

## Introduction to Galatians

**Authorship:** There is very little doubt among scholars that Paul wrote this letter, but it was also quite common in Paul's days that an *amanuensis* or secretary took part in such writings. It is known from one of Paul's own statements that he did not write every word of his letters (6:11). In other texts Paul made a point that he had written the greeting with his own hand (2 Thess. 3:17; 1 Cor. 16:21). Such a statement would not have to be made if he had written the whole script. So the question becomes, how much was Paul involved in the actual writing? Did he dictate the text word for word, or give an overall picture of what he wanted to say and let the secretary fill in the blanks? This is not an important discussion for our purposes, but a possibility that might well be worth noting.

**Date:** There are a number of issues that have to be considered when attempting to determine the date of the writing. This paper does not have the space to give much of a statement about this question. Here are some of the factors involved in the debate. The date of the letter depends on whether the letter was written to churches in northern or southern Galatia. The difference in dating based on these two locations has to do with the timing of Paul's missionary journeys and therefore, when he would have written a letter after his initial contact with either location. Another consideration has to do with the chronology of the text. Was the trip to Jerusalem that is described in 2:1-10 before the conference in Acts 15 or is it describing the events of Acts 15? So, might the letter have been written before or after Acts 15? Scholars are somewhat divided on this issue. Based on these factors, the writing of Galatians could have been written in the late 40s, making it one of Paul's earliest letters, or it could have been written in the middle 50s. However, not knowing for sure when the letter was written does not keep us from understanding the major thrust of Galatians. We also need to remember that understanding every aspect of the letter is not easy and one needs to be humble about his/her own opinion.

**The Opponents:** Although there is no statement in the text that specifically identifies Paul's opponents, there are statements in the text that aid reader's understanding of the

issues. The statement in 1:8 discouraging people from listening to angels if their message differs from Paul's gospel may indicate that the opponents were claiming that their teaching came from a higher authority than Paul i.e., angels. That Paul felt a need to defend himself (1:11-2:10) suggests that the opponents were challenging Paul's apostleship. It is apparent the opponents believed a relationship with God was based on the observance of Torah (especially circumcision: 5:2; 6:12-13, 16-17), and believed the observance of Torah was the power behind their ability to deal with the weakness of their fleshly nature (5:16-24). Paul's reference to his opponents as false believers (2:4) and his point that he had been given the right hand of fellowship by the pillars in Jerusalem (2:9) suggest that these opponents were very likely Jewish Christians who had a connection with the church in Jerusalem. They may have believed the gospel Paul preached was incomplete without an emphasis on the observance of Torah.

***First Century Struggles:*** It is very apparent from the NT that there was a struggle in the early church around the relationship between Christianity and Judaism and the observance of Torah. From our limited history such a discussion may seem ridiculous. But when all you have known and practiced about God and religion comes from Torah, trying to figure out how Jesus fits into all of that was an impossible task without revelation from God. Circumcision as a sign of covenant relationship with Yahweh went all the way back to Abraham (Gen. 17). The Mosaic Law came directly from God and was given from a quaking mountain. It had defined Israel for centuries and had set Israel (in their minds) apart from the rest of the world.

And let's not forget that contemporary people have had problems with less important issues that have had much less history. Due to an established tradition, we have argued over whether the Lord's Supper has to be before or after the preaching. We have struggled with whether we can have a service without an invitation, or whether women can wear pants, as well as many others issues. Christians today think that the Law of Christ and our country's laws have the power to make us better morally. We keep wanting congress to pass laws to make people live a certain way. That is not much different that the opponents of Paul thinking it was the observance of Torah that made Jews moral and would make Gentiles a moral people. Christians have even been

afraid if preachers don't preach a lot of "thou shall not's," and have believed that talking about grace leads to all kinds of immorality and lawlessness. Our struggles do not have near the history of circumcision and other Jewish rituals.

***Nature of the Letter:*** This is not a feel good letter. There is not the usual greeting and thanksgiving that is found in many of Paul's letters. Paul is very angry with what was going on in the Galatia region and was very passionate about the situation.