

MIRROR-READING A POLEMICAL LETTER: GALATIANS AS A TEST CASE*

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1. *Introduction*

I recently heard Professor Christopher Evans describe the New Testament as 'a bad-tempered book'. He was alluding to the fact that an extraordinarily high percentage of the documents in the New Testament are steeped in polemics, arguing with opponents (real or imagined) who were perceived to be an external or internal threat to the writer's Christian community. One has only to think of Matthean attacks on the Pharisees, Johannine polemic against 'the Jews' or the schismatics, and Petrine abuse of 'the dogs who turn back to their own vomit' to realize the extent of the New Testament's 'bad temper'; and that is without considering Paul, who is, perhaps, the most belligerent of them all.

If we are to understand such polemics, we must make every effort to clarify the origin and nature of the relevant dispute; and an indispensable ingredient of that effort will be the attempt to reconstruct the attitudes and arguments of the other side in the debate. However much we may be predisposed to *agree* with the New Testament authors' arguments, we will not *understand* their real import until we have critically reconstructed the main issues in the dispute and allowed ourselves to enter into the debate from *both* sides. But here we run up against a formidable obstacle. In most cases we have no independent witness to the arguments of those under attack in the New Testament; our only access to their thoughts and identities is via the very documents which oppose them. Hence the necessity for one of the most difficult and delicate of all New Testament critical methods: we must use the text which answers the opponents as a *mirror* in which we can see reflected the people and

the arguments under attack. Like most New Testament methods, such mirror-reading is both essential and extremely problematic, and it is to some of the problems and possible solutions that I want to address myself in this article.

In what follows I will discuss mirror-reading almost entirely in relation to Galatians. One could apply the same questions and observations to any polemical part of the New Testament, but I choose Galatians partly because it has been the focus of my study for a few years and partly because it provides an excellent test case for my present exercise. Here is Paul at his most polemical, thoroughly involved in extensive argument against opponents. And Galatians itself is our only reliable source of evidence for what the opponents were saying and doing in Galatia. (Acts may, or may not, help us when it comes to Jerusalem, but it says nothing about Paul's disputes in Galatia.) We must therefore address ourselves to the general problems involved in mirror-reading Galatians and the specific pitfalls which await scholars, and then work our way towards a methodology which will help us mirror-read the text with care and accuracy.

2. *The Problems*

Let us consider first some of the general problems which we face in mirror-reading a letter like Galatians. Using different, but equally appropriate, imagery, Morna Hooker has described our problems in deducing the nature of the 'false teaching' under attack in Colossians as 'an extremely difficult task, as prone to misinterpretation as the incidental overhearing of one end of a telephone conversation'.¹ We are all familiar with the problems here: it is so easy to jump to conclusions about what the conversation is about and, once we have an idea fixed in our minds, we misinterpret all the rest of the conversation. But there are three features of the conversation in Galatians which add even more to our difficulties.

1. In the first place, Paul is not directly addressing the opponents in Galatians, but he is talking to the Galatians about the opponents. This means that it is not just a question of trying to piece together what is being said at the other end of the telephone, but of listening in to one side of a dialogue (between Paul and the Galatians) about a third party (the opponents). Since Paul considers that the Galatians are being 'bewitched' by the persuasion of his opponents (3.1), and since the Galatians are turning all too quickly to the 'other gospel'

(1.6), it may be fair to conclude that, generally speaking, in answering the Galatians Paul is in fact countering the opponents themselves and their message. But there are also points in the letter when Paul is manifestly attempting to prise the Galatians away from the opponents, so that what he says to the Galatians could not be read as a direct response to the opponents. For instance, in 5.3, Paul warns the Galatians that everyone who gets himself circumcised will be obliged to keep the whole law. Walther Schmithals leaps on this verse (together with 6.13) to argue that *the opponents* were unaware of the connection between circumcision and Torah-observance;² but Paul is instructing the Galatians, not the opponents! Robert Jewett and others consider that, although the opponents knew very well that circumcision involved keeping the whole law, the fact that Paul has to tell the Galatians this fact in 5.3 indicates that the opponents had craftily refrained from passing on this information.³ But again this is a shaky assumption; the opponents may have made very clear the duties arising out of circumcision, but Paul may nevertheless feel it necessary to hammer home their full unpalatable implications. In other words, the Galatians may be not so much *ignorant* as *naïve*. We must remember that Paul is not directly responding to the opponents' message, but responding to its effects on the confused Christians in Galatia.

2. The second point to remember is that this is no calm and rational conversation that we are overhearing, but a fierce piece of polemic in which Paul feels his whole identity and mission are threatened and therefore responds with all the rhetorical and theological powers at his command. We hear him not just 'talking' but 'shouting', letting fly with abusive remarks about the Galatians (as credulous fools, 3.1-3) and the opponents (as cowards, fit only for castration, 6.12; 5.12). Jost Eckert and Franz Mussner have done well to highlight this aspect of the letter and to point out how much more difficult this makes it to reconstruct what the opponents were really like.⁴ We should never underestimate the distorting effects of polemic, particularly in a case like this, where Paul is going out of his way to show up his opponents in the worst possible light, with the hope of weaning the Galatians away from them. We must take into account, then, that Paul is likely to caricature his opponents, especially in describing their motivation: were they really *compelling* the Galatians to be circumcised? And was it really *only* in order to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ (6.12)? I suspect that Jewett has taken these charges too seriously when he proposes that the

opponents are acting under the pressure of Judean Zealots;⁵ and I am pretty sure that Schmithals has been far too gullible in taking at face value Paul's accusation in 6.13 that the opponents (or those who get circumcised) do not themselves keep the law.⁶ This is not to say that Paul could have *wholly* misrepresented his opponents and their message. If he was attempting to persuade the Galatians to abandon the 'other gospel', what he says about it must have been both recognizable and plausible in their ears. **Thus the letter is likely to reflect fairly accurately what Paul saw to be the main points at issue; but his statements about the character and motivation of his opponents should be taken with a very large pinch of salt.**

It is worth mentioning in this connection another possibility which has been raised by some scholars, namely that Paul may have seriously misunderstood his opponents. This is an essential assumption for Schmithals's case that Paul was actually entertaining Gnostics unawares,⁷ and Willi Marxsen made it a central point in his interpretation of the letter.⁸ One cannot, of course, discount this possibility altogether, but one must also face its implications. If Galatians is our only evidence for what the opponents believed, and if, in writing Galatians, Paul laboured under a major misapprehension about them, our search for the real opponents must be abortive. It is one thing to say that Paul has caricatured his opponents: handled cautiously, the text could still yield useful information about them. It is quite another thing to say that despite the whole of Gal. 2.15-5.12 the opponents had no interest in the Torah;⁹ that totally destroys our confidence in the only evidence we have. Of course we do not know anything about Paul's sources of information, and we cannot be sure how much he knew about events in Galatia or their true rationale. But we do know he had been there at least once (4.13), and the confidence with which he speaks about their 'change of course' probably indicates a reasonable amount of information.

3. A third complicating factor lies in the linguistic problem of knowing only one partner in a particular conversation. **Since the meaning of all statements is, to a large extent, conditioned by their accepted associations within a particular language community, it is especially hard to interpret statements in isolation from their historical and linguistic contexts.** In the case of Galatians, while we know a little about one partner in the dialogue, Paul, and can compare the meanings he attaches to similar statements in other contexts, his ultimate conversation partners, the opponents, are unknown to us. The very statements which most directly relate to

them (and which we would like to use in order to gain information about them) are also the ones whose precise meaning is determined by the particular interchange between them and Paul. Thus a verse such as 1.10 ('am I now pleasing men or God?') remains obscure until we can hypothesize the other end of the dialogue, and yet it is also among the very verses we need to use in order to reconstruct that dialogue. Such circularity is as inevitable as it is frustrating and highlights the hermeneutical problems inherent in this mirror-reading exercise.¹⁰

Before we go into detail about the specific pitfalls which lie in wait for the unwary scholar, it may be helpful to offer a comparison which illustrates the difficulties of mirror-reading polemical documents like Galatians. At his enthronement as Bishop of Durham in September 1984, David Jenkins delivered a famous sermon which concluded with a number of pointed remarks about the British miners' strike. At that point both sides in the dispute seemed to be intransigent—the miners under Arthur Scargill refusing to allow that more than the totally exhausted pits be closed, and the Coal Board, led by its American-born and tough-minded Chairman Ian MacGregor, insisting on large-scale pit closures. The Government were giving tacit support to the Coal Board, not least in providing massive resources of police to prevent miners' pickets travelling around the country. Jenkins's sermon instantly hit the headlines because he criticized the Government and referred to Ian MacGregor as an 'elderly imported American'. A few days later, the Secretary of State for Energy, Peter Walker, wrote a reply to Jenkins which was published in *The Times*.¹¹ It occurred to me to wonder how accurately Walker had answered Jenkins's arguments and, with the present methodological question in mind, how well we would do in reconstructing Jenkins's sermon on the basis of Walker's reply alone. Having obtained the full text of Jenkins's sermon I was able to run the experiment, with the following results. Taking Walker's letter, we would know that Jenkins had said that the miners should not be defeated, had implied that the Government wanted to defeat them, had pointed out the problems of a pit-community if the pit closes down, and had made some derogatory remarks about Mr MacGregor (although, interestingly, we would not know about his specific reference to the 'elderly imported American' or his suggestion that MacGregor should resign). Since Walker gives a lengthy exposition of the Government's concern for the coal industry, we might suppose that Jenkins had cited some detailed statistics to show the

Government's neglect of miners. How does this compare with what Jenkins actually said in his sermon? The most striking feature of the comparison is that Jenkins's comments on the miners' strike take up less than a quarter of his sermon, so that from Walker's reply alone, one would be totally ignorant of three-quarters of the Bishop's total message. Moreover, although we were right in deducing some of the content of Jenkins's remarks, Walker's reply gave us no hint that Jenkins had also said there should be no victory for the miners on their present terms, that Arthur Scargill should climb down from his absolute demands, and that criticisms could be made of the Government's use of police and the complacent attitude of society as a whole. While Jenkins made specific suggestions about Mr MacGregor which Walker did not pick up, he did not make detailed allegations about the Government's economic record as we might have supposed from Walker's letter. Thus this polemical reply turns out to be a response to a very limited range of issues. It takes particular care to rebut allegations which bear on the personal responsibility of the writer (as Secretary of State for Energy); and it tends to polarize the issues, playing down points on which the two antagonists actually agree. And all this in a setting where the respondent had full access to the facts of the case (he had clearly read Jenkins's sermon) and was obliged to conduct his argument with reason and restraint in an effort to win over sceptical readers of *The Times* like me!

If this situation is at all analogous to Galatians, it may be instructive. I realize there are important points of difference, which mostly induce one to have less confidence in the value of Paul's letter as accurate evidence about his opponents than one can attribute to Walker's letter. It does suggest, however, that there are many aspects of the opponents' message that we can know nothing about because Paul chose not to reply to them. There may also have been many points on which Paul and his opponents agreed but which are submerged by the polarizing effect of his polemic. Moreover, on the analogy of Walker's detailed personal defence, we must acknowledge the possibility that Paul's lengthy self-defence in Gal. 1-2 may not be a reply to a number of specific allegations (as is usually assumed), but may simply pick up almost incidental remarks about his personal credentials.

For all these reasons, the mirror we are trying to use may not be as smooth and clear as we would like. We have to reckon with the possibility that its image is distorted and hazy. Now we see 'through

a glass darkly'; and unfortunately we can entertain no hopes of meeting Paul's opponents face to face!

3. *The Pitfalls*

Thus far we have considered some of the major problems which plague any attempt to mirror-read a polemical letter like Galatians. We can now turn to look in more detail at some of the recent attempts to mirror-read Galatians which exemplify the dangerous pitfalls in such an enterprise. Four dangers are particularly noticeable in this regard:

1. **The first we may call the danger of *undue selectivity*.** In attempting to discern the opponents' message from the text of Galatians we have got to make some decisions as to which of Paul's statements are particularly revealing for our purpose. Tyson, who addresses himself to the methodological issues more fully than most, confines his search in Galatians to Paul's defensive statements, where Paul answers the opponents' accusations.¹² But this is surely unduly restricting, since much, perhaps most, of the opponents' message may have been entirely free of accusation against Paul; it is interesting that Tyson can make little of the arguments about Abraham and Scripture in Gal. 3-4, although here, if anywhere, Paul seems to be replying to his opponents' arguments.¹³ Mussner follows a slightly different tack, isolating possible slogans and objections emanating from the opponents and now reflected in Galatians.¹⁴ Again, while this may be of some help, we have surely got to end up with a reconstruction which can explain the whole letter as, in some sense, a response to the crisis brought about by the opponents. The problem of undue selectivity is highlighted even further by those scholars who read the letter entirely differently. Schmithals dismisses all of Gal. 3-4 as current 'topoi' in Paul's debate with Jews, while the real character of the opponents is revealed in Gal. 5-6, where it can be seen that Paul is responding to pneumatic and libertine Gnostics.¹⁵ **We clearly need some criteria by which we can judge which are the most revealing of Paul's statements, while also taking seriously the need to provide an explanation for the entire letter.**

2. **The second pitfall is the danger of *over-interpretation*.** In a polemical letter like this we are inclined to imagine that every statement by Paul is a rebuttal of an equally vigorous counter-statement by his opponents. But a moment's reflection will reveal that this need not be the case at all. In 5.11 Paul raises a forceful

question: 'But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted?' We are inclined to mirror-read this as a reflection of a criticism by Paul's opponents, who *accused him* of still preaching circumcision.¹⁶ But it could also be no more than a simple contrast between Paul and his opponents, reminding the Galatians that he, Paul, is in a totally different category from them; in this case *no explicit accusation* need be posited. Or we could even read this verse, as Peder Borgen has suggested, as Paul's reply to a claim made by the intruders in Galatia who *saw themselves as Paul's allies* and were pleased to show how much they were in accord by implying that he, like them, circumcised his converts.¹⁷ Indeed, although I will call them 'opponents' all the way through this article, we must bear in mind the possibility that they did not see themselves in opposition to Paul. It is quite possible for Paul (or anyone else) to count as his foes those who thought they were supporting him!

The same dangers of over-interpretation bedevil the use of other parts of the letter. Because Paul claims he was not dependent on the Jerusalem authorities or any other men in Gal. 1-2, Schmithals jumps to the conclusion that he was being explicitly *accused* of such dependence, and that the only people who would voice such far-reaching accusations would be Gnostics.¹⁸ But again, there are a number of other possible explanations for Paul's line of argument in Gal. 1-2 which do not require one to posit any such Gnostic accusations.¹⁹ Or take Paul's argument about being children of Abraham in Galatians 3; Ropes made a quite unnecessary assumption when he took this to be directed against Gentiles who denied the value of Abraham and the Jewish tradition.²⁰ And how should we interpret Paul's commands in the ethical section 5.13-6.10? If Paul warns the Galatians about immorality and drunkenness in his list of 'the works of the flesh', need we assume, with Lütgert and Schmithals, that there were at least some Galatian Christians who indulged in such libertine excesses in a wild pneumatic license?²¹ Or if he encourages those who live by the Spirit to walk in the Spirit, need we take this, with Jewett, as an indication that the Galatians consciously denied the significance of any earthly behaviour?²² **In all these cases the scholars concerned would have done well to reflect on the ambiguities of mirror-reading and to take into account a range of other less extreme possibilities.**

3. **A third pitfall awaits those who are guilty of mishandling polemics.** I have already mentioned the inevitable distorting effects of polemical debate and cautioned against taking some of Paul's

descriptions of his opponents too seriously. Although we can be fairly sure that they wanted the Galatians to be circumcised, we should be a lot less confident that this had anything to do with 'making a good showing in the flesh' or 'avoiding persecution for the cross of Christ' (6.12). Because Paul constantly pits the cross against the law and circumcision (3.1, 13; 5.11; 6.12, 14-15), many scholars have concluded that the opponents, who taught the law and circumcision, must have *played down* the message of the cross.²³ But can we be so sure about this? They may have been entirely happy to talk about the cross, even emphasize its saving significance, only failing, *in Paul's view*, to see its message as excluding obedience to the law. We can be fairly certain that they would have described any disagreements with Paul in rather different terms, and that some of the issues on which Paul polarizes the two camps, they would have regarded as insignificant or even irrelevant.

Another way in which Paul's interpreters have mishandled his polemics is in unduly taking sides in the debate. Those who are inclined to admire Paul tend to portray his opponents as malicious, confused and theologically bankrupt; those who prefer to 'put Paul in his place' paint a picture of men who were sincere Christians, with admirable intentions and a strong theological case to argue. **There is a particular danger in the temptation to dress up Paul's opponents with the clothes of one's own theological foes.** I suspect this is why, in Protestant circles, Paul's opponents have so often been described as legalistic and mean-minded Jewish Christians, with a streak of fundamentalist biblicism: in exegeting and supporting Paul one can thereby hit out at Jews, Catholics and fundamentalists all at once!²⁴ One of the most patent examples of a scholar falling into this sort of temptation is found in an essay by Helmut Koester.²⁵ Latching onto Paul's reference to the observance of festivals and the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in 4.9-10, Koester concludes that the Judaizers must have emphasized the 'cosmic dimensions' of the law within a context of 'a mythologizing of Old Testament covenant theology'. Paul then turns out to be a theological hero pitting the 'history' of the cross against the covenant 'myth' of the opponents; and the opponents' basic heresy is their failure to 'demythologize'!²⁶ All this of course, has a lot to do with Bultmann and virtually nothing to do with Paul's opponents; one is tempted to say that it is Koester who is really responsible for concocting myths!

4. The fourth pitfall is that of latching onto particular words and phrases as direct echoes of the opponents' vocabulary and then

hanging a whole thesis on those flimsy pegs. In one sense this is a further example of 'undue selectivity' but it has the added ingredient of regarding certain words as the very vocabulary of the opponents. A few examples will suffice. In 6.1, Paul addresses 'you who are spiritual (πνευματικοί)'. Lütgert seized on this word, and, with the Corinthian correspondence in mind, took it to be the self-designation of a party of Galatian libertine pneumatics (the second of the two fronts against which Paul had to write his letter).²⁷ Schmithals and Jewett followed suit, with some modifications, and even Kingsley Barrett uses this phrase to posit the existence of a group who called themselves 'spiritual' and exulted in their spiritual gifts.²⁸ In the next verse Paul refers to 'the law of Christ', and recently several scholars have argued that this unusual phrase must derive from the opponents, who saw Christ as a law-giver.²⁹ Or again, back in chapter 4, Paul uses a rather obscure phrase, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, which means 'the elementary something of the world' and occurs elsewhere in the Pauline corpus only in Colossians (2.8, 20). A chorus of scholars has confidently declared that Paul must here be using his opponents' vocabulary, and that this is an unmistakable sign of their syncretistic tendencies, merging the Torah with astrological speculation.³⁰ To give one more example, since in 3.3 Paul talks of 'beginning in the Spirit and completing in the flesh', a number of exegetes have concluded that the opponents also talked of 'beginning' (with Paul's gospel) and 'completing' or 'perfecting' (with their instructions).³¹

Although none of these suggestions is entirely impossible, I regard all of these attempts to mirror-read single words or phrases with some suspicion. One needs to spell out exactly what assumptions are involved here. Such an exercise depends on: (a) Paul's knowledge of the exact vocabulary used by his opponents; (b) Paul's willingness to re-use this vocabulary either ironically or in some attempt to redefine it; (c) our ability to discern where Paul is echoing his opponents' language; and (d) our ability to reconstruct the meaning that they originally gave to it. Such is our uncertainty surrounding each of these assumptions that I regard the results of any such exercise as of very limited value. They should certainly not be used as the cornerstone of any theory, as has all too often been done in recent scholarship on Galatians.

At this point I would like to make a few comments on a recent book by Bernard Brinsmead, which is the latest detailed attempt to reconstruct the character and propaganda of Paul's opponents in

Galatia.³² Despite his good intentions and his awareness of the methodological problems involved, Brinsmead manages to fall into all four pitfalls I have mentioned, and a good few more beside. To pick up an example we have just discussed, Brinsmead takes Paul's reference to beginning and completing in 3.3 as an echo of his opponents' vocabulary and then goes on to specify exactly how they used that vocabulary: ἐνάρχεσθαι, he tells us, 'often has the meaning of an act of initiation', while ἐπιτελεῖν 'commonly means a performance of ritual or ceremony which brings to completion or perfection'.³³ This indicates that these terms 'may comprise a technical formula for progress in a religious mystery from a lower to higher stage'.³⁴ On this, very shaky, foundation Brinsmead swiftly builds the opponents' theological position: their message had 'mystical connotations' and offered circumcision as a sacramental rite of perfection! Within the space of a few pages a 'suggestion' has become a 'certainty' and a whole hypothesis has been built out of a tissue of wild guesses.

What makes Brinsmead's book so disappointing is that he thinks he has found a way of solving the problems of mirror-reading. In a genre-analysis of the text, largely dependent on Betz, he takes the epistle to follow the rules of a law-court defence-speech and to be a continual dialogue with the opponents. But this new methodology solves none of our problems and, in Brinsmead's hands, sometimes creates even more. In distinction from Betz, Brinsmead treats 5.1–6.10 as a 'refutatio' (he never explains why), the part of the speech which is supposed to answer the opponents' arguments.³⁵ Having imposed this alien rhetorical description on what is a perfectly innocent piece of ethical exhortation, Brinsmead ransacks the material to find what Paul is answering here and concludes that where Paul uses *traditional* forms (catalogues of vices and virtues or words of the Lord), these must represent *the opponents' ethical traditions*. As if this totally unfounded assumption is not enough, Brinsmead then compares these catalogues with those in 1QS 3–4 and, noting the similarities, jumps to the conclusion that the opponents advocated an Essene theology and ethics!³⁶ So far from unravelling the complexities involved in interpreting a dialogue, Brinsmead leaps from one incredible assumption to another. His book well deserves David Aune's wry comment that it is 'justified only by faith'!³⁷

4. A Possible Methodology

From what I have said so far one might be tempted to conclude that I consider mirror-reading a polemical text to be an impossible undertaking; in fact, George Lyons has recently written it off as an unworkable technique.³⁸ Actually I think it is a good deal more difficult than is usually acknowledged, but not wholly impossible. What is needed is a carefully controlled method of working which uses logical criteria and proceeds with suitable caution. The following are what I consider to be the seven most appropriate criteria for this exercise:

1. *Type of utterance.* a. If Paul makes an *assertion*, we may assume that, *at least*, those to whom he writes may be in danger of overlooking what he asserts, and *at most*, someone has explicitly denied it; in between those two extremes there is a range of feasible suggestions, including the possibility that his audience have forgotten what he now reminds them about. b. If Paul makes a *denial*, we may assume that, *at least*, those whom he addresses may be prone to regard what he denies as true, and *at most*, someone has explicitly asserted it; again, between these two extremes there is a range of other possibilities.³⁹ c. If Paul issues a *command*, *at least*, those who receive it may be in danger of neglecting what he commands, and *at most* they are deliberately flouting it; again their condition could also be anywhere between these two poles. d. If Paul makes a *prohibition*, there must be *at least* some perceived chance that what is prohibited may be done, and *at most*, someone has already flagrantly disobeyed him; but perhaps it is a case of action being performed in naive ignorance (or a host of other possibilities).⁴⁰ Thus each type of statement is open to a range of mirror-images, and one must beware of rash over-interpretation. One can only decide where in this range of possibilities the truth lies when some of the other criteria are brought into play.

2. *Tone.* If Paul issues a statement with emphasis and urgency (he has a variety of ways of doing so), we may conclude that he perceives this to be an important and perhaps central issue. Conversely, the casual mention of an issue probably indicates that it is not, in his view, crucial to the debate.

3. *Frequency.* If Paul repeatedly returns to the same theme it is clearly important for him; conversely, an occasional remark probably signals what he considers to be only a side-issue.

4. *Clarity.* We can only mirror-read with any confidence statements

whose meaning is reasonably clear. Where interpretation hinges on an ambiguous word or phrase (or on a contested textual problem), or where we have good grounds for suspecting that Paul's 'description' of his opponents is polemically distorted, we cannot employ that evidence for any important role in our hypothesis.

5. Unfamiliarity. While taking into account our limited knowledge of Paul's theology, we may be entitled to consider the presence of an unfamiliar motif in Paul's letter as a reflection of a particular feature in the situation he is responding to.

Most of these criteria are framed in terms of 'mays' and 'mights', which indicates that they need cautious handling, with all due sensitivity to the particular document under consideration. Taken together they should enable one to form some sort of hypothesis which can then be further tested by the last two criteria:

6. Consistency. Unless we have strong evidence to suggest that Paul is responding to more than one type of opponent or argument, we should assume that a single object is in view. Thus the results of the previous criteria may be tested to see if they amount to a consistent picture of Paul's opponents.

7. Historical plausibility. At this point we can bring into play what other evidence we have for contemporary men and movements which could conceivably be the object of Paul's attacks. If our results are anachronistic or historically implausible for some other reason, we will be obliged to start again.

The conscientious application of these criteria may mean that there is only a limited number of facts which we could determine with anything like certainty. But this does not mean that they are excessively negative. New Testament scholars need to learn to be more candid in admitting the real value of their theories, and there is a good case for establishing a sliding scale of hypotheses ranging between 'certain' and 'incredible'. J. Louis Martyn suggests that we need to employ both 'scientific control' and 'poetic fantasy' in this matter.⁴¹ I am not sure that 'poetic fantasy' will help us much, but I agree that one should be able to discuss hypotheses which are not proven beyond doubt, so long as one recognizes their proper status. Ed Sanders does a useful job in this regard, constructing a range of categories into which we may assign hypotheses (in his case, about the historical Jesus). His range runs from 'Certain or Virtually Certain', through 'Highly Probable', 'Probable', 'Possible' and 'Conceivable' to 'Incredible'.⁴² Although one could quibble with the

semantics, I think these would be useful categories into which one could place one's findings after mirror-reading a letter like Galatians.

5. Results

The main purpose of this discussion is to outline some of the methodological issues involved in mirror-reading Galatians. Given the limitations of space it is not possible to attempt a full-scale reconstruction of the opponents' message and identity, but it may help to clarify the application of the seven criteria just mentioned if I conclude with a brief statement of plausible results.⁴³

On the basis of Paul's reference to 'another gospel' (1.6-9) **it seems clear that the opponents were Christians.** Whether they were Jewish or Gentile Christians is slightly less certain because of the ambiguity in the phrase οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι in 6.13 (and the associated textual uncertainty). But in view of verses like 4.30 (apparently meant to apply to the opponents) **it is highly probable that they were Jewish.** Certainly it would be precarious to build an important thesis about their Gentile origin on 6.13 alone (as did Munck; see criterion 4). Paul associates their message with circumcision, both explicitly (6.12-13) and implicitly (5.2-4, 11-12), and the emphasis and frequency with which he discusses this subject make it clear that he regards this as a central issue (criteria 2 and 3; cf. 2.3-5). It is doubtful that they could or would actually *compel* the Galatians to get circumcised (6.12; cf. 2.14) but they clearly presented their argument with some persuasion (3.1) and won the esteem of many Galatians (4.17). **What is more difficult to assess is why they advocated circumcision,** since Paul's verdict in 6.12 is partial and probably misleading.

This issue is closely bound up with another: to what extent were they serious in advocating the observance of the Torah? 4.10 indicates that the Galatians had begun to observe some of the Jewish calendrical requirements, and it is unlikely that that was as far as the opponents wanted them to go. In fact Paul's concern about 'works of the law' (3.1-10) and his extended arguments to prove the temporary validity of the law (3.6-4.11), taken together with remarks like 4.21, **make it highly probable that the opponents wanted the Galatians to observe the law as circumcised proselytes** (criteria 2 and 3). 5.3 is open to a range of interpretations (criterion 1a), although those offered by Schmithals and Jewett find no support in any of the rest of the letter or from any other of our criteria; certainly 6.13a looks very

like an exaggerated polemic point. Taking the argument of the letter as a whole, there is sufficient evidence that the Galatians were informed of (and responded warmly to) the requirements of Torah-observance as the hallmark of the people of God.

This may indeed be confirmed by the evidence of the 'paraenetic' section (5.13–6.10). The use of these verses to provide evidence for a libertine group or gnostic/libertine tendencies should be questioned in the light of criterion 1 (c and d) which emphasizes the range of possible reasons for a command or prohibition. There is no evidence in this section, or elsewhere in the letter, which would support taking these verses as a reply to Gnostics or libertines (see again criteria 2 and 3). In some instances Paul is explicitly reminding the Galatians of their duties (5.19–21) and in others the abuses he attacks are not specifically libertine (5.15, 26). (In any case all two-front or Gnostic theories run aground on criteria 6 and 7.) In giving his exhortation Paul appears intent on demonstrating that walking in the Spirit is a sufficient alternative to living under the law (5.14, 18, 23; 6.2). If the opponents wanted the Galatians to observe the law they probably argued that only the law could properly regulate their daily life.

It is very probable that another of the opponents' lines of argument, which we may again see reflected in Paul's reply, was an appeal to Scripture, and in particular the Abraham narratives. Paul's repeated references to Abraham (3.6–29; 4.21–31) support this suggestion (criterion 3), while his convoluted use of certain texts may indicate that he is countering their persuasive biblical exegesis (criteria 1 [a and b] and 5).

Paul's extended self-defence in Gal. 1–2 makes it virtually certain that the validity of his gospel and his apostleship was under attack. Unfortunately it is difficult to be more precise about any particular 'charges' since, as we saw above, even quite detailed self-defence can be triggered off by a very few damaging innuendos. However, in the light of 1.1, 10–12 and Paul's repeated attempts to specify his relationship to the Jerusalem apostles, it is probable that the opponents considered Paul to be an unreliable delegate of the Jerusalem church (criteria 1a and b, taken together with criteria 2 and 3).⁴⁴ 5.11 may also reflect an accusation that Paul sometimes circumcised his converts, but as an implicit denial it is open to the range of interpretations suggested by criterion 1b and is not elucidated by any other criteria (see Section III above).

The questions of the opponents' origin and motivation are even harder to answer. The prominence of Jerusalem in this letter (as well

as Gal. 1-2, see 4.25-26) probably indicates that they had some links with the Jerusalem church; but they could have come from Antioch or almost any other church which included Jewish Christians. It would certainly be going beyond the evidence to identify them with the 'false brethren' at Jerusalem (Gal. 2.4; cf. Acts 15.1-5) or the circumcision party at Antioch (2.12). Given Paul's ironic but not wholly negative attitude to 'those in repute' at Jerusalem, it is inconceivable that 'the pillars' had actually commissioned Paul's opponents. It is not impossible that the opponents were acting under Zealot pressure in Palestine (so Jewett), but such a thesis hangs rather precariously from the single thread of Paul's comment in 6.12.

It is conceivable that at some points Paul echoes the exact vocabulary of his opponents: they may possibly have referred to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and the law of Christ and described their purpose as completing Paul's work, but at least in the first two cases we are still in the dark about what they meant by such phrases.

We may then tabulate these results as follows:

Certain or Virtually Certain

1. Paul's opponents were Christians.
2. They wanted the Galatians to be circumcised and to observe at least some of the rest of the law, including its calendrical requirements.
3. They brought into question the adequacy of Paul's gospel and his credentials as an apostle.
4. Their arguments were attractive and persuasive for many Galatian Christians.

Highly Probable

1. They were Jewish Christians.
2. They argued from Scripture using, in particular, the Abraham narratives.
3. They expected the Galatians to become circumcised proselytes and to observe the law, as the hallmark of the people of God.

Probable

1. They had some links with the Jerusalem church and thought that Paul was an unreliable delegate of that church.

2. Their scriptural arguments made reference to Genesis 17 and the Sarah-Hagar narratives.

Possible

They told the Galatians that Paul circumcised his converts in some circumstances.

Conceivable

They talked of 'completing' Paul's work, made reference to the law of Christ and used the word στοιχεῖα.

Incredible

1. They were Gnostics or gnosticizing to an appreciable degree.
2. They were libertines or played on the Galatians' 'Hellenistic libertine aspirations'.
3. They were syncretists with cosmic or mystical notions about circumcision, the law or keeping festivals.
4. They were directly commissioned by the Jerusalem apostles.
5. Paul was fighting against two distinct groups.

I am well aware that this is not a complete list of those things that we can know about the opponents; but I hope it illustrates the role of the criteria outlined above and the value of collating material on a graduated scale of certainty. Having drawn up this list one could go on to compile a much longer one of all the things that we do *not* know about the opponents, either because we cannot see them clearly enough in Paul's mirror or because he chose not to reflect them at all. I will not indulge in such a tedious exercise, although it should perhaps be a requirement of all serious historical work.⁴⁵

One could also draw up an interesting list of points on which Paul and his opponents would have agreed. This would include at least the following points:

1. Scripture, God's word, is now reaching its fulfilment through Christ.
2. Salvation is now available to Gentiles, in fulfilment of the promises to Abraham.
3. The Spirit has been given to the people of God who believe in the Messiah.
4. God's people should abstain from idolatry and the passions of the flesh.

Such a list would show how much Paul and his opponents had in common and thus help to correct the impression of complete disagreement which the letter to the Galatians conveys.

I am aware that the results tabulated above are not particularly surprising or innovative. It is probably true that a critical methodology like this will tend to be most effective in questioning fashionable but flimsy attempts to build some new reconstruction of the opponents and their message. That is not to say, however, that interesting new things cannot be said on the basis of these results. However, my primary aim has been to discuss the methodological issues involved in mirror-reading a polemical letter. If these cautionary notes and positive suggestions are of any value, they could equally well be applied to Colossians, 2 Corinthians 10-13, the Johannine letters or indeed any other of the many polemical parts of the New Testament.

NOTES

*A revised version of a paper read at the Tyndale New Testament Conference in Cambridge in July 1986. I am grateful to Dr D.R. de Lacey, who not only read the paper for me (in my enforced absence) but also made several useful criticisms of it.

1. M.D. Hooker, 'Were There False Teachers in Colossae?', in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Essays in honour of C.F.D. Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and S.S. Smalley (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), p. 315.

2. W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (ET: Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 32-33; the argument is repeated and expanded in 'Judaisten in Galatien?', *ZNW* 74 (1983), pp. 51-57.

3. R. Jewett, 'The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation' *NTS* 17 (1970-71), pp. 200-202; cf. E.P. Sanders, *Paul, The Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 29.

4. J.Eckert, *Die urchristliche Verkündigung im Streit zwischen Paulus und seinen Gegnern nach dem Galaterbrief* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1971), pp. 22-26 and 234-36; F. Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 9; Freiburg: Herder, 1974), pp. 27-28.

5. 'The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation', pp. 203-206.

6. *Paul and the Gnostics* pp. 33-34 and note 51 (wrongly claiming support from Schlier and Lightfoot).

7. See *Paul and the Gnostics*, pp. 18, 47 n. 98, 52 n. 110 and 54 n. 125; P. Vielhauer sharply criticizes Schmithals on this point (*Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur. Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975], p. 121).

8. *Introduction to the New Testament* (ET: Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), pp. 50-58.

9. This is the weakest part of Schmithals's thesis, renounced even by those who follow his interpretation in other respects.

10. I owe the general point here to my colleague, John Riches: see the article by A. Millar and J.K. Riches, 'Interpretation: A Theoretical Perspective and Some Applications', *Numen* 28 (1981), pp. 29-53.

11. Jenkins's enthronement sermon was delivered at Durham Cathedral on September 21st, 1984. Peter Walker's letter was printed in *The Times* on September 25th 1984.

12. J.B. Tyson, 'Paul's Opponents in Galatia', *Nov. T.* 10 (1968), pp. 241-54.

13. This has been plausibly argued by C.K. Barrett, 'The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians', in *Rechtfertigung, Festschrift für E. Käsemann*, ed. W. Pöhlmann, J. Friedrich and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1976), pp. 1-16. See also J.L. Martyn, 'A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles: The Background of Galatians', *SJT* 38 (1985), pp. 317-23.

14. *Der Galaterbrief*, p. 13, listing 'Schlagworte' and 'Einwände'.

15. *Paul and the Gnostics*, pp. 41-43, 46-55; because Paul's exhortation is directed against 'ecstatic licentiousness', 'it is sufficiently clear that people in Galatia were preaching circumcision but for the rest were thinking and living in libertine rather than legalistic fashion' (p. 52).

16. See e.g. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982), pp. 236-37; compare the more cautious approach by H.D. Betz, *Galatians. A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 268-69.

17. P. Borgen's interesting thesis is set out in two articles: 'Observations on the theme "Paul and Philo". Paul's Preaching of Circumcision in Galatia (Gal. 5.11)', in *Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie*, ed. S. Pedersen (Århus: Aros, 1980), pp. 85-102; and 'Paul Preaches Circumcision and Pleases Men', in *Paul and Paulinism. Essays in honour of C.K. Barrett*, ed. M.D. Hooker and S.G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 37-46. A similar argument is put forth by G. Howard in *Paul: Crisis in Galatia. A Study in Early Christian Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), pp. 7-11.

18. *Paul and the Gnostics*, pp. 13-32.

19. See the discussion of this passage by J.D.G. Dunn, 'The Relationship between Paul and Jerusalem according to Galatians 1 and 2', *NTS* 28 (1982), pp. 461-78.

20. J.H. Ropes, *The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 4-11.

21. W. Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist: Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des Galaterbriefes* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1919).

22. 'The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation', pp. 209-12.
23. See e.g. Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief*, p. 412.
24. See E.P. Sanders's devastating critique of the familiar Protestant caricatures of Judaism (and Catholicism), *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 33-59.
25. H. Koester, 'ΤΝΩΜΑΙ ΔΙΑΦΟΡΟΙ. The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity', *HTR* 58 (1965), pp. 279-318.
26. '... the historicity of the event of the revelation becomes the decisive criterion for the understanding of traditional theologies and mythologies. The failure to apply this criterion, i.e. the failure to demythologize, is identical with the "heresy" of the opponents' (*ibid.*, p. 309).
27. *Gesetz und Geist*, pp. 9-21.
28. C.K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation. A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 78-79. The adjective could be a perfectly innocent description of those who walk in the Spirit (5.16, 25).
29. This suggestion was apparently first made by D. Georgi (see Betz, *Galatians*, p. 300; but I can find no indication of authorship in the text he cites in his note 71). Betz supports it.
30. See e.g. H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (Meyers Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament, 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), pp. 202-207; K. Wegenast, *Das Verständnis der Tradition bei Paulus und in den Deuteropaulinen* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1962), pp. 36-40.
31. See e.g. Jewett, 'The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation', pp. 206-207; A. Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament, 9; 5th edn; ed. J. Rohde, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1984), p. 101.
32. B.H. Brinsmead, *Galatians—Dialogical Response to Opponents* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).
33. *Galatians*, p. 79.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Galatians*, pp. 44, 53-54, 163-81.
36. *Galatians*, pp. 164-78.
37. See D.E. Aune's Review in *CBQ* 46 (1984), p. 147.
38. G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography. Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), ch. 2; see e.g. p. 96: 'The "mirror reading" approach to the interpretation of Galatians may be challenged on several bases. It may be shown that the methodological presuppositions on which it rests are arbitrary, inconsistently applied, and unworkable'. He is particularly, and rightly, critical of those who assume that every Pauline denial is a response to an explicit criticism from his opponents (pp. 105-12). But the paragraphs below may go some way to meeting his objection that the whole method is impossibly speculative and unscientific.

39. Betz rightly notes that 'not everything that Paul denies is necessarily an accusation by his opposition' (*Galatians*, p. 6). Lyons, however, fails to explore the range of other possibilities when he concludes that, since Paul's denials need not be directed against specific charges, they 'are often, if not always, examples of pleonastic tautology used in the interest of clarity' (*Pauline Autobiography*, p. 110).

40. Hooker, 'Were There False Teachers in Colossae?', p. 317: 'Exhortation to avoid a certain course of action certainly does not necessarily indicate that those addressed have already fallen prey to the temptation, as every preacher and congregation must be aware'.

41. J.L. Martyn, 'A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles', p. 313

42. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 326-27.

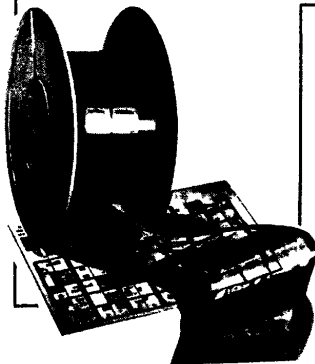
43. I have set out detailed argumentation for most of the following statements in my Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 'Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Exhortation in Galatians 5-6' (1985), which will be published in the near future.

44. I would maintain this even in the face of Lyons's vigorous argument that no apologetic motif is present here (*Pauline Autobiography*, chs. 2-3). I fail to see how Paul's detailed description of his movements in 1.17-24 can fit Lyons's conclusion that the only purpose of Paul's autobiography is 'as a paradigm of the gospel of Christian freedom which he seeks to persuade his readers to reaffirm in the face of the threat presented by the troublemakers' (p. 171; cf. pp. 158-61). Lyons has not taken sufficient account of Paul's repeated emphases in these chapters, or the fact that the troublemakers must have considered Paul's work in Galatia insufficient.

45. I recall the late Sir Moses Finley starting his Cambridge lectures on ancient Sparta with the sobering (if somewhat exaggerated) statement, 'We know nothing about ancient Sparta'!

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