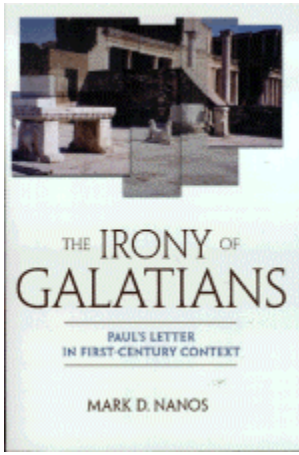


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Nanos, Mark D.

The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context

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In *The Irony of Galatians*, Mark Nanos provides an engaging historical-critical investigation into the social context of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Nanos questions the received scholarly tradition that Paul's ire in Galatians is directed against the influence of rival Christian evangelists who, in Paul's absence, have persuaded Paul's Gentile followers that they need to become more rigorous in their dedication to Torah if they are to be counted among the righteous ones of God. In place of the notion that the problematic situation in Galatia is caused by outside representatives of a competing gospel (with a different notion of the place of *halakah* in Christian community from that of Paul's), Nanos suggests that Jewish representatives of local Galatian synagogues are the indirect target of Paul's polemic. These synagogal representatives, having developed a significant relationship with Paul's Gentile followers after Paul's departure, are encouraging the "Christians" to acquire the benefits of Jewish identity by means of the traditional route of inclusion within the Jewish subculture of antiquity—that of the proselyte. This would mean full-fledged socialization into the Jewish community and the acceptance of the guidance of the law according to local custom. This transfer of allegiance from pagan to Jewish culture would be symbolized by the appropriate rites of passage. For men, this entailed circumcision.

According to Nanos, one can easily understand the attraction of this gracious offer by the local Jewish leadership to the Pauline Gentiles to become Jewish. The Gentiles-become-Jews would inherit an established community network with significant social and material resources. They also would fall under the legal protection of Judaism, an

established and tolerated *religio licita*. On the other hand, if Paul's Gentiles do not make this formally recognized move into Judaism, they will be perceived as a recent association of individuals that (1) has removed itself from participation in cults at the civic and imperial levels, (2) worships a Judean crucified by Rome, and (3) is shunned by the recognized local Jewish community. If the Christ followers do not become proselytes, then they become vulnerable to the social controls a *polis* would impose upon a group that resists participation in the public discourse of provincial life in Asia Minor during the early empire.

What upsets Paul, in Nanos's reading, is the ease with which the Galatians have been persuaded by representatives of the local Jewish communities that it is in their own best interest that they become proselytes. Paul informs his communities in Galatia that such thinking misses a central point of the gospel. In Christ the new age has dawned. Things are no longer as they appear. The old way of thinking about how Gentiles are included among the righteous of God (circumcision) has been superseded by the revelation that it is precisely as *Gentiles*, as members of the nations, that they have come into a full relationship with God through Christ. If they accept the offer to step into the Jewish social world, then the Gentiles empty the cross of its eschatological content.

In defending this interpretation of the Galatian situation and, in particular, the identity of those who are influencing Paul's communities, Nanos works creatively but carefully with his material. He is quite aware of the problems of this interpretation and deals at length with some of the many Galatian texts that seem to refute it. Two in particular are singled out: Gal 6:12 ("It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ"); and 1:6-7 ("I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel..."). A straightforward reading of these passages (i.e., the traditional view) suggests that those who are influencing Paul's followers are fellow believers in "the gospel" who have a different notion of the role of the law in the *ekklesia* than does Paul.

Nanos deals with the first passage (6:12) by suggesting that here Paul communicates that the local Jewish community's outreach to the Christ believers is motivated by self-interest. The intent is to circumvent anticipated repercussions by local civic authorities who understand it to be the responsibility of the Jewish leadership to compel those who claim the prerogatives of Jewish status to be part of the acknowledged Jewish community. If the Jewish leaders do not exert their authority (while the followers of Christ opt out of participating in the city's other cults), the Jewish community itself will fall prey to the resultant resentment and aggression of the city's non-Jewish inhabitants. If the Christ believers are not reined in, then the Jewish community could itself be "persecuted for the cross of Christ."

Nanos's reading of 1:6-7 is more complex in that he perceives here a Pauline use of irony. This brings us to the methodological heart of Nanos's rereading of Galatians. Nanos understands Paul's letter to the Galatians to be an example of an established rhetorical form: an "ironic rebuke." Paul's use of *thaumazō* ("I am amazed") at 1:6 is read in the light of such rhetorical traditions. When Paul says that he is "amazed" that the Galatians are so easily turning to a "different gospel," Nanos suggests that Paul is actually communicating (to the recipients who would appreciate the irony) that he is neither "amazed" nor is it a "gospel" to which the addressees are defecting. Indeed, what Paul intends to say is: (1) though disappointed in the behavior of his Galatian Gentiles, their response to the Jewish offer of inclusion was predictable (it is the easy way out of the status discontinuity they are experiencing); and (2) what the Galatian Gentiles imagine to be a logical extension of the "good news in Christ"—their being circumcised and becoming Jewish—actually represents a defection from the gospel's intent. A decision to move "forward" into Judaism actually represents a backslide into "old age" thinking and behavior.

In revisiting the question of the identity of those who are influencing Paul's community in Galatia, Nanos has done great service to those who are interested in puzzling out the complex social reality that was first-century Judaism. The work, in addition to its review of ancient ironic rhetorical conventions, is a treasury of insight on many subjects. For example, Nanos's understanding of the distinction between "situational discourse" in Galatians (i.e., text that is particularly helpful in trying to identify the players involved in Galatia; e.g., Gal 1:1-9) and "narrative discourse" (i.e., text that has little direct value in identifying the specific situation in Galatia; e.g., the autobiographical section in 1:13-2:21) is critical to his argument and helpful in general. His discussion on the "evil eye" warning of Gal 3:1-5 is insightful. His reflections over Paul's understanding of law in terms of love of neighbor (228-29) are brilliant. The work also engages the important issue of how Galatians has been used in the history of interpretation to stereotype Judaism and/or early Jewish believers in Christ in pejorative terms (e.g., legalistic, exclusivist) so that a "Pauline" Christianity might shine the brighter. In particular, Nanos's discussion of how Paul's debate partners have been characterized in the history of scholarship is telling (e.g., as "Judaizers," "opponents," "rivals," "outsiders," "agitators," "troublemakers," etc.). Nanos provides a helpful correction to this tradition when he points out that Judaism of the first century was anything but "exclusive." Although "ethnocentric," Judaism was graciously inclusive and had established rituals to help individuals negotiate the complex boundaries between the Jewish and Gentile social worlds.

The work is based on the author's dissertation, and it does reflect aspects of that genre. I found it a bit repetitive. It could have been edited down into a much more concise piece. I am also not persuaded that one can separate out "belief in Christ" from the sociological issues of group inclusion within Judaism as easily as does Nanos. His thesis assumes that "belief in Christ" would not be a divisive issue in synagogal life at this time. No doubt

some kinds of “belief in Christ” were not as troubling as others (to some kinds of Jewish subgroups). Yet I suspect that, for example, the notion that Jesus—who was hung on a tree—could be the Jewish Messiah was problematic to at least some Jews of the period (cf. Deut 21:22-23; Gal 3:13). Could a Gentile follower of Christ pass through the proselyte socialization process and still hold to the notion that the form of Jesus’ death was *not* viewed in unfavorable terms by the law?

I deeply appreciate the heuristic value of Nanos’s radical reframing of the social context of Galatians. I suspect that much of his revisionist take on that context may be more right than wrong. Unfortunately, the ironic readings that support his central historical hypothesis are not verifiable, something Nanos knows well. Scholars will continue to reflect over his central contention regarding the Jewish identity of the “influencers.” Yet even if one shifts the identity of the “influencers” back into the traditional interpretation of evangelists of “another” gospel active in Paul’s communities, much of Nanos’s refined reading of Galatians is of value. Taken as a whole, Nanos’s exegetical reflections in *The Irony of Galatians*, as were those in his earlier *The Mystery of Romans* (1996), provide a refreshing counterweight to the pejorative characterizations of Second Temple Judaism that, even in the wake of the “new perspective” on Paul, still plague much New Testament scholarship.