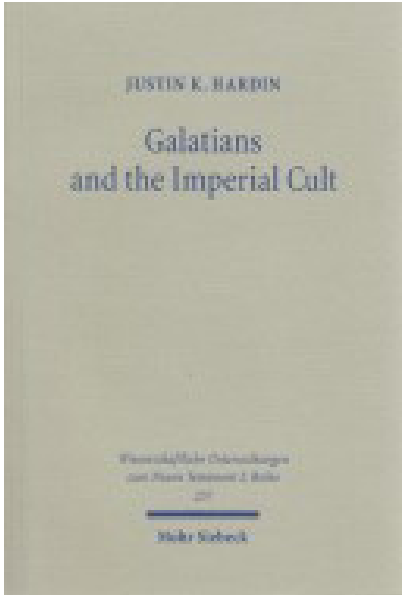


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Hardin, Justin K.

Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First-Century Social Context of Paul's Letter

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The interpretation of Paul's epistles is always challenging, as one can see from the Cambridge University Ph.D. dissertation of Justin K. Hardin (under the supervision of Graham N. Stanton). Hardin defines the imperial cult as the background of the conflict with the Judeo-Christian opponents. Contrary to the traditional interpretation, which sees this controversy as a conflict between Paul and the Judeo-Christians, he ties it in with research results of especially B. W. Winter and T. Witulski and develops their assumptions concerning the imperial cult in an interesting way. He argues: "It will be helpful, then, to assess the available external evidence, especially the archaeological data from Galatia, which may help us to understand this complex better. Our task is thus to determine to what extent we might turn beyond the text of Galatians in order to ascertain what fruit might be yielded for interpreting Paul's letter to the Galatian churches" (4).

Chapter 1 ("Galatians in Its Social and Religious Context," 1–19) deals with an introduction to the aims of this work. Here Hardin concentrates on reception-oriented studies on Galatians as well as the aims, methods, and structure of the book.

Part 1 (chs. 2–3: "The Imperial Cult in the Roman Empire and in Galatia," 21–81) is very interesting. The structure is self-explanatory: chapter 2 (23–48) concentrates on the

“Imperial Cult and Ideology in the Julio-Claudian Period.” The history of events in Hellenistic and ancient Oriental times should have been mentioned at least briefly. The great significance of the imperial cult in the early times of the Roman emperors is discussed impressively: the emperor as benefactor and savior regarding the continuance of the empire as well as his influence on the arrangement of space (in the cities) and time (new calendar) are important topics; this is also true for the development of the imperial cult until the end of the epoch in question. Hardin refers to literature as well as to inscriptions, coins, and architecture. The New Testament scholar who does not deal with this contemporary material regularly is supplied with a wide range of interesting aspects. For example, the different levels of participation of various groups of the population are clearly shown in relation to pagan religions and the celebration of the imperial cult in different events and festivals. I fully agree with Hardin’s conclusion of: “We can no longer be satisfied with the reluctance of some scholars to acknowledge that the imperial cult is a proper backdrop from which to discuss the NT writings”(47).

This becomes evident in the exceptionally diverse presentation of the reception of the imperial cult in the province of Galatia (ch. 3: 49–81). Both northern and southern Galatia are discussed, although the author prefers the south Galatian theory, which he does not explain in more detail (see 18). The evidence of the imperial cult in the north and south of Galatia diminishes the importance of the question as to which part of the province Paul addressed the letter. Hardin rightly points out the great emphasis that was directed at the foundation and expansion of cities in the Julio-Claudian period. This clearly shows the importance of the imperial cult in this part of the Roman Empire. This refers to the imperial ideology (57–66) as well as to the imperial cult (66–78). Due to archeological and literary findings in Ancyra and Pessinus (north) and Pisidian Antioch (south), Hardin focuses on these cities.

Hardin rightly stresses the importance of all these aspects for interpreting Galatians (80), to which he turns his attention in part 2 (chs. 4-6: “Galatians and the Imperial Cult?” 83–155). The texts discussed are Gal 6:12–13 and 4:10.

Chapter 4 (85–115) deals with “Avoiding Persecution and the Imperial Cult (Gal 6.12–13)?” Hardin describes the results as follows: “In this chapter ... we have proposed that the agitators’ aim was not to claim exceptions for Jesus-believers from the imperial cult, but to remove any status ambiguity in society by joining one of the two ‘normalised’ groups (in this case, the Jewish community), both of which participated in the imperial cult” (115). Hardin (differently from B. W. Winter) stresses his viewpoint of the Jews not being released from the imperial cult but executing it specifically (sacrifice and prayers for the emperor, etc.) in a way that did not affect the basic religious themes of Israel (esp. 102–14). Nevertheless, the Jews were granted an “exemption” (103) from the specifically

pagan version of the imperial cult. Hardin's distinction helps one to interpret the persecution (Gal 6:12–13) as one not carried out by the Jews but by the Romans. Therefore, I agree with his second result (in this chapter): “We have also suggested the possibility that the agitators were hoping to avoid persecution from the local Jewish communities, who may have been the initial impetus for civic reprisals by reporting this nascent group to the local authorities” (115). We should question whether there were only local agitators. This need not have been the case (93: “perhaps”). It also refers to the assumption that the Galatian crisis was finally evoked by the imperial cult. But was the imperial cult really the most important aspect in the Galatian crisis? Hardin rightly realizes (127) the problem that Galatians as a whole discusses the obligation of pagan Christians to the Torah. Paul does not fight against two different opponents (as Lütgert once interpreted), but the theological debate (with Jewish Christians) received a political background (the imperial cult).

Chapter 5 (116–47) deals with the second passage, which is interesting for the topic: “‘Days, Months, Seasons, Years’ (Gal 4.10)?” The main question is to which calendar the time references mentioned belong. Hardin has a number of remarkable arguments against the traditional interpretation in relation to the Jewish calendar: the Galatians are not required to follow the Jewish calendar; Galatians has to be seen in another context than Col 2:16; Paul does not use specific Jewish terms regarding the time references (119–21). These arguments should be taken seriously, so that, according to T. Witulski, Gal 4:10 can certainly be interpreted as a part of the Imperial Cult: “days” refers to the birthdays of the imperial family, “months” to July and August, “seasons” to longer festivities, and “years” to the vows of fidelity, which had to be taken every five years and are mentioned in the *Res gestae* of Augustus (123–24). This corresponds very well to the interpretation of φύσει μὴ ὄντες θεοί (Gal 4:8) that claims that the emperor would only be God by θέσις (125).

In chapter 6, the conclusion (148–55), Hardin summarizes: “We have argued that the agitators were compelling the Gentile Jesus-believers to be circumcised only in order that they (the agitators) might avoid persecution from the civic authorities for affiliating with Gentiles who had ceased observing the public worship of the emperor” (150). This sounds sensible, but we must not forget that this is only a theory, as there is no evidence.

The very interesting book ends with “Reflections on Galatians and Pauline Theology” (151–55). It is an important contribution to the interpretation of Galatians in its political and sociocultural setting.