Basis for Interpreting this Letter,” 17-72) lays a methodological ground for the investigation by defining the rhetorical and epistolary character of the letter. According to the author, ironic argumentation is common with Paul and especially typical for Galatians. This letter should be read in its entirety as a “letter of ironic rebuke.” The type *ironic letter* is listed among the letter types in antiquity both in pseudo-Demetrius’ and pseudo-Libanus’ handbooks. Pseudo-Libanus also mentions a letter type which he calls “letter of rebuke” and mentions *thaumazw* to be a useful word in order to express astonished aggravation over the recipients’ ungratefulness. The existence of mixed forms is considered self-evident (see types 56 and 64 in A. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, [Scholars Press, 1988] 69-81). According to the author, Galatians is a mixture of the ironic and the rebuking types.

The author is of the opinion that the irony of Galatians becomes especially obvious in 1:6. Here Paul admits that others had come to Galatia with another good news than his, and then he immediately curses the messengers of the good news. The strategy then is to use ironical exaggeration and caricature in order to create astonishment and then shock beyond measure. According to the author, such an argumentation corresponds to how a desparate

parent who tries to save his child from destruction would act: “such rhetoric is not meant to portray the peers accurately, nor their parents... the rhetoric is intended only to shock and forever render unimaginable the powerful charm of acceptance by another court of reputation.... It is in this kind spirit that Galatians was written, I believe: by a parental figure, anxious that his children would take the road of compromise... and destroy themselves before they have had a chance to grow up...” (60-61).

By distinguishing between situational discourse and narrative discourse, the author applies a methodological approach that resembles my own analytical model for Galatians (see Mitternacht, *Forum für Sprachlose*, ConBibNTS 30 [Almqvist & Wiksell, 1999] 73-108). In Galatians, there is a basic difference between passages that speak directly to the recipients of the letter (situational discourse: 1:1-9; 3:1-5; 4:12-20; 5:2-18; 5:24—6:18) and other passages brought in as supporting arguments, but with only indirect relevance for the situation in Galatia (narrative discourse: 1:13—2:21; 3:6—4:11; 4:22-30; 5:19-23). Between these two main categories we find at times transitional material that binds the discourses together (1:10-12; 4:21; 4:31—5:1). The primary information about the recipients’ situation in Galatia should be deduced from situational discourse passages (62). The narrative paragraphs are “better suited to testing the hypothesis formulated from the situational discourses and less so from which it can be reliably constructed” (63).

The second main section (“Identifying the Players and Exigencies,” 73-200), tries to penetrate the difficult circumstances that have come about as a result of Paul’s missionary activity in Galatia, and also the “influencers” who tried to influence the letter recipients. Ironically, it was Paul’s way of presenting his gospel that caused a number of problems that were difficult to handle: his promise that a new age had begun, when gentiles were to be counted as full members of the community of the righteous *without* circumcision and only through faith in Christ, and the unreasonable demand that the social control agents of the Jewish community should accept such a claim. As representatives of an exposed minority group, the social control agents were themselves in a unstable situation and had to answer not just to their own, but also to the guardians of the larger local society (14, 91-94). For them, gentile Christ-believers were “righteous gentile guests or perhaps liminals who appear to want to be adopted into the family. For the addressees in these social situations, completion of the ritual process of circumcision may seem but a small price to pay. For the rights they have considered theirs as a result of their incorporation into this Jewish community only existed to the degree that these rights are recognized by the guardians of the communal norms” (98-99).

In the third main section of the book (“New Construction of the Galatian Context,” 201-316), the author presents his construction (not *re*-construction) of the situation in Galatia. The inter- or intra-*Christian* context, which most interpreters consider self-evident, is replaced by the author with an inter- or intra-*Jewish* context, where Christ-believers are seen as part of

the synagogue community. Here, in my view, lies the most important contribution of Nanos' reading of Galatians.

According to the author there is no evidence that the influencers were opponents of Paul, sent out from Jerusalem to Galatia in order to counteract his mission: "They are Galatians too. They are members of the larger Jewish communities of Galatia, entrusted with the responsibility of conducting Gentiles wishing more than guest status within the communities through the ritual process of circumcision by which this is accomplished" (6).

The influencers are not opponents to the message about Christ. It is not in their interest to counteract Paul's position in that regard. By speaking of another gospel Paul credits their message with being another Christ message: "his ironic point is that this other message has no standing as good news except to the degree that the addressees foolishly respond to it as though it were." Also, since Paul is not arguing against Christ-believing Jews, his criticism against the law is only a criticism against gentiles submitting to the law and becoming Jews, but not against the law as such.

As any other attempt, this construction of the Galatian situation and the so-called influencers is one among several. The text is complex and scholars will continue to disagree on its main purpose and meaning. For my part, I have learned a lot from this book and in many respects I am in agreement with Nanos. Still there remain a few question marks. I am not convinced that one can disregard chapter 2 completely and assert that the references to Jerusalem and the leaders there have no relevance for the Galatian situation. Yet, I agree with Nanos' construction of an intra-Jewish context of the Galatian situation. Even if the "advisors" (as I have called the influencers, *ibid.*, 319-20), had support from Jerusalem, the problems in Galatia can still be home-made and related directly to the socio-religious conditions within the local communities. The reference in 6:12 that the influencers were persecuted for the cross of Christ (which is often used to support the view that the influencers must have come from outside) can be explained in a number of ways, and does not pose any real threat to Nanos' construction.

Nanos' description of the argumentation of Galatians as a well-meaning ironic rebuke of a parent who uses strong language because of his care for his children is what convinces me the least. To my own mind, Paul's uncompromising demands are based on self-interest, and his claim that the recipients must accept their marginalization regardless of the circumstances goes beyond ironic rebuke. Outbursts like 3:1 or 5:12 seem too hostile to vindicate the impression of a well-meaning ironic intent that would solve or ease the threat implied by the assertions (see Mitternacht, *STK 79* (2003) 31-41).

All in all, *Irony of Galatians* can hardly be over-recommended. It is a must for any interpreter of Paul. Anyone willing to confront the damaging effect the law-gospel antithesis has on the relationship between Judaism and Christendom will need to be prepared for an unsettling experience.