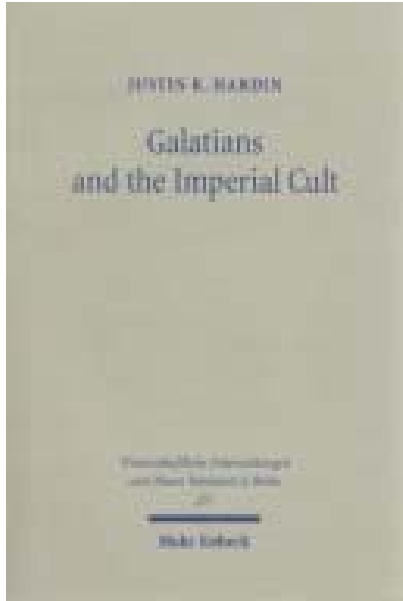


RBL 04/2009



Hardin, Justin K.

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

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/237

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008. Pp. xiv + 190. Paper. €44.00. ISBN 3161495632.

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Hardin's revised version of his 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, written under the supervision of Graham N. Stanton at Cambridge University, is a welcome extension of the insights of several recent approaches to the setting of Paul's letter to the Galatians. In particular, Hardin seeks to deepen the impact of attending to the imperial cult context to decode Paul's rhetoric.

An initial chapter is devoted to explaining the basic ideas of and relevance for imperial cult to the interpretation of Galatians. Texts and material evidence indicate that expression of cult on behalf of the emperor pervaded civic life among all levels of the population and involved participation in public feasts, processions, and games throughout the provinces of the empire under the Julio-Claudians. From the design of civic spaces to the dates on the calendars, it is clear that "imperial cult pervaded all of life and not merely the specified times of 'worship'" (47).

The next chapter discusses these matters in Galatia in particular. Hardin offers a useful discussion of the Roman colonization of Galatia following the victory of Augustus and the vacuum created in central Anatolia with the death of King Amyntas in 25 B.C.E., and thus the threat of the indigenous Homonadeis tribes of the southern region. Colonies

were settled in the north (Ancyra, Tavium, Pessinus) and south (Pisidian Antioch, Comama, Cremna, Olbasa, Parlais, Iconium, Lystra, Ninica). The *via Sebaste*, a four-hundred Roman-mile road circling through the southern colonies and down to the coast, facilitated defense. The construction of imperial cult sanctuaries include grand examples in Ancyra, Pessinus, and Pisidian Antioch. Augustus's *Res Gestae* was immortalized in several locations. Claudius rebuild roads, realigned borders, and established or reestablished cities across south Galatia.

Turning in the next chapter to the rhetoric of Paul's letter, Hardin first focuses on the language of 6:12–13. Here Paul accuses the “agitators” of compelling the addressees to be circumcised in order to gain good standing and to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. With this insight I agree heartily, although not that here “Paul revealed their true intentions” (101, 111, 149–50). Because Hardin seeks to build on this decision, it bears consideration: How can one conclude to know the intentions of parties represented only in hyperbolic Greco-Roman first-century polemic written not by themselves but by someone aiming to undermine their intentions? To hope to be effective, the writer of the accusation has to calculate it to be believable, able to resonate and undermine trust in what the audience has ostensibly supposed about them. But whether it is accurate, in the sense of actually representative of their aims, even whether mirroring them to frame opposition rather than merely reflecting the discursive topics the writer invents to serve his own ends, is another matter. Moreover, do we know that it did resonate with the audience or only that Paul ostensibly supposed it would? If one wishes to judge intentions, we at least have some basis for judging Paul's self-interests, but hardly those whose influence he opposes.

Hardin insightfully argues that the Jewish communities observed imperial cult alongside the rest of the local communities, such as through honorary inscriptions and ornamentation, and in Jerusalem, in the twice-daily sacrifices offered “on behalf of” Caesar, toward which Diaspora Jews contributed through the temple tax. This is a good point, but, pushed as far as Hardin does, it creates problems not just for those he critiques but also for his own interpretation.

Hardin notes that this behavior in the Jewish communities is honorary, integrated into the local expression of imperial cult in order to succeed in the Roman Empire, just as in groups beholden to other gods. Nevertheless, he observes that, when Jews avoided imperial processions, because they began at temples and thus with sacrifices to various gods, along with offerings on behalf of the emperor, that this abstention was tolerated as an exception extended to Jews. Yet this exception bears witness to a difference between the Jewish communities and the rest of society with broader implications. Perhaps because Hardin continually writes about and conceptualizes around “*the imperial cult*,”

he overlooks that not only in processions but that in general imperial cult was carried on within the context of local cults and thus integrated into the worship and rites involving the various deities with which each group and each city identified itself. This consideration also does not obviate issues such as the apotheosized Caesars or Gaius “Caligula” seeking worship of himself, and not just on behalf of himself, that were especially problematic for Jews. For Jewish communities, there is a significant difference between what they seek to signify through symbols of respect and what they understand to be signified by the cult expressions of other associations not permitted to them by the ancient traditions defining their singular devotion to the one God. One need not ascribe to a monolithic policy of exclusion from imperial cult to recognize that neglect of local civic cults, in which imperial cult was imbedded, was nevertheless a dynamic that differentiated Jewish communal practices from those of their neighbors, witnessed in the contestations of such nonconformist behavior (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.126; 14.156–161, 185–267; 16.162–178; *Ag. Ap.* 2.65–67). Further, we must be attuned to hidden transcripts (i.e., compliant behavior and language but coded disagreement and even defiance; see Philo, *Dreams* 2.92) at work in the rhetoric and public behavior, including monumentalizing, of people living under the regime of Rome, but with alternative ideas of who should be—and one day will be—running the show, and very differently at that.

For Hardin, the Gentile Jesus-believers Paul addresses are understood to be members of “fledgling churches” that have “broken away from the local Jewish community/synagogue” (112). Those influencing Paul’s addressees are identified as “local” rather than from outside of Galatia, which is refreshing to see being seriously considered. They are labeled “agitators” and identified to be Jewish Jesus-believers, in conformity with prevailing views; however, in a minority-view twist, they are portrayed to have separated from the Gentile Jesus-believers. Thus they are no longer in the churches to which Paul’s letter is sent. How does this develop? These Jews had initially left the Jewish communities with the Gentile Christ-believers, forming Pauline churches, but decided to return to Jewish communities and were now seeking to bring the Gentiles into conformity with Jewish communal norms in order to avoid persecution from the local Jewish communities, which may have been reporting their unacceptable behavior to the larger civic authorities. What is unacceptable among these Christ-believing Gentile groups? According to Hardin, it is that they were not observing imperial cult at all. However, if such cult functions were indistinguishably observed by everyone, including Jews, from whom they have moved away, per Hardin, then on what grounds would these non-Jews have decided to abstain from imperial cultural practices, or how would they have been able to survive if they did? Do we have any witness that this was the case for Christ-believers initially in Galatia or anywhere, or of any groups of the time? Moreover, what does it mean to speak of them existing as a group between the Jewish communities and

the “dominant Gentile population” (112)? Where is that? Yet more formidable obstacles to this construction bear consideration.

Hardin understands those influencing Paul’s audience toward circumcision to be local Jesus-believing *Jews*. The pressure they were under is proposed to be from the local *Jewish* communities because of their own constraints as minority groups within the larger civic arena, from whom they feared persecution if the Jesus-believing *Gentiles* were not circumcised. Elements of this reviewer’s construction are at play in Hardin’s proposal, but the decision to continue to view Paul’s groups as churches that function *outside* of the Jewish communities (in keeping with traditional approaches) results in several logical problems for Hardin’s construal. For example, why these Jewish Jesus-believers are themselves on the hook for their *former* group affiliation with non-Jews, for the behavior of “churches” that have moved away from Jewish communal identity and authority, and thus from themselves now that they have returned, is not explained. Why would the civic authorities bring pressure to bear upon the Jewish communities instead of directly upon members of their own families and neighborhoods, since the nonconformists are clearly not Jews, and their “churches” do not represent Jewish communal life? Instead, they represent some kind of new (non-Jewish) group practicing cult in a nonimperial (which by definition is an anti-imperial) way that endangers the interests of all members of their city or village, including Jews.

Also unasked and unexplained is why the Jewish communities, and these Jesus-believing Jews who have returned to the Jewish communities, would not rather distance themselves from any responsibility to answer for these nonconformist groups of non-Jews. Why would Jewish communities seek to gain circumcision of non-Jews whose identity is formed outside of Jewish communal identity as “churches”? Why would they need or want to answer for the continuing impiety of these non-Jews and their anomalous groups, rather than mounting a campaign to make it clear to the civic authorities that these non-Jews are anything but members of their Jewish communities, that they are not even circumcised, not even pretending to be proselytes for whom they might have to answer?

In the next chapter, Hardin concludes that the Gentile Christ-believers whom the “agitators” were seeking to influence were under sociopolitical pressure, on the one hand, to become circumcised and, on the other, to reassimilate into the dominant polytheistic communities and their expressions of cult. This matter is of particular interest, being a central tension explored in my construction of the Galatian situation (*The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* [Minneapolis, Fortress, 2002], esp. 257–71). Hardin discusses the calendar Paul opposes the observation of in 4:10. He affirms the arguments of those who maintain that it signifies a pagan, imperial cult-oriented

calendar rather than a Jewish one. Thus what Paul feared was that they would turn back toward their previous polytheistic identity if they could not pursue proselyte identity.

Hardin construes the alternatives for the Christ-believing Gentiles to be between turning toward becoming members of the Jewish communities or toward becoming members of polytheistic society, since he has argued that they are presently somewhere between these two communal options. But this conclusion is at variance with the implications of Hardin's argument that the Jewish community's practice of imperial cult was indistinguishable from that of the majority polytheistic community. If so, it is not clear why imperial calendars and circumcision represent choices for opposing communal affiliations. Would not the imperial calendar then represent the central elements of the Jewish communal calendar as well? Would they not be thoroughly integrated, so that rather than representing contrasting alternatives, these non-Jews who are supposedly refusing to practice imperial cult would, by Hardin's reasoning, have regarded both circumcision and imperial cult to signal the same, ostensibly unacceptable choice in the direction of "judaizing"? Would this not then, against Hardin's aims, corroborate rather than challenge the Paul-against-Judaism-by-way-of-the-calendar-in-4:10 interpretation upheld in the prevailing views? A concluding chapter summarizes his interesting arguments.

The conceptualization of imperial cult is no more fixed than that of Paul or Galatians. One may take exception, with Karl Galinsky, to the misleading "the" in Hardin's discussion of "the imperial cult," or adopt the suggestion of Steve Friesen to speak of imperial cults, moves intended to emphasize the local integration of imperial cult with the many other cult activities in each place. Hardin is not unaware of the dynamics that point in this direction (40–46). Yet by stressing that the Jewish communal and the polytheistic communal expressions of imperial cult were indistinguishable, normal aspects of every group's behavior, combined with upholding the traditional separation of the "churches" Paul addresses from Jewish communal life, and, moreover, positing that they have opted out of imperial cult in sharp differentiation from the Jewish communities, undermines the possibilities for these sociopolitical insights to reveal the implications of Paul's rhetoric in 6:12–13 and 4:8–10 in Jewish-minority-*within*-polytheistic-majority communal terms. Do not the groups Paul addresses have to be within minority Jewish communities for Jewish community leaders to be under pressure to answer for their dangerous (mis)behavior? That said, it is a pleasure to engage Hardin's effort to interpret Galatians by attending to probable first-century contexts and rhetorical dynamics and the different conundrums that these introduce.