INTRODUCTION

1 The letter

This letter, 'to the Galatians', comes down to us from the earliest days of Christianity. It is an established part of the Pauline corpus in all the major Greek manuscripts containing all or part of the New Testament, that is, from the fourth century onwards. It appears in broken, but almost complete form, in p68, a papyrus collection of the Pauline epistles, dated to about the year 200.\(^1\) It is cited, with attribution to Paul, the first great missionary to non-Jews, as early as Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, that is from about AD 175, and may well be alluded to by earlier second-century writers.\(^2\) So far as we know, no question was ever raised in these early centuries as to its integrity\(^3\) or authenticity.

When modern readers turn to this document, therefore, they may be entirely confident of several things. First, that the letter was written by the Paul who introduces himself in i.1. Second, that it was received by those to whom he sent it and retained by them, so that it was not lost — as appears to have been the case with some of Paul's other letters, for example to Corinth. Third, that it was circulated to other churches and thus became more widely known — how soon, or how quickly we cannot say, nor do we know when the collection of Paul's letters into a single unit began.\(^4\) And fourth, that it was valued more and more widely and its significance seen to transcend the particular historical situation for which it was written, so that its subsequent canonization (as part of the canon of the New Testament) was simply a recognition and acknowledgment of the authority and influence it had exercised more or less from the beginning.

Here then is a letter which takes us right back into the period of Christianity's foundation and initial expansion, a letter which

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1 The details can be found in the appendices at the back of the Nestle-Aland Greek Testament (Novum Testamentum Graece, 26th edition; Stuttgart 1979).
2 Details in Burton lxvii–lxix.
3 O'Neill's suggestion that the current letter comes to us in a substantially redacted and interpolated form has won no support — and rightly so, since it presumes a wooden Paul with an artificially narrow and uniform language, theology and style.
4 Most of the papyri (the earliest texts) contain fragments or parts only of individual NT writings.
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evidently helped to establish the authority of Paul the apostle, and which thus also helped to shape the character and self-perception of early Christianity, both in terms of its fundamental principles and in relation to the Jewish matrix from which Christianity emerged. H. D. Betz, indeed, calls it 'one of the most important religious documents of mankind'. Familiarity with it, therefore, should not be allowed to dull the sense of excitement and anticipation which may properly be felt by any who begin to read it, and who are interested in the character of Christian beginnings and in the Christian gospel whose exposition and defence were its chief concern.

To 'set the scene', however, we need to know something more of the letter's author, those to whom he wrote, when he wrote, and the issues which caused him to write in the first place. The second, third and fourth of these topics (to whom, when, and why) have been the subject of considerable debate. But the extent to which they hang together, and, in particular, the extent to which they hang together with the first, has not been sufficiently appreciated in this long and often detailed discussion. It will be necessary first, therefore, to let the author introduce himself in the way that he does in the letter. Then, without becoming immersed in the fine detail of the debate on the other topics, it will be appropriate to outline the main options in each case. Only then will we be in a position to offer an integrated reconstruction of what seems to be the most plausible historical context within which this letter emerged and for which it was written. In this way, we hope, we can ensure so far as possible that the evidence of the letter itself is given greatest weight in any attempt at historical reconstruction.

2 The author

Not least of fascination about Galatians is the information which it provides about Paul himself – details which we learn nowhere else – and particularly about the phases of his life. Since he takes care to give his readers such details, and just these details (we shall see in chs. i and ii how carefully he chose them), they provide vital information as to why Paul wrote as he did. Here, uniquely in Paul's letters, the information he gives about himself

1 Betz, 'Spirit' 145.
provides invaluable insights into the occasion and purpose for the letter. The self-image he projects is in service of the message (the gospel) he wants his readers to hear. Paul ‘presents his “autobiography” as a paradigm of the gospel of Christian freedom . . . (and) considers himself in some sense a representative or even an embodiment of that gospel’.1

From i.15–14 we gain a brief but highly informative picture of Paul’s ‘way of life in Judaism’ before he became a Christian, of his zeal for the law and passionate concern to preserve the distinctive character of Judaism, that is, from defilement by Gentile lawlessness; hence his career as ‘persecutor’ and destroyer of ‘the church of God’. Paul evidently alludes to this period of his life later when he talks about ‘building again the very things which I demolished’ (ii.18), referring, it would appear, to the actions of Peter and ‘the rest of the (Christian) Jews’ in Antioch when they withdrew from table-fellowship with the Gentile believers in Antioch (ii.12–15).

Verses i.15–16 give us Paul’s perspective on what has traditionally been called his conversion. But in these verses it is evident that Paul saw this encounter with God’s Son (on the ‘road to Damascus’, according to Acts ix) not so much as a conversion, and much more as a commissioning – a commissioning specifically to preach the good news of this Jesus ‘among the Gentiles’. If we may speak of the event as a conversion it was not a conversion from the religion of Israel to a new religion, but a conversion from one viewpoint within Judaism, regarding the relation of Israel to the other nations (the Gentiles), to another viewpoint – conversion from suspicion of and antipathy to non-Jews, to concern for their conversion to the gospel of the Jewish Messiah. To what extent this perspective on his Damascus-road encounter (as a commissioning to the Gentiles) was given to Paul there and then, or was the product of later reflection (and thus a case of autobiographical reconstruction), we cannot say. But Paul was evidently anxious in these verses, as in i.1 and 12, to make it clear that his apostolic commission was direct from God and had this character from the first (apostle to the Gentiles).

From i.16c to ii.10 there emerges an intriguing picture of Paul’s relationship with the Christian leaders in Jerusalem (the mother church of Christianity).2 The care with which Paul

2 Cf. Holmberg 15 – ‘the dialectic between being independent of and acknowledged by Jerusalem is the keynote of this important text; see further my ‘Relationship’.
narrates these contacts (particularly in i.16c–17, 18–20, and ii.2, 6, 7–10) indicates a double phase of Paul’s ministry. Initially he worked as one not directly dependent on Jerusalem’s authority (even though for much or most of the time a missionary of Jerusalem’s daughter church in Syrian Antioch, as Acts xiii–xiv attests), but ready to acknowledge the authority of the Jerusalem leadership to pronounce on issues related to the gospel and its proclamation among Gentiles. Paul willingly concedes this degree of recognition, because in the test-case of the Greek Titus (whether as a non-Jew he needed to be circumcised in order to be acceptable as a fellow believer in Jesus the Christ), the Jerusalem leadership backed him, and in face of strong pressure from those whom Paul calls ‘false brothers’ – an amazing step of faith and foresight on their part, for which they have been too little honoured (ii.2–6). The agreement reached between James, Peter and John, on the one side, and Paul and Barnabas, on the other, regarding the openness of the gospel to the Gentiles (without requiring them to undergo the characteristic Jewish rite of circumcision) is the climax of the section (ii.7–10).

By the time Paul wrote the letter, however, it is clear that there had been a change in his relationship with Jerusalem. This is signalled particularly by the distancing and indeed rather dismissive way he describes the Jerusalem leadership (in ii.2 and 6). But also, more explicitly, by the fierceness of the language Paul uses in ii.11–14, where he attacks Peter in forthright terms, as also, by clear implication, the group whose coming to Antioch ‘from James’ had disrupted the table-fellowship previously enjoyed between Jewish and Gentile believers. It is obvious that in Paul’s view the behaviour of Peter and the other (Christian) Jews at Antioch was in breach of the Jerusalem agreement. From this it also follows, most probably, that it was the incident at Antioch which changed Paul’s relationship with the Jerusalem authorities. Moreover, from the way Paul follows through from his description of that incident and leads into the main argument of his letter (ii.15–21), it is also evident that the Antioch incident had particular relevance to the situation in Galatia which the letter was intended to address (see also Introduction to ii.15–21). The very personal language of that section indicates the extent to which Paul’s appreciation of how the gospel affected him was inextricably bound up with his perception both of the gospel as for the Gentiles (by faith and not ‘works of the law’), and of his authority so to preach.

Paul gives us a little more information about himself when he recalls his actual bringing of the gospel to the Galatians (iv.13–15) and in his peroration (vi.17). But the crucial
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information which informs the purpose and meaning of the letter is provided in the first two chapters. We do not need, yet, to be more specific about the chronology of the letter — either about the precise sequence of the events described in i.18–i.1, or about how the letter fits into the ‘missionary journeys’ narrated in Acts xiii–xvi (see below). Nor is it of any great moment that Paul used an amanuensis (or secretary) to transcribe the letter at his dictation (see particularly Longenecker lix–lxi, and on vi.11). What is more to the point here is the way in and degree to which the letter fits into the theological self-perception and development of Paul himself.

What we see, then, or are given by Paul to see, in summary, is a man who was a Christian Jew, but with a commission from God to take the good news of Christ to the Gentiles. The tension between Paul’s past (as a zealot and persecutor) and present (as evangelist and apologist for the church he once sought to destroy) is also the tension of the letter. The tension between Paul’s commission as standing within the tradition of Israel’s prophet commissionings, but as a commission to the Gentiles, is also the tension of the letter. The tension between Paul and the Jerusalem leadership is also the tension of the letter. It was precisely as a Jew who was also apostle to the Gentiles, that Paul wrote. It was precisely as a Jew who rejoiced in the blessing and inheritance of Abraham, but who now saw it to be integral to that blessing and inheritance that they are for Gentiles as well, that he pleads and warns so fervently. It was precisely in defence of his own inheritance as an Israelite, its fundamental character and richest blessing, that he fights so fiercely to maintain that character and blessing for Gentile as well as for Jew.

3 The recipients

Here we come to the first major dispute among students of Galatians during the past two centuries. We need not rehearse it in any detail, since the pros and cons have been debated repeatedly over the intervening decades and can be found in any good introduction to the NT or large (particularly English-language) commentaries on Galatians. The basic facts are clear. Paul was writing to the ‘the churches of Galatia’ (i.2), to
'Galatians' (Galatai — iii.1). The name derives from the Gallic tribes (the Gauls, or Celts) who migrated into Asia Minor and settled in its heartland in the third century BC.1 The uncertainty arises because the name (Galatia/Galatians) can be used both ethnically (to refer to the descendants of these Gallic tribes) and administratively (to refer to the Roman province so designated from 25 BC and its inhabitants). This uncertainty does not affect the question of whether the recipients were Jews or Gentiles; even on the latter alternative (Galatia as the Roman province) a description of the recipients as ‘Galatians’ almost certainly implies that non-Jews were in view (as iv.8 confirms — ‘you did not know God and were in slavery to beings that by nature are no gods’). The issue in fact boils down to whether Paul could be referring to the churches established during ‘the first missionary journey’ (Acts xiii—xiv) as a missionary of (Syrian) Antioch: (Pisidian) Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. These towns lay south of ethnic Galatia, but had been included in the Roman province as its southernmost part.

The whole issue hangs for most to a decisive degree on the relation between Galatians and Acts. Acts speaks of Paul’s passing through ‘Galatia’ on subsequent missionary trips (Acts xvi.6 and xviii.23), and in the former reference the implication is clear that ‘Phrygia and Galatia’ are distinct from the cities named earlier (Derbe and Lystra at least, referred to in xvi.1—5).2 That also implies that for Luke (the author of Acts) ‘Galatia’ refers to ethnic Galatia. If this correlates with Paul’s usage, then Paul cannot be referring to the churches established on ‘the first missionary journey’ and must be referring to those initially established in the mission indicated in xvi.6.3 For obvious reasons this view is usually named ‘the north Galatian hypothesis’.4

Alternatively, we need not assume that Paul’s and Luke’s usages were mutually compatible. ‘Galatia’ and ‘Galatians’ were quite proper designations of the towns in the south of the Roman province and of their inhabitants. And it is difficult to see what

1 Details e.g. in Burton xvi—xxi and Bruce 3—5.
2 Zahn 16—17 and Burton xxx—xli, however, question whether the Acts xvi.6 journey was intended as a missionary trip, that is, whether it resulted in the establishment of churches or simply in the gaining of some scattered disciples en passant.
3 That Paul addresses his audiences as ‘Galatians’ (iii.1) does not determine the matter, since the address is a rebuke (‘foolish Galatians’) and may be used for its rhetorical effect — ‘you of the province of Galatia who are acting as though you truly were foolish Gauls’ (see also on iii.1).
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other single designation could embrace all four towns: Iconium, Lystra and Derbe belonged to Lycaonia; but Antioch would be more properly designated as in Pisidia. ‘The south Galatian hypothesis’ therefore identifies the Galatians with the churches established by Paul in these towns during ‘the first missionary journey’.

The only obvious conclusion to draw from all this is that the evidence briefly reviewed is actually decisive on neither side. In particular, the difficulties of correlating Galatians with Luke’s account in Acts make it doubtful whether, or at least to what extent, we can use the details of Acts to fill out the picture in Galatians. At each point of contact, indeed, there remain unresolved problems or unanswered questions. How to correlate Luke’s record of Paul’s visits to Jerusalem with Paul’s own account in Gal. i–ii (see below §4)? Why does Luke say nothing whatsoever about the agreement at Jerusalem which Paul evidently saw as of the first importance (ii.7–10), or about the incident at Antioch, to which Paul, in contrast, gives such a central place (ii.11–14) in the build-up to his main theme? Why does Luke give none of the details about Paul’s visit to ‘Galatia’ which made the visit so memorable for Paul (iv.13–15)? Why, not least, does Luke say nothing about the situation which gave rise to the letter to Galatia or about Paul’s evidently deep and passionate concern for his converts there, or indeed about the letter itself? Some of this fits with Luke’s pattern overall: he draws a veil over most of the discord and disunity which racked much of the early expansion of Christianity; and he makes no mention of any of Paul’s letters. But the lack of correlation generally between Luke and Paul in matters relating to Galatians makes it of doubtful wisdom to give Acts the determinative voice on this question.

At all events we should note the vividness with which Paul recalls his first visit to these Galatians (iii.1; iv.13–15), the success of his evangelism, as attested particularly by the powerful experiences of the Spirit which launched the Galatian churches (iii.2–5; iv.6; v.25), and, not least, the depth of his continuing concern for them (iv.19). The most obvious deduction is that the visit took place during the period covered by i.21 (see on i.21).

4 The date

The issue of when the letter was written is problematic in the same measure, since, historically, it has been so much bound up

1 So particularly Burton xxvii, xxix, xlv and Bruce 14–18.
with the issue of destination. On the north Galatian hypothesis, the letter could not have been written till after Paul had evangelized the northern regions of the Galatian province. And if iv.13 refers to two visits (see on iv.13), we would have to allow time for a further trip through north Galatia. That would fit quite neatly with the two trips narrated in Acts xvi.6 and xviii.25. Allowing time for developments following that second visit would put the letter to Galatia quite far down the sequence of Paul’s letters – not only after the Thessalonian correspondence, but also, probably, after the Corinthian correspondence, but before Romans. The similarity in tone between 2 Cor. x–xiii and Galatians, on the one hand, and in theme between Galatians and Romans, on the other, can be taken as support, therefore, for a date in the middle of the 50s (so most who accept the north Galatian hypothesis).

The south Galatian hypothesis, however, usually implies a much earlier date. Here again the correlation between Acts and Galatians is given decisive voice. Since Paul insists that the agreement in Jerusalem (ii.1–10) was reached on his second visit there, and since Luke records a second visit (for famine relief) in Acts xi.29–50, the suggestion seems attractive that Paul wrote his letter shortly after returning from ‘the first missionary journey’. Moreover, the Antioch incident (ii.11–14) would help explain the need for a fuller consultation with the Jerusalem leadership on matters of disagreement regarding missionary work among Gentiles, which accords with the Acts’ account of the so-called council of Jerusalem in Acts xv. On the Acts time-scale that would put Galatians before the Jerusalem council, usually dated to about 49, and suggests, therefore, a date for Galatians of about 48 or early 49, making Galatians the earliest of Paul’s letters.1

It is somewhat ironic that it is the correlation with Acts which proves decisive for the north Galatian hypothesis on the question of recipients (above §3), and the correlation with Acts which proves decisive for the south Galatian hypothesis on the question of dating. That simply adds to the feeling of unease about allowing the correlation with Acts to be decisive on these issues. On balance, the weight of considerations probably favours the view that Gal. ii.1–10 is Paul’s account of the Jerusalem council (Acts xv; see on ii.1), but, as we shall see, that conclusion does not tell necessarily against the south Galatian hypothesis, or for a date as late as the mid-50s.

1 So, recently, particularly Bruce 55 and Longenecker lxxxviii.
5 The opponents

Here there is greater agreement. Most follow the clear enough hints of the letter itself. Since Paul’s last (or only) visit to these little groups of believers in Galatia, others had appeared or arisen who were urging them to be circumcised; this is explicit in v.2–12 and vi.12–13, though already implicit in ii.5–5. That the ‘troublemakers’ or ‘agitators’ (i.7; v.10, 12) were Jews is also fairly obvious.\(^1\) It is implicit in the very fact that circumcision was their primary demand (v.2; vi.12–13) – circumcision being so much bound up with Jewish identity that Jews could be designated ‘the circumcision’ (see on ii.5). It is implicit in the fact that central to Paul’s concern in i.12–ii.14 is his relationship with the Jerusalem leadership (see above §2), and in the way he integrates talk of ‘Judaism’, ‘Jews’ and ‘judaizing’ into this biographical build-up to the main theme (i.13–14; ii.13–15).\(^2\) It is implicit in the fact that descent from Abraham dominates chs. iii–iv, and from the way Paul describes the purpose of the ‘troublemakers’ in terms of ‘zeal’ (cf. i.13–14), and as ‘wishing to shut you out’ (see on iv.17) and to ‘boast in your flesh’ (see on vi.13). And it is implicit, not least, in the prominence of the (Jewish) law, the ‘Torah, in the whole discussion – particularly in the key phrases, ‘works of the law’ (see on ii.16), and ‘under the law’ (iii.23; iv.4–5, 21; v.18).\(^3\)

Moreover, it is equally clear that the ‘troublemakers’ were also Christians, or at least saw themselves as such. Or if the term ‘Christian’ imports a sharpness of definition which is anachronistic, we should simply say that the ‘troublemakers’ saw themselves as believers in Messiah Jesus and followers of his ‘way’ (cf. Acts ix.2; xxii.4; xxiv.14, 22), and, presumably having been baptized in Jesus’ name, were regarded by others as fellow believers. This is implicit in the fact that ‘gospel’, or indeed

\(^1\) Munck, particularly 130–4, argues that it was some of Paul’s own (Gentile) converts who reached the conclusion that circumcision was necessary on the basis of their own reading of the (Jewish) scriptures. But this ‘fanciful attempt at reconstruction’ (Musser 17) relies too heavily on vi.13 (see on vi.13) and hardly accords with the evidence reviewed below or with the fact that Paul always refers to ‘the troublemakers’ in the third person, whereas he addresses his converts directly in the second person (e.g. iii.1–5).

\(^2\) The opponents should, however, not be called ‘Judaizers’, as is still common today. A ‘judaizer’ in the terminology of the time was one who ‘lived like a Jew’ (see below n. 21 and on ii.14), not one who tried to get others to Judaize.

\(^3\) Gasen 29–30 argues, most implausibly, that ‘under the law’ refers to Gentiles; but in the context of the argument from iii.17 onwards that is virtually impossible.
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'gospel of Christ' is common language between them and Paul; Paul himself questions the validity of the terms in their case (i.6–9), but it is obvious from the way Paul labours the point in these verses that he is contesting a claim already made by them or for them. A similar implication attaches to Paul's description of those who insisted on Titus' circumcision in ii.3–4 as 'false brothers': evidently they thought of themselves as 'brothers' and were so accepted by those who admitted them to the Jerusalem consultation—Paul's designation ('false brothers') obviously attempts to undermine a status claimed and recognized by others; and the 'for you' of ii.5 relates the episode of the 'false brothers' directly to the crisis confronting the Galatians. Not least, it is clear enough from the main thrust of the letter that faith, that is faith in Christ, is a common denominator between Paul and those whom he criticizes (see e.g. on ii.16 and iii.6). It is the corollary to that faith which provided the bone of contention between Paul and those against whom Paul writes: whether that faith must be supplemented or delimited by works of the law like circumcision, food laws and Jewish feast-days (ii.3–6, 12–16; iv.9–10), or whether 'faith operating effectively through love' is sufficient (v.2–6); whether a beginning with faith (in Christ) is made complete, or rather undermined by allowing such fleshly (ethnic) considerations to determine faith's scope and working out (iii.5). And above all, only of Christians could it be said that they were seeking 'to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ' (vi.12).1

The inference is also fairly strong that these Christian Jews had come to Galatia some time after Paul's last visit and that they had come as 'apostles' or missionaries 'preaching the gospel'. This is implied in Paul's insistence on the independence and immediacy of his commissioning (i.1, 11–12, 15ff.); presumably the others had come claiming the authorization of respected Christian leaders, such as James of Jerusalem. This is suggested also by the prominence given to Jerusalem in the opposite column in iv.25, and by the emphasis on festivals in iv.10 whose correct dating (in the case of the new-moon festival especially) would probably need to be determined from Jerusalem (see on iv.10). It is implicit also in Paul's repeated talk of 'gospel' and 'preaching the good news' in ch. i–ii (i.6–11, 16, 23; ii.2, 5, 7, 14). Hence the frequent designation in the following pages of

1 Mussner 29 notes the importance for subsequent history of the conclusion that Paul was not attacking Jews as such, far less the Jews, but only Christian Jews, fellow Christians of Jewish origin.
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them as 'the other missionaries'.¹ We need not doubt that these other Jewish-Christian missionaries had (at least some) support among the Gentile Galatians. But it is very unlikely that the issues and challenges to Paul’s gospel in Galatia had arisen purely by spontaneous internal combustion. On the contrary it is difficult to see how such a comprehensive challenge to Paul’s gospel, and of such a clearly Jewish-Christian character could have arisen without input of a fairly determined and purposeful kind (see also on v.7).

That Paul was also battling on a 'second front' has been argued by some,² on the basis particularly of the alteration of focus and thrust at v.15, and of the charge in vi.13 that 'they do not themselves keep the law'. But that is an unnecessary hypothesis, as the great majority agree (see opening remarks on v.13–15 and on vi.15). Still more idiosyncratic and unconvincing is the argument of W. Schmithals (Gnostics 13–64) that the whole letter is directed against Jewish-Christian Gnostics, which assumes that Paul was ill informed on the situation in Galatia and thus has to read more into the letter than it reads out. J. Drane, in contrast, somewhat influenced by Schmithals, argues that 'Paul’s teaching in Galatians could be construed almost as an open invitation for Gnosticizing influences to enter the first-century church' (p. 114). R. Jewett ('Agitators' 209–12) tries to steer a difficult middle course in hypothesizing a pneumatic liberalism which was being attracted by 'works of the law' understood as giving access to higher perfection. But v.15ff. is adequately explained as Paul’s warning of potential dangers for those who give the Spirit the emphasis Paul desires, dangers he was no doubt already aware of (not least if he was writing from Corinth), but not yet necessarily already part of the Galatians’ experience; otherwise there would have been more description of the situation reported to Paul, and less guarded comments at iii.2–5, and the final summary vi.12–16 would not have reverted so completely to the single major issue of circumcision.

In short, the letter makes clearest and fullest sense if we see it as a response to a challenge from Christian-Jewish missionaries who had come to Galatia to improve or correct Paul’s gospel and to 'complete' his converts by integrating them fully into the heirs of Abraham through circumcision and by thus bringing them 'under the law'.

² Particularly Lügert, and Ropes.
6 The situation reconstructed

We are now in a better position to reconstruct the situation which called forth this passionate letter from Paul. In so doing it seems wisest to make first and fullest use of the letter itself and of the hints it provides so fully. Where they correlate with other evidence from outside Galatians, all the better. But where they clash with other evidence it will have to be a matter of judgement as to whether to give more weight to an integrated and coherent picture drawn from Galatians or to the other evidence. We have already cautioned against a too straightforward reliance on Acts; though equally we must remember that Paul's account of affairs will hardly be unbiased and wholly objective. And as for correlation with other Pauline letters, the shortness of the time span covering the main letters (at most less than ten years), and our lack of knowledge of the circumstances which called them forth, and therefore of the degree to which Paul's argument in each letter will have been conditioned by these circumstances, should make us wary of drawing firm conclusions regarding their chronological relationship and the development of Paul's theology from one to other. At all events, the indications gleaned from Galatians should be given first consideration.

6.1 We best start from the point at which Paul breaks off his autobiographical narrative and defence and begins to turn to address the Galatians directly – that is, the confrontation with Peter in Antioch (ii.11–18). It is evidently at that point that Paul's previous history ceases to be of positive value in the defence and plea he wishes to make to the Galatians. Presumably it was the issues posed most sharply by that episode which most fittingly led into the main argument of chs. iii–iv.¹

This is all the more important when we further realize that the most obvious deduction to draw from this section is that Paul was defeated in his confrontation with Peter. Had Peter and the other (Christian) Jews backed Paul on that occasion, he could hardly have failed to draw attention to and underline that fact since it was of first importance to his Galatian readers (as he had in the earlier confrontation – ii.6; see further on ii.14). This is again confirmed by the way Paul's thought moves from ii.11–14

¹ "It cannot be accidental that at the end of the narratio in Gal. ii.14, when Paul formulates the dilemma which Cephas is in, this dilemma is identical with the issue the Galatians themselves have to decide: “why do you compel the Gentiles to judaize?” (Betz 62).
through ii.15–21 to the main thrust of his argument and appeal, since it strongly suggests that Paul saw the issue confronting him in Galatia as a re-run of the battles fought in Jerusalem and Antioch. The battle won in Jerusalem, its fruits in danger of being lost as a result of the Antioch fiasco (from Paul's perspective), had to be fought afresh in Galatia for the same reasons (hence ii.5 — ‘in order that the truth of the gospel might remain for you’).

The confrontation with Peter, and behind him the shadowy figures ‘from James’, is the most likely explanation for the change in Paul's relationship with the Jerusalem leadership (reflected in his language in ii.2 and 6 in particular; see above §2). That is to say, the consequences of Paul's defeat at Antioch almost certainly included a breach between Paul and Jerusalem, and also, by implication, with Barnabas. This ties in to the account of Acts, (a) that soon after the Jerusalem council Paul and Barnabas split up (Acts xv.56–41), and (b) that thereafter Paul in effect became an independent missionary, using first Corinth (Acts xviii.11) and then Ephesus (Acts xix.10) as his centre of operations. That is, from having been a missionary (apostle) of Antioch (Acts xiii.2–5; xiv.4, 14, 26–7), and therefore under Jerusalem's authority (Antioch being a daughter church of Jerusalem — hence Paul's trepidation in ii.2, and the evident readiness of the Antioch believers to respond positively to the 'men from James' in ii.12), Paul had come to a clearer understanding of himself as simply apostle to the Gentiles, with direct legitimation and authority from God, and to insist on this point with the fervour of i.1 and 11–12.

How much of all this Paul explained to the (south) Galatian churches on his second visit (Acts xvi.1–5) is not clear. Verse i.9 certainly suggests that Paul sought to restate in clear terms the essential character of his gospel on that second visit. But he may not have been too anxious for these churches, since, despite the outcome of the Antioch confrontation, they lay beyond the territory of Antioch's natural administrative oversight, with the Taurus mountain range intervening. At any rate, if Acts is correct, Paul seems to have been relaxed enough to circumcise Timothy (son of a Jewish mother and Greek father), in order to include him in his team (Acts xvi.3) — an action which quite possibly lies behind the retort in Gal. v.11.

However, the fact remained that 'the first missionary journey' (of Acts xiii–xiv) had been carried out under the auspices of Antioch (and so of Jerusalem), and it would be understandable (from the perspective of the dominant group at Antioch) that the churches founded during that mission must forthwith be drawn
within the circle of the practice established (or re-established?) at Antioch as a result of those who came 'from James' (ii.12). That is, those who understood the gospel in terms similar to that of the 'men from James' would presumably try to extend their victory at Antioch to all the daughter churches of Antioch. The so-called 'apostolic decree' of Acts xv.20–9 may provide some confirmation here. For, according to Acts it was sent at James' bidding (xv.20–1), and explicitly to 'the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia' (xv.23), that is, to the region administered from Antioch, and so to churches which would most naturally come under the oversight of the church in Antioch. Paul himself, it will be recalled, presumably includes the south Galatian churches in 'the regions of Syria and Cilicia' in i.21. To that extent, Luke confirms an attempt made from Jerusalem to bring about a conformity of practice within the churches most likely to look to Antioch as their mother church.

6.2 This in fact provides an obvious, probably the most obvious occasion for the letter. That is to say, the crisis in Galatia was probably caused by the arrival in the Galatian churches of a group equivalent to the 'men from James' (ii.12), anxious to press home their success at Antioch and to establish the Jewish way of life ('judaizing' – ii.14) as the norm for all churches founded as a result of the expansion from Antioch. In the wake of Paul's defeat at Antioch they could readily exploit the ambiguity of his earlier relation with the Jerusalem leadership (see above §2), and emphasize their own authority, while at the same time undermining his (as implied in i.1 and 11–12). That they should (now) be demanding circumcision as well, or rather, above all (see above §5), may simply indicate that the pressure brought in Antioch (ii.11–14) had already marked something of a retreat from the liberalism of the agreement made in Jerusalem (ii.6–10). The considerations which weighed so heavily with Peter and Barnabas in ii.12–14 (see on ii.12 and 13) would have weighed all the more heavily with those less sympathetic to a mission to Gentiles in the first place. The parallel between ii.12 and vi.12 suggests that similar motives were operative in both cases – that is, fear lest being seen to accept Gentiles on equal terms as full members of the covenant people (made so by the cross of Christ – iii.13–14), without requiring them to judaize and be circumcised, would be seen by Jewish zealots (like Paul of old – i.13–14) as an unacceptable adulteration and abandonment of Israel's covenant status and obligations (see particularly Jewett, 'Agitators'; also on ii.12 and vi.12). As parallel episodes of the
period indicate, circumcision was the natural correlate and climax of any judaizing process for most Jews.¹

Moreover, it is quite possible that Paul won the day at Jerusalem (ii.1–10) because the status of the Gentile adherents to the new movement had been ambiguous: without circumcision they could be regarded simply as God-fearing Gentiles. But once the question of their full status as members of the covenant and full heirs of its promises was raised, that would be a different story. Once the question of sonship of Abraham became an explicit issue and a central factor of identity (see below §6.5) – then circumcision was almost bound to reappear on the agenda of any devout (Christian) Jew (not least in the light of Gen. xviii.9–14). We may therefore have to recognize that between Antioch and Galatia the stakes were increased – from the open question of the ill-defined character of a God-fearer judaizing, to the explicit issue of full proselyte status.

Alternatively, and more threateningly, ‘the other missionaries’ may have been representatives of the ‘false brothers’ defeated in Jerusalem (ii.3–6), who, in the wake of Paul’s defeat at Antioch, saw their chance to undo the mischief they thought Paul was doing. Certainly we should not underestimate the spectrum and diversity of views on this matter (the acceptability of Gentiles as Gentiles) within the earliest Christian groups, or the passion with which divergent views were maintained. In a context of sharp factional rivalry (cf. the language of ii.4, 15–14; v.12), talk of ‘defeat’ and ‘victory’ is hardly inappropriate, and shifts of emphasis and policy would depend on which viewpoint was most influential in a given situation. Either way the authority of Jerusalem could be claimed in some degree or other. And either way Paul’s own position and the authority of his version of the gospel were vulnerable to disparagement, given the ambiguity of his earlier relationship with the Jerusalem leadership and the way he had evidently been isolated and ‘left out in the cold’ by the united Christian-Jewish front at Antioch.

6.3 In any attempt to reconstruct the ‘gospel’ and rationale of the other missionaries there are two crucial features to be

¹ Esther viii.17 LXX – ‘many of the Gentiles were circumcised and judaized for fear of the Jews’; Theodotus in Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica ix.22.5 – Jacob would not give Dinah to the son of Hamor ‘until all the inhabitants of Shechem were circumcised and judaized’; Josephus, War ii.454 – Metilius (commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem) ‘saved his life by entreaties and promises to judaize and even to be circumcised’; Josephus, Antiquities xx.58–46 – Irates, king of Adiabene, having been converted by a Jewish merchant, without circumcision being required, was thereafter persuaded that circumcision was essential.
observed in the letter. The first is indicated in the terms of the main section (ch. iii–iv) – that sonship of Abraham and share in his promises and inheritance were what was at stake. We do not know why this became the central ground of dispute. Traditionally Gentiles who adopted a Jewish way of life (‘Judaized’) without circumcision were acceptable as adherents to Jewish synagogue communities (‘God-fearers’; see on ii.12). That may well indicate a willingness on most diaspora Jews’ part to recognize that the righteous Gentile could have a share in the world to come even without becoming a Jew; this is certainly an accepted view within later rabbinic Judaism. But in this case at least the talk is all of sharing in Abraham’s blessing. For traditionally minded Jews that must mean more than simply ‘fearing God’; to share in Abraham’s inheritance was open only to those descended from Abraham; and for others to enter that heritage was impossible without circumcision; Gen. xvii.9–14 surely put the question beyond dispute. We may well imagine ‘the other missionaries’ so arguing and attempting so to persuade the Galatian believers (though see on iii.9). Whether it was they who first introduced the topic (sonship of Abraham), or Paul previously, we need not try to determine at this point. What is clear enough is that the topic once seized on by the other missionaries was almost bound to polarize the range of Christian views regarding acceptability of Gentiles and to bring the issue of circumcision inescapably to the fore (despite the earlier Jerusalem agreement).

The other crucial feature is the degree to which the whole argument in Galatians focuses on what we might call the ‘second phase’. It is most explicit in iii.5: what follows from the beginning once made by the Galatians? how do they think the completion of God’s saving work will be achieved? The answer of the other missionaries is clear – by ‘works of the law’. Faith in Christ must be complemented and demonstrated by the observances laid down in the law (see on ii.15–16). The grace of

1 Cf. Burton liv–lv; Barclay, Obeying 60–74, sums up the issues at stake in the Galatian crisis as ‘the identity’ of the Galatian Christians and ‘their appropriate patterns of behaviour’. For the pitfalls and possibilities in ‘mirror reading’ as a means of deducing the opponents’ views, see particularly J. M. G. Barclay, ‘Mirror Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case’, JSNT 31 (1987) 73–95.
2 See e.g. P. Fredriksen, From Jesus to Christ (New Haven/London: Yale University, 1988) 149–51; and the material collected e.g. by C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology (New York: Schocken, 1974) ch. 29.
3 Perhaps also, How should they live appropriately, determine patterns of behaviour, settle disputes (Barclay, Obeying 71) but that is more to be deduced from v.15ff. than here.
God was displayed pre-eminently in the past in the giving of the law, and obedience to the law is the proper and necessary corollary or response to that grace (ii. 21; v.4). To which Paul responds by insisting that the role of the law was temporary and primarily for Israel’s benefit in the period before Christ (iii.15–24), and that faith is not only the beginning of relationship with God but the sole continuing basis for it on the human side (ii.16, 20; iii.2–5, 7–9, 12–14, 22–6; v.5–6). In so far as Paul also recognizes the importance of believers’ response to divine grace in ethical terms (v.16–vi.10) and is willing to speak of that responsibility by reference to the law (v.13–14), his position is not so far from that of his opponents; but that should not be allowed to obscure the fact that for Paul faith is the only and only continuing basis for relationship with God.¹ So when it was asserted that faith’s obedience necessitated circumcision and that God’s acceptance of Gentiles was dependent on their assuming Jewish identity, Paul saw the heart of the gospel and its character of grace as under direct threat.²

All this speaks strongly in favour of the south Galatian hypothesis. On the Acts schedule, only those churches established during the first missionary journey would naturally be regarded as falling within Antioch’s jurisdiction. Moreover, the natural implication of ii.1, 9 and 13 is that Barnabas was well known to the Galatians; but according to Acts, Barnabas accompanied Paul only during that first missionary journey; prior to the missionary trip through north Galatia Barnabas and Paul had parted company. So far as Galatians is concerned, the implication of the sequence ii.11 through to ch. iii is that the Antioch incident and its issues led directly into the crisis in Galatia.³ Which strongly suggests that the other missionaries pursued Paul some little time after he had left Antioch and had struck out for western Asia Minor by way of the churches in Lycaonia and Pisidia (Acts xvi.1–6). That the time-scale was short certainly fits with (even if not required by) the ‘so quickly’ of i.6 (see on i.6).

6.4 In the meantime, if we follow the Acts itinerary, Paul had continued on the so-called ‘second missionary journey’, through

¹ This point is obscured by Sanders’ suggestion that Paul distinguished between ‘getting in’ (not by works of law) and ‘staying in’ (by keeping the law) – Law 10 (better 46).
² For the theology of Galatians see further my ‘Theology’ and Theology.
³ This feature tells strongly against the central thesis of Howard, Crisis 2, 9, that the opponents thought they were on Paul’s side. So too does i.9 (Paul had already warned the Galatians against alternative versions of the gospel), the fact that this other gospel ‘troubled’ the Galatians (i.7; v.10), and the clear implication of i.1–ii.6 that the opponents had attacked Paul’s authority.
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northern Galatia (Acts xvi.6) and subsequently through Macedonia into Greece (xvi.11–xviii.1). By the time the other missionaries had reached Galatia, travelled through the (south) Galatian churches, explaining their understanding of what participation in Abraham’s inheritance involved and sowing their seeds of confusion, and the news of this development reached Paul (messengers would not know where to find him and would have to follow in his footsteps), he had probably been settled in Corinth for some time. As soon as he heard the news he evidently called for some papyrus and a scribe and began to compose his letter in the full flood of his dismay and anger.1 As he perhaps had feared, the incident at Antioch had undermined the crucial agreement reached earlier at Jerusalem, and steps must be taken at once to set the record straight and to prevent the collapse of all that he had worked for; his fears of ii.2 were being realized all too fully.2

The possibility of being a little more precise is given by a comparison with the Thessalonian correspondence. We can be confident that it was despatched from Corinth during the same period, and early in the same period (cf. particularly 1 Thess. ii.17; iii.1–2, 6). The most notable differences between the Thessalonian correspondence and the rest of Paul’s (undisputed) letters is that in the former there is no talk of justification and righteousness (themes which are prominent in all of Paul’s other main letters), and that Paul does not introduce himself as an apostle (as almost every time thereafter). Paul’s normal practice of beginning by mentioning his apostleship must have started after he wrote to Thessalonica. And Galatians gives us the obvious starting point. It is clear enough from Gal. i.1 and 11–12 that Paul perceived his status and authority to have been called in question by the other missionaries (explicitly or implicitly). It was the Galatian crisis, in other words, which convinced Paul of the need to assert his apostolic status and thus almost certainly established the pattern of his self-introduction thereafter (see on i.1).

Likewise it was the Galatian crisis which brought the themes of righteousness and justification to the forefront of Paul’s theology, and which ensured that thereafter he usually made a point of drawing them in, even when the topic did not require it. The Thessalonian correspondence could imply, by way of contrast, either that these themes had not previously received

1 Verse vi.11 implies that only one copy of the letter was sent and was intended to be taken round to each of the Galatian churches.
2 The lack of reference to Timothy in Galatians (Longenecker lxxi) may be simply explained by his absence from Corinth on one of the trips on which Paul seems regularly to have sent him (see also on i.2).
such prominence in Paul's preaching, or that he had shifted or varied the thrust of his original preaching in Thessalonica. In the former case the corollary would be that Paul's initial preaching in Galatia had not emphasized the themes of justification and righteousness and could imply that the centrality of 'justification by faith' first emerged as a consequence of the confrontation at Antioch and its sequel in Galatia. Either way, the crisis in Galatia reinforced the importance of justification by faith as central to the gospel and the ongoing relations between Jewish and Gentile believers.

All this suggests that the letter was sent from Corinth some time (not necessarily very long) after the Thessalonian correspondence, and therefore also before the Corinthian letters and the still later Romans. The degree of closeness in tone between 2 Cor. x-xiii and Galatians hardly tells against this, since we can neither assume that Paul sustained a very high level of indignation over a lengthy period, nor that he was thus indignant on only one occasion during a three- to five-year period. Nor does the closeness in theme between Galatians and Romans tell against such a dating since the modifications in presenting his Abraham exposition (see for example on iii.6 and 15) must indicate some interval for further reflection on these matters on Paul's part, and there is no obvious reason why that interval should not have extended across a five-year rather than, say, a two-year period.

In short, the most plausible hypothesis is that Paul wrote Galatians from Corinth to the churches of south Galatia in the early 50s, or, to be more precise, during the period from late 50 through the first half of 51; and that he wrote to meet the threat posed to his gospel to the Gentiles by Jewish-Christian missionaries from Antioch or Jerusalem. The fact that the letter was retained by at least some of the Galatian churches and evidently cherished, so as to be integrated into the subsequent process whereby Paul's letters were collected into a single corpus, strongly suggests that Paul won a significant victory in Galatia (cf. also 1 Cor. xvi.1; and from the Pauline circle, 2 Tim. iv.10 and even 1 Pet. i.1). Although he had lost at Antioch he was able to hold the line on the more fundamental issue of Gentile circumcision and thus to maintain the fundamental faith (rather than ethnic) structure of the household of God (see on vi.10).

1 Betz 12 and Watson 58-9 prefer the combination of the north Galatian hypothesis and an early date (Betz = 50-5; Watson, before 1 Corinthians).
7 The structure of the letter

Considerable attention has been given in recent years to the letter within the setting of ancient epistolary and rhetorical conventions. For full treatments in these terms see particularly Betz 14–25 and Longenecker c–cxix. It is certainly the case that such comparisons shed light on various features of the letter and of the form and ordering of its contents. More important, they shed light on the conventions by which any reasonably well educated among Paul’s readership or audiences would have appropriated the letter and recognized both its high points (not least, the way the *narratio* leads up to the Antioch incident — i.12–ii.14) and any significant departures from convention (e.g. the omission of an opening thanksgiving in the Introduction — see on i.6). Beyond that, however, attempts to label Galatians as a particular kind of letter or to determine its structure from conventional parallels are of questionable value. It is clear that Galatians does not accord closely with any ideal type,² and there is a danger that analysis of the letter will be too much determined by fitting it on to a grid drawn from elsewhere rather than by the natural flow of the argument. More important, there is a danger that too much emphasis on rhetorical considerations may blur the extent to which the letter is driven by theological logic and passion. It is the theological issues and logic which are likely to have determined the main line and structure of the argument, particularly in the central section (chs. iii–iv), more than anything else, though we will find plenty of evidence of Paul’s rhetorical skill in pressing home his case.

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1 Hansen 56 quotes E. A. Judge’s observation that ‘Paul would have had the opportunity of a Greek education even in Gamaliel’s school at Jerusalem’; see further Hengel, *Pre-Christian Paul* 57–61.
2 See particularly the critique of Betz by Longenecker cxi–cxiii; Longenecker 185 posits a ‘mixed rhetorical genre’; see also Introduction to iv.12–20.