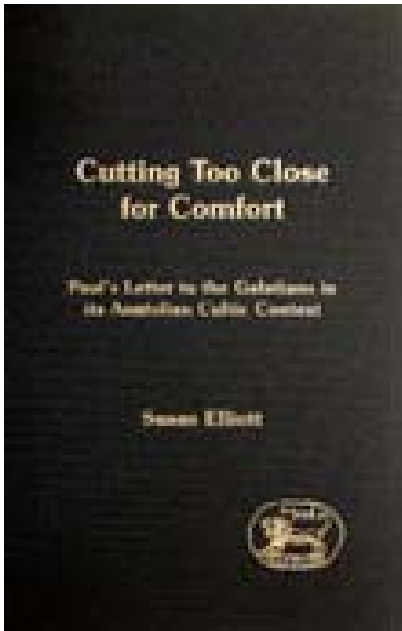


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Elliott, Susan

Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians in Its Anatolian Cultic Context

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Steven A. Hunt
Gordon College
Barrington, NH 03825

The premise of Elliott's work is so remarkably simple it is a wonder the book was not written long ago: Paul did not address his opponents in Galatia; he addressed the "*the churches of Galatia*" (1:2). Her study therefore emphasizes the former pagan cultic context of the recipients. While circumcision remains the central issue, Paul's concern over the issue "does not originate from an antipathy towards the Law but from an antipathy toward the cult of the Mother of the Gods and an abhorrence of self castration" (13). This rereading of Galatians produces radical results.

Galatians 4:21–5:1 is ultimately the foundation upon which Elliott's entire thesis rests. She begins, then, by laying bare some of the perennial difficulties in Paul's allegory regarding Hagar and the free woman. She argues that "Gal. 4.21–5.1 gives every appearance of a self-evident chain for which the audience does not require extensive explanation" (21). More specifically, Elliott's treatment of the textual and grammatical issues in 4:25, the missing elements in 4:26, Paul's use of Isa 54:1 in 4:27, as well as Paul's negative portrayal of the law throughout the section raises several important questions. Elliott tantalizingly suggests throughout that all these problems will be resolved by a reading that takes seriously the Anatolian context (24, 26, 27, 29, 31).

Elliott's treatment of 3:19–4:11 skims the general pattern of the family system in the Greco-Roman world. After briefly tracing the means of the Galatians' transition to sonship, she notes both the similarities as well as the differences between son/slave and adult son/heir in Greco-Roman thought. A helpful discussion of adoption, the pedagogue (which she reads with the majority as a negative casting of the law), and the custodian in antiquity follows.

Elliott's survey of the always problematic στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου concludes judiciously: "whether the στοιχεῖα are understood as elemental in the moral or physical or cosmic order, some form of controlling power is understood to inhere in them. By virtue of having such power, they must be considered in some sense beings or entities" (51). She next addresses the obvious question: is the law equated with the στοιχεῖα or one of the στοιχεῖα, or is it merely associated with them? For Elliot, the answer really does not matter—the law is portrayed negatively in any reconstruction.

Elliott turns her attention to Paul's audience and the broad religious ethos of central Anatolia in part 2. Observing the impact on the region of various empires (e.g., Hittite, Phrygian, Lydian, Persian, Greek) as well as contemporary ethnic groups in Paul's day (e.g., Lycians, Carians, Pisidians, Isaurians, Lycaonians, Galatians, Jews), she delves into the "divine judicial system" of the region. Her careful study of "funerary imprecations" and "confession inscriptions/*defixiones*" demonstrates that the deities of Anatolia were viewed as absolute monarchs whose reach touched upon every aspect of life (88). Finally, Elliott describes the important socioeconomic role of cult organizations. She concludes, "Just as in Utah one enters a 'Mormon zone' that pervades community life, so also in Anatolia one enters an 'Anatolian zone' with similarly pervasive influence" (93).

Chapter 4 focuses on one critical feature of Anatolia—the Mountain Mother of the Gods—a goddess variously named in different areas of the region (e.g., Cybele, Agdistis). Elliott dispels the earlier view of the Mother as simply a "fertility goddess," arguing instead that the central identity of the goddess was as an "omnipotent ruler deity, a 'guardian goddess'" (96). Known by the name of Agdistis in Phrygia, she was known more generally elsewhere as the Mother associated with a particular mountain or location. The center of the cult in southern Galatia, for example, would have known her as the Zizimmenē Mother, for the city Zizima near Iconium (114). The center of the cult in northern Galatia, however, would have known her as the Dindymenē Mother, for Mount Dindymus near Pessinus. These were simply local manifestations of the Mountain Mother of the Gods—Agdistis (115–16). As "guardian of the written rules" (123), her association with law proves important for understanding Paul's letter to the Galatians (120). Her civilizing influence notwithstanding, the mother (often viewed with lions in iconography) is the "wildness she brings under control" (125). The "orgiastic disorder"

and “frenzy of her worshippers” is therefore directly related to the wild Mother herself (126).

Elliott next examines the Mother’s associate, the “male” Attis so frequently depicted together with her. Her general description of the iconographic representations and literary portrayals of him are helpful: Attis is always beardless, sometimes very young, other times recently castrated and frequently androgynous. His function as a *gallus*, a castrated servant of the Mother, links him clearly with the *galli*, the castrated men in her service. Elliott then follows Attis back to his legendary beginnings, perhaps as a historical king or high priest for the Mother.

Elliott offers a fine contribution to the study of the *galli*—the Mother’s slaves. Among other things, she describes their initiation ritual, castration, clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, and orgiastic blood-letting ceremonies. She details their position between social boundaries. Most difficult for ancients was their androgyny: they were neither male citizens nor females capable of bearing children (185).

Detailing their sexual activity, Elliott carefully distinguishes between their extremely negative and often lurid portrayal by ancient authors and the reality of their sexual encounters with other males. Their prostitution (as the passive partner) appears to be one means of their support and does not serve a cultic function (180). Relying heavily on Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, Elliott describes the goddess-induced *mania* and the accoutrements of self-punishment. She notes how Hesychius equates an ἀνόητος with a *gallus* (194).

Their roles as healers, prophets, and sacrificial victims (via their self-laceration) could give them quite an influential place in their own native society. They also played an important role in international politics, interceding on behalf of their countrymen with Rome. Elliott finally speculates on the possible motivations of those who became *galli* (221–29).

Elliott returns in part 3 to Paul’s letter to the Galatians. She begins by revisiting the exigence of the letter: Paul seeks to dissuade his audience from getting circumcised. His motivation is critical: “Paul saw circumcision as an especially problematic ritual in a context in which ritual castration was practiced” (233). She begins by detailing Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Anatolian attitudes toward circumcision. The rest of the chapter focuses broadly (and too briefly) on several issues that link the letter of Galatians to this broader Anatolian context. For example, Paul’s emphasis on δικαιοσύνη, its associations with life, and its forensic connotations relate to the broader divine judicial system of Anatolia that also had the power to give life, to condemn and punish.

Δυνάμεις in Paul's letter implies that the Galatians seek deeds of power through circumcision, just as the *galli* manifest the δυνάμεις of the Mother Goddess especially in their castration. Similarly, Paul's emphasis on cursing and blessing throughout the letter relates to the importance of the same in Anatolian culture.

Elliott returns in chapter 8 to the unanswered questions of chapter 1. The difficulties raised by Paul's allegory in 4:21–5:1 take center stage. The seeming self-evident chain of associations following Hagar and "Sarah," heretofore never satisfactorily explained, are explained now in light of the Anatolian context. Hagar in Galatians should be read against the background of the Mountain Mother. She is identified with a mountain called Sinai in the way Agdistus is identified with a mountain called Dindymus. She is in fact the Meter Sinaienē comparable to the Meter Dindymenē (as the Mountain Mother is called near Pessinus). Just as the inhabitants of Pessinus are enslaved in Agdistus's temple state, so also the inhabitants of Jerusalem are enslaved in Hagar's temple state. The images in the section play out this way:

Mother of the Gods = law

Mount Dindymus = Mount Sinai

Agdistus = Hagar

Pessinus = Jerusalem

slaves/children of Agdistus = slaves/children of Hagar

This reconstruction explains why Paul can put this entire allegory before them as self-evident. In sum,

When [the Galatians] heard about Hagar as Mount Sinai, they would hear Hagar as a name like Agdistus, the Mountain Mother's personal name. They would mentally picture Hagar as Mount Sinai, the Mountain Mother overlooking Jerusalem, and they would see Jerusalem as a temple-state inhabited by sacred slaves, a city like Pessinus. They would begin to see the image Paul wants them to have of being "under the Law" (v. 21) as a return to the domination of the Mountain Mother. (263)

Paul's graphic image in this allegory creates a choice for the Galatians: they can either stay with Paul's gospel or opt for circumcision, which would take them back into the world dominated by the Mother. As castration bound the *galli* to the Mother, so circumcision will enslave. Remaining uncircumcised will enable them to continue on as sons and heirs (286).

Elliott argues that the “two ways” presented in Gal 5–6 are integrally related to the rest of the book and associated with the two choices explicit in 4:21–5:1. To read the passage as simply a paraenetic afterthought misses the clear choice between the two ways as they are described by Paul. To opt for circumcision means to opt for a life “under law”—a life of slavery akin to the life of the *galli* before the Mother. On the other hand, to remain uncircumcised is to remain free and to remain within the inheritance given by virtue of their being in Christ.

The final chapter is a thoroughgoing investigation of Gal 3:1–5 emphasizing the allusions to the *galli* in the text. They include the following: ἄνόητος, a term explicitly linked to the *galli*, is found both in 3:1 and 3. The question “Who has bewitched you?” in 3:1b refers to the evil eye and, rather than referring to Paul’s opponents, more likely refers to a deity. She notes that “‘completion in the flesh’ clearly refers to circumcision” in 3:3 (340). She highlights the verb ἐπιτελέομαι, which in various ancient authors was used in reference to the rituals of the *galli*.

Elliott’s work is truly monumental. Acknowledging that “a seminal study” is generally overused in book reviews, it is definitely apropos here. Her presentation, especially in part 2, which details the “Anatolian Cultic Context,” is thoroughly researched, bringing the historical context of the recipients of this letter to life. Still, the general principle of exegesis that maintains that what is unclear should be read in light of what is clear argues against her basic premise. That is, Elliott attempts to make sense of Galatians in the rather dim light of an allegory (4:21–5:1), but so much of Galatians makes eminently good sense as it is generally interpreted by others (whether one prefers Betz, Longenecker, Martyn, Witherington, etc.). The question as I see it now is this: How can these more typical readings of Galatians today be informed and further clarified by Elliott’s crucial observation that Hagar is Mount Sinai (or the Mosaic law) and is therefore like the Mountain Mother of the Gods? I will refer to this book again.