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Galatians from a Jewish Perspective

To my grandmother, Ruth Johnson, who was raised a Quaker and never talked much about her faith.

She just lived it out every day. Saint Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words." Her life screamed, "Love Jesus."



Galatians is probably one of the most misunderstood and misused books of the B'rit Chadashah because of the lack of understanding of its literary style and original context. **Paul's** letter to the **Galatians** is a fiery literary composition that was meant to grip its original readers with the importance of freedom from most of the commandments of **the Torah** that the gospel offered its **Gentile** recipients. Like all the other **Jewish** writers who stirred up controversy by having a negative opinion, **Paul** used midrashic methods of interpretation as well as the language of passion, conflict, and exaggeration to pour forth **his** heart when **he** felt his congregation was being threatened by a gospel of Works. This commentary helps the reader understand the delicate balance **Paul** sought between **the Torah** and the grace of **Yeshua** through its analysis of **his** literary methods and comparison to other **Jewish** texts from his time, especially 4QMMT from Qumran. The relevance of the necessary balance between faith and works, as seen in the scales symbolizing this book, is increasing in our own time as people seek restoration to **God's** original plan for **His people**, both **Jews** and **Gentiles** in the Church (**Ephesians 3:14**). It shows both **Paul's** love for **the Torah** and **his** awareness of its limitations to make a person righteous in the eyes of a holy **God**. This book is a must-read for those who want to understand the B'rit Chadashah (New Covenant/ New Testament) in its original context.

Author

The opening verse of the book identifies **Paul** as the author of **Galatians**. Apart from a few nineteenth-century interpreters, no one has seriously questioned **his** authorship. The reasons for this are based on the clear testimony of both internal and external evidence. Most of **Chapters 1** and **2** are autobiographical and harmonize consistently with the events in **Paul's** life recorded in **Acts**. And the theology of **Galatians** is the theology that **Paul** taught in his other writings such as **Romans**. In the second and third centuries **Galatians** was attributed to **Paul** and quoted by the Church fathers, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. It must, therefore, be concluded that no real doubt existed in the early Church, nor should there be any doubt today that **Paul** was the author of **Galatians**.¹

Date and Place of Writing

Galatians is the second oldest document in the New Covenant, and first of **Paul's** many books (**to see link click [Ae](#) - The Dates of Books in the B'rit Chadashah**). It is older than **Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts**. **Paul** composed **his** letter to **the Galatians** in 48 BC about twenty years after the resurrection during his **Third Missionary Journey** (see the commentary on **Acts [Ce](#) - Paul's Third Missionary Journey**), for **Paul** had visited **the Galatian** churches on his **Second Missionary Journey**, and at that time there were no evidences of the destructive work of **the Judaizers**.

The Background and Destination

The name **Galatia** comes from the barbaric Gauls, or Celts, who settled in Asia Minor after several centuries of plundering the Greek and Roman empires. Under Roman rule, the original region of Galatia was made part of a larger province by the same name in central Asia Minor (modern Turkey) that encompassed an area some 250 miles north to south and up to 175 miles from east to west.

In **Paul's** day the name **Galatia** was used for the original smaller region as well as the province. On his **First Missionary Journey** **Paul** and **Barnabas** established churches in **Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:14 to 14:23)**. The letter to **the Galatians** itself, however, does not identify any specific church, but they were churches in which **Paul** had personally ministered (**4:13-15**). While in **Galatia**, **Paul** nearly lost **his** life, having been stoned and left for dead by **the Judaizers** who followed **him** from **Pisidian Antioch** and **Iconium** to **Lystra**. After establishing a church in **Derbe**, **Paul** and **Barnabas** revisited the other three cities **strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging**

them to persevere in faith (Acts 14:22). On his **Second Missionary Journey** Paul visited the Galatian churches with Silas. Now Paul came to Derbe and Lystra. There was a disciple there named Timothy, son of a woman who was a Jewish believer and a Greek father, who was well-spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this young man to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him for the sake of the Jewish people in those places - for they all knew that his father was Greek. As they were traveling through the cities, they were handing down the rulings that had been decided upon by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, for them to keep. So, Messiah's communities were strengthened in the faith and kept increasing daily in number (Acts 16:1-5).²

The Problem

There were **Judaizers**, or **Jewish false teachers**, who taught that those who wanted to believe in **Yeshua Messiah** first had to undergo circumcision and submit themselves to the Torah of Moshe. The Messianic Community in Jerusalem was opposed to this whole issue, **Jews** and **Gentiles** are saved by **faith** alone (see the commentary on **Acts Bs - The Council at Jerusalem**). But in spite of the decision of the Jerusalem Council, **they** would not accept the ruling and were plaguing the **Galatian** churches. Everywhere **Paul** went, **the Judaizers** were sure to follow. Once **Paul** established a church in **Galatia**, as soon as **he** left, **they** would come in and **distort the gospel of Messiah (1:7)**. In other areas they had little success, but in **Galatia**, **they** had great success. This is why **Paul** wrote the book of **Galatians**. The ultimate issue in **Galatians** is two questions. First, what is the essence of the gospel? And secondly, what one must do to be saved?

The Use of the phrase, "the Law" in the context of Galatians

In the context of **Galatians**, the **Law** is used as a negative term for **legalism**, or trying to obtain salvation by upholding **the 613 commandments** of **Moshe** and **the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**).

The Use of the Tree of Life Version

Because I am writing this commentary on the book of **Galatians** from a Jewish perspective, I will be using *the Tree of Life Version* unless otherwise indicated.

The use of ADONAI

Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce the Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **God**, and this remains the rule in most modern Jewish settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant.¹ In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase *the Name*, instead of writing or pronouncing **His** Name. Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His** Name were lost. The closest we can come is **YHVH**, with no syllables. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the name Yahweh is only a guess of what the original name sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*.

The use of TaNaKh

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuvim," the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB)**. I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase the Old Testament, throughout this devotional commentary.

The Use of the phrase, "the righteous of the TaNaKh," rather than using Old Testament saints

Messianic synagogues, and the Jewish messianic community in general, never use the phrase Old Testament saints. From a Jewish perspective, they prefer to use the phrase, "righteous of **the TaNaKh**." Therefore, I will be using "the righteous of **the TaNaKh**," rather than Old Testament saints throughout this devotional commentary.

Theological Teaching

Galatians stands as an eloquent and vigorous defense of the essential truth in the B'rit Chadashah that people are **justified by faith** in **Yeshua Messiah** - nothing less and nothing more - and that they are sanctified not by legalistic deeds of the flesh, but by the obedience that comes from **faith** in **God's** work for them, in them, and through them by the power of **Messiah** and **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**. It was the rediscovery of the basic message of **Galatians** (and **Romans**) that brought about the Protestant Reformation. **Galatians** is often referred to as "Luther's book," because Martin Luther relied so strongly on this letter in all his preaching, teaching, and writing against the prevailing Catholic theology of his day.³

Key Verse

It is clear that no one is set right [justified] before God by Torah, for "the righteous shall live by faith" (Galatians 3:11CJB).

Key Word:

Grace (Greek: charis).