

Review of Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians*, by Anders Runesson, in *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 68 (2003): 221-23 [in Swedish].

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In recent years several prominent scholars have published studies that make a serious effort to interpret Paul within his Jewish context. Among these is Mark Nanos, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament who has won recognition as an innovative and insightful Pauline scholar. In 1996, his *Mystery of Romans* won the National Jewish Book Award for Jewish/Christian Relations. *The Irony of Galatians* is the revised version of his 2000 Ph.D. dissertation at The University of St. Andrews, Scotland, under the supervision of Philip Esler. There is no doubt that Nanos's latest study is a sign of—and introduces—a new era in the study of Paul.

The book is divided into a Prologue and three main sections, which, in turn, are subdivided into a total of ten chapters. In addition, there is an Appendix, a Bibliography, and Indexes of Subjects, Ancient Texts, and Modern Authors. After summarizing the results of the book in the Prologue, the first section deals with the methodological basis for the study. The fundamental problem concerns how to acquire the information to be used in the re-construction of the socio-political context of the letter that is required to interpret the text, when the letter is almost the only source to which we have access. The issue of circularity is significant: from the letter we deduce historical information, and then we use this information to interpret the letter. Nanos provides convincing reasons in favor of interpreting the text on the basis of rhetorical conventions of the time, conventions found in ancient rhetorical handbooks. Nanos claims that, in Galatians, Paul employs a technique known from ancient letters that use irony to rebuke the recipients. The rhetorical analysis becomes a window into history. This way of de-rhetorizing, or unveiling, the text challenges more traditional interpretations, which depend on the apparent surface level meaning of Paul's statements. Nanos seeks to clarify the way in which "irony undermines the ostensible meanings implied at the surface level of Paul's rhetorical rebuke" (p. 10).

The second section of the book identifies the different players in the letter and analyzes the problems facing the letter's recipients in Galatia when viewed from the various perspectives of the different players. Paul's position is not privileged, as if there was no other point of view on these matters, and the perspectives of the other players are also given consideration. This approach is similar to that of Dieter Mitternacht, whose dissertation on Galatians was published in 1999 (*Forum für Sprachlose*). Nanos seeks to portray and label the addressees and those who want to influence them in a direction Paul finds unacceptable—those whom scholars have pejoratively labeled 'troublemakers,' 'opponents,' 'Judaizers'—in a neutral way, as "influencers," that strives towards a characterization of them on their own terms.

The third section explores the political and religious situations of the players within the context of the Roman Empire, when Judaism was a permitted religion with the right to organize itself as *collegia*. The Jewish *collegia*—the synagogues—had extended rights given them by Julius Caesar, which allowed them reprieve from participation in the cult of the emperor. This did not mean that the Jewish associations were not threatened, however; they often had to struggle to establish their right to exist, to which Josephus and Philo bear witness. This political situation is

an important component of Nanos's interpretation. The discussion in part three is decisive for the interpretation presented in part two. The results from those two parts will therefore be presented together in this review.

According to Nanos, the addressees were non-Jews who accepted Paul's message and believed that through Jesus they had the right to full membership in the people of God without circumcision. Those who wanted to influence the addressees were Jews who did not belong to the subgroup of Christ-believers present in the synagogue, but who were responsible for taking proselyte candidates through the process of conversion. Important here is the thesis that no split between the synagogue and the church had yet developed. The people who are portrayed as Paul's opponents had discovered that the addressees, without undertaking circumcision, had begun considering themselves to be full members of the synagogue communities, and had therefore ceased to fulfill their duties towards the Roman state. This created a problem for the influencers, since this kind of disruption of the socio-religious boundaries may lead to persecution of the Jews, who had the right to refrain from participation in the cult of the emperor and other Roman state activities considered unacceptable by them. For the influencers and the Roman authorities, circumcision became an important social marker that defines synagogue membership. In order to avoid pressure leading to persecution, the influencers tried to convince the addressees to comply with state obligations (Gal 4:8-11) until they had undertaken the rite of proselyte conversion. (Belief in Christ was thus not the problem addressed by the influencers, since such belief was considered just one among many expressions of Jewish faith within the synagogues.) The addressees of Paul's letter responded positively to this solution to the urgent socio-political and religious problems they experienced following the influencers' negative reaction to their claims.

Paul, on the other hand, reacts extremely negatively when the news of this development reaches him. The explanation to his reaction lies in Paul's theology of mission: if Israel's God is the God of the whole world, both of Jews and non-Jews, it is crucial that non-Jewish males are not circumcised when incorporated into the people of God. Circumcision would make them Jews and obligate them to keep the whole Law (Gal 5:3), which would, by implication, mean that God would be the God of the Jews only. This, in turn, would falsify the claim that Israel's God was the God of all nations. For Paul, if the addressees were to follow the influencers' advice, that would demonstrate that the Christ event had not brought the dawn of the eschatological age when non-Jews—as non-Jews—would 'come to Zion' and join the Jews in the worship of the God of Israel. The fact that the addressees had to suffer social marginalization if they followed Paul's teaching was not considered by Paul a reason to choose another way: as Jesus, Paul had suffered, and preparedness to suffer was an integral part of the identity of the Christ-believer. To reject suffering was to reject Christ. Using irony as a weapon, Paul attacks the proponents of this threat against his theological worldview, ridiculing and belittling those who think differently.

Nanos's interpretation of Galatians and the players reflected in the letter differs in many respects from that of previous interpreters. It is precisely the emphasis on rhetoric as a necessary interpretive tool and the insistence that social and political aspects must be taken into account when reading Galatians in first-century Jewish context that makes Nanos's study so interesting. In my opinion, the burden of evidence is now switched. Those who argue for a more traditional

interpretation of Galatians and the players involved will have to address not only Nanos's analysis of specific passages, but also the overall approach of the book.

This, of course, does not mean that *Irony* is without flaws. The repetitive style is a minor annoyance. On the other hand, these repetitions of the main hypotheses and theories function to emphasize the message over and over again. Further, although Nanos is correct in avoiding references to rabbinic literature, when he does include such quotes, as in the case of conversion rituals (pp. 88-89), one would wish for a little more caution. The use of rabbinic literature in the study of first century Judaism, including the Jesus movement, is problematic not only for chronological reasons, but also because it represents only one of several Jewish perspectives. The rabbis, who like other groups had their own interpretations of Jewish customs and rituals, were not as influential even in third century Jewish society as their texts seem to suggest, much less so any perceived first century forerunner of this movement.

A question that needs further treatment concerns the structures of authority within and between synagogues and between the Christ-believing subgroups, both in the Diaspora and in Palestine. Should an analysis of the situation in Jerusalem and Antioch affect our understanding of Asia Minor? There are several indications that the different local synagogues in the diaspora were independent from any supra-local authority. This would have affected the earliest Christ-believing subgroups. In fact, such a reconstruction of patterns of authority within the first century synagogue supports Nanos's interpretation of the situation in Galatia, and the thesis would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of this question.

These minor flaws do not undermine the overall impression that this book is a thoroughly researched and sharp interpretation of Paul's letter to the Christ-believers in Galatia. It exemplifies the scholarly community at its best: researchers from different backgrounds join in dialogue and interpretation of historical phenomena using common, agreed upon methodological tools. The unavoidable subjective elements in every interpretation are negotiated in the inter-subjective scholarly pursuit of knowledge, leading to a higher degree of probability of the interpretations offered. A rich diversity and a dynamic scholarly dialogue are necessary for the establishment of any future consensus. *The Irony of Galatians* is a welcome and important contribution to the positive recent development within this field of New Testament studies.