

Reproduced here with permission from *Kesher 15* (Summer, 2002) pp. 90-96.

THE IRONY OF GALATIANS

BY MARK NANOS • FORTRESS PRESS • ©2002

Reviewed by Russell L. Resnik

When our local Messianic synagogue was just getting started, an anonymous “sister in Jesus” left a commentary on the book of Galatians on my doorstep. I never read the book, but I suspect my “sister” feared that I was on inherently risky, if not heretical, ground in seeking to establish a Messianic Jewish congregation. The label most likely to be applied to me from her study of Galatians would be “Judaizer.”

Messianic Jews, however, are not the only ones who have suffered misunderstanding because of some all-too-common interpretations of Galatians. Judaism as a whole, and especially its most prized possession, the Torah, have been maligned, and worse, in response to Shaul’s letter. Mark Nanos provides a radically different reading of Galatians that remedies the usual anti-Jewish polemic. He dedicates his book to the victims of the *Shoah*, for reasons that he explains in his acknowledgement.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the victims of certain interpretations of Paul’s voice, especially those who have suffered the Shoah. Their suffering cannot be separated from prejudices resulting from those interpretations any more than it can be wholly attributed to them. To them I dedicate the effort represented in this book.¹

Nanos argues that Galatians has been chronically misunderstood and misapplied, often at great cost to the Jewish people. The key to a better understanding of Galatians is to recognize it as a letter of ironic rebuke, which was an established epistolary form in the First Century Mediterranean world. Shaul writes not systematically, but “with the expression of parental-style disappointment and instruction.”²

¹ Nanos, *Galatians*, p. ix.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

This understanding of irony yields a distinctive interpretation of 1:6-7, which becomes foundational for Nanos's reading of the entire epistle.

I am surprised that you are so quickly defecting from him who called you in [the] grace [of Christ] for a different good news, which is not another except [in the sense] that there are some who unsettle you and want to undermine the good news. . . .³

The commentary I received years ago explains these verses in this way: "Paul is telling these people that the Jews are telling them that their message is just another form of the Gospel—but it's not." Instead, it is a "new Jewish 'gospel' " that has "something other than grace . . . mixed in with [it]."⁴

In contrast, Nanos argues that Shaul is using the phrase "a different good news" ironically. Shaul's opponents in Galatia (whom Nanos refers to simply as "the influencers") have "good news" for the Galatians, which Shaul says is really not good news at all. Their good news is that the Galatian believers can become fully accepted into the Jewish community and take advantage of its legal standing in the Roman world, and its general religious attractiveness, simply by converting. Shaul has led the Galatians to believe that they already share in the blessing of Abraham and the privileges of the people of Israel by trusting in Messiah. The influencers are representatives of the Jewish community in Galatia who inform the Galatian believers that they

--

³ Ibid., p. 286. Although not stated explicitly, the translation is Nanos's. I have left out a number of Greek words that he included in brackets.

⁴ Yandian, Bob. *Galatians: The Spirit-Controlled Life*. (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1985): p. 46.

are mistaken in this belief. But—good news—there is a remedy; if they will undergo traditional proselyte conversion, they can gain full admission to the people of Israel.

This assessment of the conflict in Galatia, of course, departs dramatically from the usual interpretation, which sees the “different good news” as a different version of the story of Messiah, a version inferior to Shaul’s and corrupted by a misguided loyalty to Judaism and its Torah. Those whom Nanos calls the influencers are called the opposition in this interpretation. They are misguided believers promoting a deficient doctrine of justification by faith that threatens to bring the Galatians into spiritual bondage. Generally, this opposition party has been corrupted in its theology by overexposure to Judaism, or a failure to break free of the old religious system and enter the liberty of Messiah. As my old commentary implies, they are Jews and not real Christians. Obviously, such an interpretation will only reinforce anti-Jewish and anti-Torah attitudes.

Nanos claims that we must understand the identity of Shaul’s opposition in Galatia to gain a proper reading of the entire letter. He develops the hypothesis that they are not divergent believers, but Jewish authorities who do not believe in Yeshua at all. They have legitimate concerns to maintain a proper boundary for Jewish identity in the midst of Roman paganism. They are neutral concerning the Galatians’ belief in Messiah, but refuse to accept Shaul’s claim that this belief by itself gives the Galatians some sort of share in the community and privileges of Israel. If the Galatians desire that, say the influencers, they need to undergo full proselyte conversion. Hence, Nanos asks, is not the real issue in Galatians “whether the addressees have a legitimate status claim while remaining Gentiles, and not a concern (more appropriate for a Christbelieving proselyte anyway) for Torah observance plus faith in Christ?”⁵ In other words, Galatians is not primarily about a “lawfree gospel” or justification by faith, but about the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God through faith in Messiah.

--

⁵ Nanos, *Galatians*, p. 143.

Nanos's development of this alternate reading is thorough and widely researched, and yields some major implications for Messianic Judaism.

First, Nanos provides an example of how we are to deal with the supposed anti-Jewish content of much of the *Brit Khadasha*. He brings great thoroughness and deep acquaintance with the contemporary literature to his interpretation of Galatians to free the book of anti-Jewishness. As Messianic Jews, we ultimately have the responsibility to provide this sort of interpretation for the entire *Brit Khadasha*, which we rightly claim as part of our canon. As a form of Judaism, we must provide a reading of the *Brit Khadasha* that honors the Jewish people and counters anti-Semitism.

Second, Nanos upholds Torah observance for Jewish believers by showing that observance was never in question in Galatians, and was indeed characteristic of the letter's author, Shaul of Tarsus. "In fact, nothing I have encountered in Galatians has led me to question the working assumption that the Shaul who writes this letter is a Torah-observant Jew, known as such by his addressees when he had lived among them." On the basis of his own commitment to keep Torah, Paul warns the Galatians that if they convert, they too will be obligated to keep the whole Torah. (5:3) If Paul was non-observant, the Galatians could have countered that they could undergo conversion (for whatever reason) and, like Paul, remain free from the obligation of Torah.⁶

This continued keeping of Torah by Jewish believers underlines Nanos's portrayal of Torah as the unique inheritance of the Jewish people. If the Galatians become Jews, they will automatically become responsible for the full obligation of Torah, because this is what distinguishes Jews in every age. Such an argument counters the claim of some within Messianic Judaism who promote a Torah movement for Gentiles. Torah has application to all believers, but remains the unique covenant docu-

--

⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

ment of the Jewish people. This truth underlies the entire argument of Galatians, according to Nanos.

Nanos touches directly on a related issue of growing interest in Messianic Jewish circles, the conversion of Gentile believers in our midst. In the case of the Galatians, writes Nanos,

...they were being persuaded that as long as they remained merely pagans in status—regardless of whether labeled righteous or Godfearing or in some other way—they were excluded from the position of equality with proselytes or Jews as the children of God; they would not receive the full acceptance they so earnestly sought. They may have thought that they were sons and daughters of Abraham on the teaching of Paul, but they were not; they had either misunderstood Paul or been misinformed by him.⁷

Here we have the key to Shaul's vehemence in his letter to the Galatian congregation, to his entire tone of irony. The solution proposed by the influencers—conversion for the Galatian believers—carries an implicit denial of Shaul's message that they are already children of God by faith. This solution would have resolved the Galatians' sense of marginalization, and preserved the proper boundaries of Judaism, at least in the influencers' understanding, but it would also have denied the reality of Gentile incorporation through the sacrifice of Messiah alone. This incorporation is one of the clearest signs that Messiah has arrived and brought a foretaste of the age to come when all nations will worship the God of Israel. Conversion of Gentile believers to Judaism, in the Galatian context, counters Shaul's claim that Messiah has arrived and brought the power and reality of the age to come to those who believe.

We may still question how to apply this perspective on conversion today, when the status of Judaism within the larger society is radically different from the First Century. Before the destruction of Jerusalem in CE 70, Judaism was an authorized religion with a long and honored history. Gentile believers in Messiah might desire conversion as an easy way to come into the mainstream and establish a new identity after they had for-

--

⁷ Ibid., pp. 243-244.

saken paganism. But today, when Judaism is no more favored than Christianity and often carries its own stigma, might there not be other reasons for conversion? Some Gentiles within Messianic congregations today might contemplate conversion to resolve personal identity issues. But are there not others who might be motivated by *Ahavat Yisrael*, a love for the Jewish people and a desire to share more deeply in their story, even though this adds nothing to their status as children of God?

Finally, Nanos helps to debunk the supposed tension between grace and Torah. In Galatians, Shaul is not preaching against Torah, but against conversion as the means of incorporation into God's people. At the heart of his gospel is the announcement that *Olam haBa* (the age to come) has already dawned in Messiah. A remnant from all the nations, therefore, has already been brought near to worship the God of Israel. To require that this remnant convert to Judaism, which inherently means coming into observance of Torah, would be to deny the character of the new age in Messiah. Hence, Shaul's problem is not with Torah or Judaism as such, but with the denial of the radical implications of the appearance of Messiah. As Nanos points out, "[a]part from the historical anomaly within Jewish (Israelite) social space for which Paul argues—Gentiles as full members without becoming proselytes because of the actions of God in Jesus Christ—the tensions that arise between grace and Law or works and faith do not arise."⁸ This claim is obviously of great import to Messianic Judaism, adding theological weight to a claim that many of us have been making for years, and confirming our embrace of the *Brit Khadasha* as compatible with Jewish identity.

Nanos has produced another book, like his first (*The Mystery of Romans*), which will be of great help to Messianic Judaism. Its broad approach, however, is marred by a dense and, at times, obscure writing style. Both the overall plan of the book and many specific passages could have been improved by

--
⁸ Ibid., p. 231.

more thorough editing. At times, the writing stands in the way of the extremely important message itself.

Furthermore, the interpretive perspective of the book at times is far from obvious. This fact, of course, does not mean that Nanos is wrong, but it does raise the question of Scripture's availability to the common reader. If "all Scripture is given by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17), should not its meaning be readily accessible? Is it possible that this letter could have been so greatly misunderstood for so long? Of course, in the end, we must say that it is possible. After all, the legitimacy of Messianic Judaism itself was ignored or denied within the believing community for most of its history. Like Nanos with Galatians, Messianic Jews are claiming at least implicitly to have corrected misinterpretations that have prevailed for centuries. Nevertheless, precisely because it is so radical, it is all the more important that the interpretation Nanos puts forth be presented in the clearest and most accessible way. One would hope for more popular versions or discussions of *The Irony of Galatians* that would make its insights available to spiritual leaders and serious students of Scripture without the background and perseverance that the current version of the book requires.

Nanos has made a substantial contribution, especially relevant to Messianic Judaism. Indeed, it is a seminal work that one can only hope will find its way into the thinking of average Christians and Jews. A work of great intellectual depth, *The Irony of Galatians* also fulfills the concern expressed in its dedication to the victims of the *Shoah*. It helps to free this profound letter from anti-Semitic distortion to carry the message that God intended all along.

Russell L. Resnik is General Secretary of the UMJC.