



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Chapter 4, Verses 8-20

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Some people say that culture has nothing to do with understanding the Bible – since it's a “book for all time” we should simply read the words and the Bible will interpret itself. In many ways, that's the case, but a little background can certainly enhance our understanding, especially when it comes to Paul's writings.

In the book of Galatians, Paul was dealing with two opposing cultures – the “one-god” culture of the Jews, and the multi-god, polytheist culture of the Greeks and the Romans. He was also having to deal with civil and religious laws of each culture, specifically the Jewish “oral” law, and the Roman cultic law that allowed only two religions to exist within the Roman territories – those being the worship of the emperor along with the Roman gods of mythology, and Judaism - the worship of the one god – YHVH.

This special Jewish status was evidenced by the fact that there were synagogues throughout the Roman provinces including northern Africa, Asia Minor, the Middle East, as well as in Rome itself. In addition, we have the account of Cornelius, a Roman soldier who openly worshiped the God of Israel. Thus being identified with 1st century Judaism was something a person had to take into account when he took steps to move his family from the worship of the Roman gods and begin to worship the God of Israel. The fact that this status even existed plays a role in understanding this portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

In the last installment in this series, we saw how Paul used the Roman law of the “patria potestas” – the “power of the father” – to illustrate his previous point on how one becomes a true “heir” to the promises of Abraham by being “emancipated” from the “law” (the law of the patria potestas) and being adopted by another “father”. As part of the illustration, he showed that even the Jews were in need of emancipation (actually redemption) , not from a Roman law, but from the “guarding role” of the Torah. It is here that Paul used the Greek word “stoicheion” – the elements¹.

Before we continue with the next 13 verses, let's review a few key facts that we've been able to derive so far:

- The Galatian congregations were comprised of both believing Jews and believing gentiles – which I refer to as “non-Jews” so as to leave room for the understanding that some of these “gentiles” may in fact be “non-Jewish Israelites”.
- The letter was written primarily to the non-Jews, though at times was directed to the Jews that Paul assumed would be reading the letter as well.
- The motivation for the letter was the willingness of some to depart from the “gospel” message Paul had earlier delivered to the Galatian congregation(s) and to move toward an “other gospel” that is dependent on Jewish oral law.
- The oral law aspect of the “other gospel” was that non-Jews had to convert to Judaism (which included observance of the oral laws) in order to be heirs to the promises of God.

In the next few verses, Paul began a digression from his pattern of presenting one illustration after another to show how Torah observance did not make them heirs of the promises. Instead, He showed that it's faith in Messiah Yeshua, the one who redeemed Israel from the “curse of the law”², that brought

¹ See the article “Romans 4:1” and its addendum on the web site – www.amiyisrael.org

² Deut. 28:15 - 68

this about. After showing them how they had been freed from the bondage of the former ways and had become heirs of the promises, he went on to remind them of what they had formerly be enslaved to:

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:8** But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods.

In verse 6 of this chapter, Paul moved his focus from the Jewish believers back to his intended audience, the non-Jews in Galatia. We know this because he stopped using “we” and began again to say “you”, plus he made the statement – “when you did not know God”. We know that this could not apply to the Jews, because they had always believed in the God of Israel, even though they didn’t always follow Him

Before becoming a believer in the God of Israel, the non-Jewish Galatians had to participate in the cultic worship of the Roman gods. This included prayers and penance to the various gods in order to keep them happy. They also had to observe the numerous Roman “feriae”³ – religious festivals dedicated to the gods – of which there were well over 100 in any given year.

The Romans never “knew” their gods because (according to the mythology) they didn’t want their subjects to know them. They just wanted to be pacified and left alone to live and play in their own ‘world’. Paul reminded them of that, even pointing out that their former “gods” were not even gods.

In contrast, the Jews “knew” their God. He was real to them, and what made YHVH real was the Torah, and more specifically, the history on which the Hebrew people were built. Throughout history, YHVH made promises, then fulfilled them. This was what made YHVH real to the Jews. The Torah was the ‘elements’, the building blocks on which the Hebrew people, and the current Jewish nation, was built. Now the non-Jews in Galatia, as a result of what the Messiah had done for them, had the opportunity to know the true God as well.

Paul started this next verse using the word “*alla*” (Strong’s 235) which means “never-the-less”. Even though they had come to know God and had become and “heir of the Father”⁴, something was happening in the Galatian community. They had begun to revert back to their old pagan ways.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:9-11** But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

The non-Jewish Galatians had come to know the God of Israel, and as evidenced by the fact that they were even being drawn (back) to Him⁵, it’s clear that they were even “known by God”. Paul used an even more emphatic term than “rather”; he used the term “*mallon*” (Strong’s 3123) that means “more” or “to a greater degree”. They had actually seen YHVH working in their lives . . . quite a contrast from the Roman gods who just wanted to be left alone. For the non-Jews, YHVH was real to them.

Yet they had begun to turn again to the cultic Roman worship. Paul used the term “*epistrepho*” (Strong’s 1994) which in the LXX is often used to translate the Hebrew word “*shuwb*”⁶ which means “to return”. In this passage, “*epistrepho*” is in the present tense, thus they are in the process of turning back. They may have just begun the process. This, of course would pose the question “why?”

³ “days instituted for the sake of the gods” - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_festivals#Keeping_the_feriae

⁴ See marginal notes in NKJ

⁵ Deut 4:39; Is. 43:10; John 6:44, 65

⁶ Judges 11:9; 1 Sam. 7:3

What were they turning back to? They were turning back to the “elements”. Were they the same elements as mentioned in verse 3, i.e. – the Torah? No, that’s not possible. Even though many Christian pastors teach that the Gentiles were giving up the “freedom of Christ” by turning back to “the Law”, that’s simply not possible. Why? Because the non-Jews had never observed the Torah. Now if Paul had been speaking to the Jews that may have been possible, but we’ve already determined that he was not. He was clearly speaking to the non-Jews, the ones who had not known God.

What’s more, Paul always describes the Torah in a positive way. He uses phrases like –

^{NKJ} **Romans 7:12** Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

^{ESV} **Romans 7:22** For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,

“But”, you might ask, “are you not using the word two different ways to suit your needs? After all, in the previous installment, you said that the elements were the Torah.”

Yes, that’s true. I am saying that the word “elements” means different things in each passage. The word “stoicheion” (translated ‘elements’) is a noun that simply means “the first (or primary) in an order of things”. It could be any first thing, and to find out what that “first thing” is, you have to go to the context and the adjectives attached to it. A good example of that type of noun is the word “light”. If we say “turn on the light” we understand it to be an electric light, but if we say “stop at the light”, or if we’re riding in a car and we say somewhat excitedly “it’s a red light”, we’re talking about a traffic light. If we say “let’s let in some light”, we’re normally talking about sun light, but if we’re in a dark room processing film, we’re probably talking about opening the door into another room.

In verse 7, the context of the law of the “patria postestas” is a perfect fit for the role of the Torah that Paul had been explaining. It is the primary part of a Hebrew person’s life. But it would never fit the context of verse 9. Paul would never describe the Torah as “weak (Strong’s 772) and beggarly (4434)”, i.e. – powerless and void of value.

What was powerless and void of value that the non-Jews had once been in bondage to? The Roman gods and the cultic worship. The ‘gods’ were inept, worthless, non-existent. Never-the-less, the Romans centered their culture around them.

Not only were the Roman god’s worthless, they also consumed so much of the peoples time. Like I said earlier, there were well over a hundred ‘holidays’ devoted to their worship, including the December 25th holiday called “Dies Natalis Solis Invicti” – the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun”. These were the ‘days and months and seasons and years’ that the non-Jews were turning back to.

Maybe they were just dabbling again in pagan worship, possibly mixing the worship of YHVH with the pagan Roman cult. We don’t know for sure, but whatever they were doing, Paul was concerned.

In the English standard version, verse 11 reads like this:

^{ESV} **Galatians 4:11** I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Dealing with the Galatians was difficult for Paul. It would have been much easier if all the Galatians had been Jews, or if they had all been “gentiles”, but the mix of cultures as well as the fact that some of the Galatians were indeed *Israelites* though not Jews caused some very unique problems. For example:

- Paul knew it was important for the non-Jews to grab hold of the Torah, but . . .
 - He didn’t want them to believe the Torah is what saved them.
- The Jews held the ‘oral law’ in high esteem as evidenced by Peter’s actions in chapter 2, but . . .
 - Paul did not want the non-Jews to feel obligated to the ‘oral law’ in order to fit in with their Jewish brothers.
- Paul knew the tendency of the Jews to impose ‘oral law’ on everyone, thus making Torah observance almost impossible, and . . .

- He knew that if the Jews were successful in doing that, they could drive the non-Jews out of the congregation and back into idolatry. Why?
- Because in the Roman culture and according to Roman law, you either had to worship the Roman gods, or you had to be associated with Judaism.

Were Paul's fears unfounded? I don't think so. The Jews had already built a reputation of excommunicating those who did not see things their way. The case of Yeshua healing the man who was blind from birth is a good example:

^{NKJ} **John 9:1** Now as *Jesus* passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth ¹⁹ And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ "but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know . . ." ²² His parents said these *things* because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed *that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue.*

Then there's the Jewish leaders who refused to "come out of the closet":

^{NKJ} **John 12:42** Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue;

"But this would never happen among 'messianics', would it? Notice what Yeshua said to His disciples on the night He was betrayed:

^{NKJ} **John 16:1** "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. ² "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.

It was no secret that the Jews would put a person out of the synagogue, but Yeshua's warning seems to indicate a future time when even believers in Yeshua would put other believers out because of the gospel message that He had taught.

Could it be that while some of the non-jewish Galatians were turning to the "other gospel", others could sense that they were not welcome and were slowly moving back into the Roman culture, hoping the Romans didn't notice their abandonment of Judaism? If so, Paul had failed, at least in regards to the Galatians.

This may be the crux of the issue, the reason why Paul was so upset with what was happening. The "gospel" of the perpetrators was forcing people back into idolatry.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:12** Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all. ¹³ You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. ¹⁴ And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

Paul's frustration seems to have reached its peak. He just couldn't understand what had happened. Why had some of them turned to the "other gospel" while others had begun to move back into the Roman cult? He took a break from trying to convince them that what they were doing was not good, and began to talk about their relationship.

He urged them to be like him, something he had also done with the Corinthians –

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 11:1** Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ.

He also stated that He was like them – that they had things in common. Note that in the text the word “became” is added by the translators. He did not become like them, especially not the way most Christians believe. Paul did not cast off the Torah; and at this time, neither had the Galatians. What they did have in common was the persecution they were receiving from the Jews in the congregation.

Persecution by the Jews was nothing new to Paul, nor was it unexpected. Yeshua prophesied it would happen on more than one occasion.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:34-37** ³⁴ "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: *some* of them you will kill and crucify, and *some* of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city . . . ³⁷ " O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!

^{NKJ} **Matthew 10:16-17** ¹⁶ " Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. ¹⁷ "But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.

^{NKJ} **Mark 13:9-10** ⁹ "But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them. ¹⁰ "And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations.

Paul had already been persecuted for his belief in Yeshua and his gospel message. He knew what the Galatians were facing –

^{NKJ} **2 Corinthians 11:24** From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one.

^{NKJ} **Acts 20:22-24** "And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, ²³ "except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. ²⁴ "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Because Paul was more than aware of their situation, he wanted them to know that he did not take their actions as a statement of defiance. The non-Jews were somewhat “between a rock and a hard place”. They could convert to Judaism and escape persecution in the synagogue, or they could try their best to continue the Hebrew walk but avoid persecution by the Romans by making it appear that they were practicing the Roman religion - possibly by taking on some of the “lighter” pagan practices. It seems that simply continuing to be a part of the Jewish community by being a “god fearer” like Cornelius was no longer an option.

Paul alluded to the previously mentioned fact that they were “known by God” by reminding them of the circumstances surrounding his arrival in Galatia in the first place. Apparently this was an unscheduled stop, but possibly because of illness or travel fatigue Paul stopped in one of the Galatian villages and was immediately taken in by the believing community; possibly a Jewish synagogue that had a number of non-Jews who were beginning the process of becoming a proselyte. In his letter, Paul seems to have been trying to make them realize that their initial contact with him was a result of divine intervention, after all -

^{NKJ} **Romans 8:28** . . . all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

In his statement “You *know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first.*” (vs. 13), Paul may have been making a play on words in order to emphasis his point. If he had been writing in Hebrew, he would have used the same Hebrew word “basar” for both “physical infirmity” and for “gospel”. If that is indeed the case, then his next statement would have been easily understood. “ *And*

my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus." (vs. 14). If we substitute the word "gospel" for "flesh" (they're the same word in Hebrew) we would see that even from the beginning, the Galatians never rejected his gospel message. Assuming that Paul did write in Hebrew, the sentence could read like this:

"And my trial which is my Gospel, you did not despise or spit out? . . . but you received me as a messenger from God, just as you would Christ Jesus." (Galatians 4:14 ^{TLK Version})

The Greek supports this rendition, and Paul does not hesitate to speak of the sufferings he endures for the sake of the gospel.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 1:8** Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God,

If my version of Paul's statement is indeed correct, it makes a lot more sense than the way this statement is often explained, namely that Paul had a disease or sickness that the Galatians would have considered contagious or even demonic, yet they allowed it in their presence.

Yet in contrast to their previous excitement about the Gospel message, they apparently were reconsidering it. Whereas before they were willing to "pluck out their eyes" to help further the gospel, they were now seemingly in opposition to it, and to Paul - who the perpetrators were probably trying to paint as an enemy - an enemy of their version of the gospel, an enemy of Judaism since he no longer supports their view of conversion, and probably even an enemy of God since Paul was no longer putting "the Jews" on a pedestal (in regards to them having an automatic position in the Kingdom).

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:17-18** They zealously court you, *but* for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you.

Paul lays the blame for the non-Jew's change of heart squarely on the Jewish perpetrators. Yes, they wanted to fill the synagogue with non-Jews, but they wanted them to know their place. Either they convert to Judaism or they remain as second-class citizens. This was consistent with what other NT writers say about the Jewish custom of proselytizing.

Unlike today, the Jews of the first century were a proselytizing people. The likely read passages like -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 42:6** "I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles,

. . . and applied them to themselves, giving themselves a mandate to reach out to those of other nations.

The Jews also understood the prophecies of return, and the need for their non-Jewish brothers to return to the walk. Unfortunately, their methods often lead to disaster for those who followed them - as shown by this statement of Messiah Yeshua -

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:15** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Apparently some within the Jewish leadership were no longer willing to allow the status of "god-fearer" (the status of Cornelius) to continue. Instead, they insisted on full conversion - which included acceptance of all oral law, or they wanted them excluded from the Jewish community which would then lead to persecution by the Roman authorities.

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Yes, the perpetrators had zealously courted the non-Jews, but not because they wanted them to love YHVH and learn to be Hebrew, but so they could claim converts to Judaism.

Though condemning the zeal of the perpetrators, Paul wanted the non-Jews to understand that their own zeal in wanting to be a part of the people of God was good, and that they should continue with that zeal even if Paul isn't with them.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:19-20** My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.

Unlike the perpetrators, Paul had a sincere love for the non-jewish Galatians. He knew they were young and fragile, and had hoped that they would have been able to stand up under the persecution of the perpetrators, but he realizes that they still don't have a good grasp on what Yeshua did for them. They apparently have not been "birthed" as it were. They had not yet had their "Red Sea experience" where they come to realize that it was their savior, their Yah-shua, that enabled them to come up out of the sea alive, as a new - a free man.

If he could only go to Galatia himself, sit down with them and talk, he could probably get it all straightened out, but that's not possible. He wonders if they will stick with it, will they succumb to Judaism. Or will they return to their previous pagan walk.

Paul hasn't given up yet as well see when we continue.

Shalom Alecheim