

GALATIANS
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. MCKEE

MESSIANIC
APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

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Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

P.O. Box 850845

Richardson, Texas 75085

(407) 933-2002

www.outreachisrael.net

www.messianicapologetics.net

originally produced by TNN Press 2012 in Kissimmee, Florida

Front cover image is of the ruins of Ancient Lystra

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
Ara: Aramaic	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ASV: American Standard Version	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	KJV: King James Version
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	LXX: Septuagint
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	m. Mishnah
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	MT: Masoretic Text
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Ger: German	NIV: New International Version (1984)
GNT: Greek New Testament	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
Grk: Greek	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
Heb: Hebrew	NT: New Testament
	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world

OT: Old Testament

PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*

REB: Revised English Bible (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TEV: Today's English Version (1976)

TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)

TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)

TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*

Yid: Yiddish

YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

Among all the books of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), Paul’s letter to the Galatians often presents the most challenges to Messianic Believers. After a surface reading of the text, most readers of Galatians consider its six short chapters to be the “final word” on Christians’ relationship to the Law of Moses. Paul apparently sees the Law as being outdated and unnecessary for faith. Paul condemns anyone who claims that the Law of Moses has any place in the life of a born again Believer, and was seriously afraid for anyone giving it any kind of merit, perhaps even suggesting that such a person was on the verge of apostasy.

While some of these conclusions are a bit overstated, even among Christians who do not believe that Torah observance is expected of God’s people today, they do summarize a fair amount of the rhetoric that we often encounter. Messianic Believers today advocate that the Lord is restoring a Torah foundation to His people. They practice this by studying the Torah portions every week, and by doing things like keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, appointed times of Leviticus 23, and kosher dietary laws. It should be our hope that in most cases the desire to do such things is because a person is trying to grow in his or her faith and live a life like Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). The motives of a Spirit-led Messianic Believer should not be to try to rely on human actions to gain favor with God, but rather let those actions come as a result of a vibrant relationship with Him. As this relationship grows, not only will our heart be transformed—but we will have a mind that is focused on God and is able to reason with complicated issues as they arise. In spite of their natural differences as people, Jewish and non-Jewish Believers should be one in the Messiah Yeshua (3:28), serving one another in their obedience (6:2).

Galatians is one of those texts of Scripture where a mind able to compute and fathom difficult concepts is needed. More commentaries and Bible studies have probably been conducted on Galatians and its emphasis on “freedom” than any other text. Much of the Protestant Reformation was spearheaded by Galatians, as Martin Luther appropriated its words on justification to refute Catholicism’s practice of selling indulgences. But, Galatians is sometimes used when “legalists” enter the community of faith and insist that a person live up to a standard of righteous living. Some pastors and Bible teachers use Galatians to refute those who would believe that a disciplined life of faith is necessary—often taking Galatians out of its original First Century Mediterranean, mixed Jewish and Greco-Roman, context. Messianic Believers who place a high emphasis on the Torah are easy targets for being “legalists,” especially when Paul has so much to say about the misuse of the Law of Moses in his writing to the Galatians.

A coherent Messianic view of Galatians is needed in this hour when our emerging Messianic theology is in a state of flux. This commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians has strived to offer careful attention to the text of the letter, and to consider the opinions of Bible commentators, ancient history, and various Greek and Hebrew grammatical issues.

The biggest issue by far which needs to be factored into a Messianic Believer’s examination of Galatians, is consideration for what has been termed the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) that has been developing in various academic Christian circles since the 1970s. Even though it has existed for over thirty years, Christian pastors and laypersons are just now having to consider some of its propositions—meaning that people within the broad Messianic movement are largely just hearing whispers about it. The NPP began in the post-Holocaust environment of Christian scholars having to take the perspective of First Century Judaism much more seriously on its own terms. Krister Stendahl’s work *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* began some of the earliest discussions in the 1960s. More and more New Testament scholars had to be pointed to the important fact that First Century Judaism was not the Medieval Catholicism that Martin Luther used texts such as Galatians (and also Romans) to protest. 1977 saw the release of the highly important book *Paul and Palestinian*

Judaism by E.P. Sanders. Two-thirds of this massive treatise includes a great deal of data from the various writings of Ancient Judaism (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrashim, Dead Sea Scrolls) and specifically examines its position on works and righteousness. This has widely culminated in the work and perspectives offered by the two major scholars who tend to be associated with the NPP, and have undoubtedly written the most on the issues of the Apostle Paul, First Century Judaism, and the Torah or Law, James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright.

The primary thrust, presented by the NPP, is that readers have to consider Paul's writings in the context of First Century Judaism. Modern readers cannot *first* subject their Twentieth or Twenty-First Century worldview onto those ancient times. Things such as "circumcision," "works of the law," and "righteousness" need to be considered, as best as readers can contemplate, from the perspective of the wider First Century Jewish world. While the conclusions of the NPP have shaken up a few evangelicals—and even a few Messianics for that matter—what it brings to the table cannot be easily discarded. We have to include the NPP in our conversation on texts such as Galatians, as it might help us realize things that have been so easily glossed over—possibly because they have been examined through too much of a "Lutheran" perspective. Undeniable in Paul's argument to the Galatians is how Believers from the nations were to be included in the covenant people of God with the Jewish people.

This commentary of the Epistle to the Galatians will be taking into account some of the proposals and suggestions of the NPP. Generally, the NPP has received its most opposition from Reformed (or Calvinist) theologians, and its most acceptance from Arminians and Wesleyans. I cannot call myself a complete advocate of the NPP, but you will find that I am informed from its proposals and want to include some of its ideas on righteousness being corporate covenant inclusion, along with the more traditional view of righteousness being a personal, just standing before God. I do not believe the NPP can be ignored if we are to have an accurate First Century understanding of Galatians, which balances personal redemption with membership in God's corporate community. Many of the proposals of the NPP can definitely aid the credibility of the Messianic movement in the future—and most especially help our interpretation of some difficult words in Galatians.

Looking back on the decade of Messianic theological development (2002-2012), it is clear to me that a more thorough and mature approach to Biblical Studies—particularly regarding Galatians—is required. Too many Messianic Believers when testifying of their Torah related convictions to Christian family and friends, have Galatians quoted to them haphazardly. At the very least, this causes them to become discouraged and confused. The worst case scenario is that some Messianics perceive that Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul contradict themselves on the matter of the Law of Moses, and thus one must be discarded in favor of the other. I have heard liberal Messianics who counter claims from Galatians by saying that they only follow the Torah to evangelize their Jewish brethren, but they do not consider it important to follow beyond that. Likewise, I have heard unstable Messianics declare that Paul's letter to the Galatians must be a forgery and that Paul's other works should also be considered suspicious. Somewhere in the middle are those who try to examine Galatians with integrity, but who hold to a high view of the Torah and its continued relevance for Believers today.

A responsible interpreter has much to weigh when considering a text like Galatians. I do not believe that it is difficult to reconcile the seeming differences between Yeshua's and Paul's words on the Torah—but in order to do this we must gain the proper perspective. What are the circumstances surrounding Paul's composition of Galatians? What issues were the Galatians suffering from? What were the spiritual dynamics at work? These are all important questions that we should consider when examining any Biblical text—but *they are imperative to consider when interpreting Galatians*. We cannot simply interject what we think the text might mean, nor can we just throw our hands up into the air and ignore it, either. We have to do the difficult work of exegesis, being guided by a sound ideology rooted in the Torah and embodied in the worldview of Paul.

As you prepare to read this commentary on Galatians, what issues might we be facing today as the emerging Messianic movement that are paralleled in this letter? What is our position on circumcision? (Have we even defined its Galatian meaning properly?) How does one become an accepted member of God's people? What is righteousness and how do we receive a proper standing before God? Perhaps most important, how do we avoid being placed in the position of the Galatians?

You will discover that Galatians' message and what it really communicates is as relevant for our times now as Messianic Believers as much as it was in the First Century. The challenge is whether or not we will actually heed its message. The obstacle to overcome is having the spiritual and reasoning capacities to compute what the ancient challenge actually was—and whether we are indeed facing it in our midst again today. How can we be people who embody the essence of Paul's declaration, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14, NIV), while responding to some of the criticisms against that Law, commonly derived from passages in Galatians? How can we be men and women who strive to obey God as a *natural outworking* of our faith, rather than something that is required to precede faith?

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Galatians for the Practical Messianic has been updated and fine tuned in some areas, for this 2012 paperback printing and release for Amazon Kindle eBook. On the whole, readers will not notice any significant differences between the previous edition and this version. There has been some more information transplanted into this commentary from various articles and FAQ entries from the Messianic Apologetics website, and the 430-page paperback edition of *The New Testament Validates Torah*, in order to shore up the different passages and arguments considered. There have also been updates here and there to reflect some notable developments in the realm of Messianic theology, which have occurred since 2007. Also notable is the addition of "The Message of Galatians" summary article and the Author's Rendering of the Epistle to the Galatians, adapted from the 1901 American Standard Version. And of course, where necessary, some more engagement has been conducted with the Greek source text and other important issues.¹

¹ Since the initial release of this commentary in 2007, I have added a number of Galatians resources to my library, including: John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986); G. Walter Hansen, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994); Scot McKnight, *NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al. *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), pp 183-348; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

While I have employed these publications in other articles and books (as is seen in Appendix C), I did not think them to be significant enough to warrant including them in a verse-by-verse retread of Galatians, as no vastly new propositions were made, which were not already present in the resources consulted for the 2007 release.

INTRODUCTION

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians¹ (Grk. *Pros Galatas*, ΠΡΟΣ ΓΑΛΑΤΑΣ) is a very difficult text for most of today's Messianic Believers to understand. This is due to any number of factors, the foremost being that Galatians is often examined and interpreted from a perspective that is largely distanced from the First Century situation which it was originally composed to address. Rather than considering the specific spiritual and social dynamics of a group of newly maturing Believers in Yeshua (Jesus), who were challenged that their ethnic condition was not enough for true faith, redemption, and inclusion among God's people—many interpreters and lay readers consider Galatians to be Paul's *magnum opus* on Christians' divorce from the Torah of Moses. These Christian examiners of Galatians are often ill-informed of the *actual situation* of the Galatians, and too many Messianics—who have pro-Torah convictions—are ill-equipped to be able to respond to the claims made against them from this letter.

An engagement with the text of Galatians alone is not sufficient for a pro-Torah understanding of Galatians that will support Messianic convictions and lifestyle practice. (And neither is it sufficient for understanding *any* Biblical text). Most of the examination of Galatians that occurs today among your average Christians *and* Messianic Believers is often removed from its ancient context. Too much of it takes place on the basis of "this verse says this" and "but this verse says that" without consideration for the broader issues and discussions going on both in history and current academic study of Galatians. Furthermore, one must also keep in mind that Galatians is one of the earliest texts ever produced by the emerging Messianic movement of the First Century (save some of the creedal formulas used in some of Paul's letters).² As a consequence, we have to temper our examination of Galatians with the understanding that further clarification of various subjects may be given in some of Paul's additional letters and other Apostolic documents.

The message of Galatians, the exact audience of the Galatians, and some of the historical background surrounding Galatians, have all been debated by examiners in the past century. This is being compounded today by the rise of theologians advocating the New Perspective of Paul (NPP), where Christian scholars are seeing Paul's view of the Law as being far more moderate than is traditionally believed. Being informed from this view can change readers' orientation of certain passages in Galatians, which have often been perceived as anti-Law. Without question, the major theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians is a warning about some kind of perversion of the good news. But what this specifically was, and who the people were who were introducing this error to the Galatians, are often things rigorously discussed.

Christian theologians for several centuries have commonly likened Galatians as the "Magna Carta of Christian freedom," further comparing Romans to being the "Constitution" (an analogy derived from traditional English law and later American law). Since the Reformation, Galatians has been an important text for the foundational concept of justification by faith.³ Certainly, the Reformation was the key phenomenon used by God to return the Body of Messiah to the text of the Holy Scriptures, and purge many unbiblical practices introduced via a millennium or more of Roman Catholicism. Today's Messianic movement would not be in existence without good things that came from the Protestant Reformation. But as good and as

¹ Please note that in spite of the common reference to Galatians as "the Book of Galatians," I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Galatians or Paul's letter to the Galatians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant to *its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

² Including, but not limited to: Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20.

Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), xlii.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, xlili-lv for a summarization of different views and approaches to Galatians from the Second Century to the Reformation.

important as the Reformation was, to what extent did the Reformers' conclusions go too far? How limited were the early Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin in using a text like Galatians to refute the errors of Medieval Catholicism—when Paul actually wrote Galatians to strictly admonish a group of new, maturing non-Jewish Believers in the First Century Mediterranean? Have we been affected by some misappropriation of Galatians' original situation?

Over the centuries, Galatians has been used as a major support for the doctrine of justification by faith, a critical part of evangelical Protestant theology. **No Bible Believer true to God's Word should ever deny that this is important.** But how many of us have been introduced to a view of justification that is removed, in some specific places, from its Hebraic context in the Tanach (Old Testament)? When we consider what it means to be justified or declared righteous, largely embodied by the Greek *dikaïosunē* (δικαιοσύνη) in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) and Septuagint—behind this stands the Hebrew word *tzedakah* (תְּצַדִּיק), used frequently throughout the Tanach. While righteousness is certainly a personal status that God can afford to people, embodied in critical statements such as “And men will say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth!’” (Psalm 58:11), righteousness is *not just* an individualistic concept. There is a corporate sense of righteousness or *tzedakah/dikaïosunē* that involves being a part of God's covenant people, those designated as His own. *TWOT* summarizes the options:

“The covenant or theocratic aspect involves the nation of Israel, the covenant requires obedience to God by the nation and is the way of his people (Psa 1:1-6; Deut 6:25), a way of righteousness. God is righteous, [according to] the covenant, when he delivers his people from trouble (Psa 31:1), their enemies (Psa 5:8), the wicked (Psa 37:6) and when he is vindicating Israel before her foes or executing vengeance on them (Jer 11:20). It is appropriate that Israel be assured of ultimate victory over her foes (Isa 54:14-17). In this last event the Lord is both righteous and the savior (Isa 45:21).”⁴

When Paul talks about justification in Galatians—is he only talking about a personal status that Believers have in the Messiah? Or are there places where he is also talking about the corporate relationship of men and women to one another, as being members of His community of chosen ones? Recognizing this when reading Galatians may force a person to reevaluate some of his or her own Western individuality, something somewhat foreign to First Century Judaism (and ironically to much of the historic Christian Church as well). Messianic Believers are often not aware of some of the corporate aspects of justification that need to be considered. To Paul and to the other Apostles, it is not sufficient enough to be “justified” individually before God; one was interconnected to other men and women of faith who shared the same belief in Yeshua, functioning together to accomplish His purposes. It is most likely that there are some places in Galatians (i.e., 2:17) where the justification in view concerns membership in God's people, and others (i.e., 2:21; 5:4) where some kind of vindication from sins is in view.

Corporate justification is important to consider because of the inclusion of non-Jewish Believers in the First Century community of faith. If Galatians is one of the earliest Apostolic texts produced, it is likely that the issue of Jewish and non-Jewish relations was still “in progress.” Some things still needed to be figured out and discussed as the gospel message was going out to the nations. Paul concludes that faith in Yeshua resulted in one having membership in “the Israel of God” (6:16), something that was contrary to the prevailing Jewish theology of his time. The Mishnah attests a widespread view that all members of Israel (with few exceptions) were assured eternal salvation because of their ethnicity:

“All Israelites have a share in the world to come, as it is said, *Your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified* (Is. 60:21). And these are the ones who have no portion in the world to come: (1) He who says, the resurrection of the dead is a

⁴ Harold G. Stigers, “תְּצַדִּיק,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:754.

Cf. John Reumann, “Righteousness,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp 1129-1130.

teaching which does not derive from the Torah, (2) and the Torah does not come from Heaven; and (3) an Epicurean” (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1).⁵

Not only does Paul *not argue* that one’s ethnicity guarantees an individual a righteous status before God, but he recognizes that the work of Messiah Yeshua has brought a new status beyond the distinctions of Jew and non-Jew. He says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua” (3:28), actually subverting some of the religious ideas of the time (t.*Berachot* 6:18). His opponents would have disagreed with this, and would have instead argued that *something beyond belief in Yeshua* was necessary for inclusion among God’s people.

Freedom or liberty for Believers is also a major theme of Galatians, but many Christians often separate this from its original Tanach basis, which involves obedience to God’s Torah. Psalm 119:45 emphasizes, “And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts.” It is a gross misconception that God gave His people the Law to place them in bondage, and that “liberty” means being liberated from obedience to Him. On the contrary, the Psalmist opens his words with, “How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD” (Psalm 119:1). While God’s own intentions for giving His people the Torah were good, the fallen nature of humans can quickly change things and often goes beyond what He wants.

For Messianics today, Galatians often proves to be a problem text, as a surface reading of Galatians may appear to be quite negative toward a lifestyle of Torah obedience. As is summarized by many Christians, “Certain Jewish teachers, who professed to be Christians and acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, were obscuring the simplicity of the gospel of free grace with their propaganda. They insisted that to faith in Christ must be added circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law” (NIDB).⁶ Similarly, much of the Messianic movement has been accused of doing the same thing (even, at times, when just limited to the actions of Jewish Believers). While this was certainly something going on in Galatia, *why was it going on?* Was it simply an issue of getting non-Jewish Galatians to follow the Torah in obedience to God and the Messiah’s example left for His followers? Was it forcing things onto people who were not ready? Or, was it an issue of status in the community of faith—and how one is specifically considered righteous before the Lord? These are certainly all things that readers have to consider in their examination of Galatians.

When we consider Galatians, Paul does warn his audience that there was another “gospel” circulating in their midst. Outsiders had entered in after he had left, and brought a message that was going to be detrimental to their faith in Yeshua the Messiah, and their standing before one another as members of the faith community. Many of the Galatians found themselves deserting Paul’s teachings for those of some others (1:6-7), and Paul was greatly concerned as a close relationship had been forged between him and these people—almost as a parent toward children (4:19). But when Paul is said to be teaching a “circumcision free” gospel, what is he specifically advocating? Has he cast aside the instructions of the Torah as many Christians have interpreted his words? Or is he arguing against circumcision being the means for justification? What must Paul truly explain to the Galatians about their spiritual walk? What had caused the discord among the assemblies of Galatia? These are also things we will have to consider in our examination of Galatians.

The Epistle to the Galatians certainly does teach us some important things about our present relationship to the Law and our faith in Yeshua the Messiah—be we ancient Believers in the First Century, or modern Messianic Believers living in the Twenty-First Century. It addresses the age old problems of gaining inclusion in God’s family by human merit, versus a steadfast belief in His Messiah. Paul himself argues that hearing the gospel and being filled with the Holy Spirit is **sufficient for a person’s salvation** (1:1-5; 3:26-29; 4:6-7, 31; 5:1, 13, 25; 6:8, 15-16), and I will certainly *never argue against* the fact that Paul insists that Torah observance is **not required** in order to receive forgiveness from sins and eternal salvation. But did Paul really consider God’s Instruction to be abolished as a standard of holiness? Did he consider that its commandments of morality, ethics, and conduct be cast aside and were only in place prior to the cross?

⁵ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 604.

⁶ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Galatia,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 367.

What might you need to reconsider based on common perceptions of Galatians? This is why it will be imperative for us to consider some of the new Jewish and Hebraic studies being performed in the New Testament in our discussion of Galatians. There have also been some varied Messianic commentaries produced on Galatians, which we will likewise take into consideration. Modern commentators are often perplexed at Paul’s view of the Torah—some of which are concluding is *less negative* than commonly perceived—and find it difficult to reconcile in their current and often divergent Christian traditions.

PAUL AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE GALATIANS

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is among the non-disputed Pauline Epistles, as all, both conservative and liberal, agree on genuine Pauline authorship of the text. Only liberals who deny Pauline authorship of all of his attributed letters deny Pauline authorship of Galatians. All are likewise agreed on the literary unity of Galatians, as no one breaks it up into various pieces or sub-compositions.

Galatians was well known to the emerging Christian Church of the late First and early Second Centuries. It is referenced by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and listed among the books of the Muratorian Canon. Polycarp makes some direct appeals to Galatians in His *Epistle to the Philippians*:

GALATIANS	EPISTLE OF POLYCARP TO THE PHILIPPIANS
<p>“But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother” (Galatians 4:26)</p>	<p>“These things, brethren, I write to you concerning righteousness, not because I take anything upon myself, but because ye have invited me to do so. For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building... ..you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbor, “is the mother of us all.” For if any one be inwardly possessed of these graces, he hath fulfilled the command of righteousness, since he that hath love is far from all sin (<i>Polycarp to the Philippians</i> 3).⁷</p>
<p>“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7).</p>	<p>“Knowing, then, that “God is not mocked,” we ought to walk worthy of His commandment and glory” (<i>Polycarp to the Philippians</i> 5:1).⁸</p>

There is important internal evidence that we see of Pauline authorship in Galatians. The author identifies himself as “Paul, an apostle” (1:1; cf. 5:2), and most of the material seen in chs. 1 and 2 is autobiographical. All of the Church Fathers, and even some of the early heretics, identified the author of

⁷ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff, ed., Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection. MS Windows XP. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software. 2002.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Galatians as Paul. Extreme liberals such as the Nineteenth Century German higher critic F.C. Baur even considered Pauline authorship legitimate.

In Galatians, we see that Paul's apostolic authority and legitimacy as a minister of Yeshua were both seriously challenged. The opening of Paul's message to the Galatians is largely a defense of his service to the Lord and the work that he has thusfar accomplished both for the gospel, and for the Galatians in particular (1:8-2:10). The opponents whom he chastises his Galatian audience about are promoting circumcision—something that Paul tells them not to receive. He candidly says, "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you" (5:2). Paul's message to the Galatians is that they should not receive this "circumcision."

Many Christian expositors have only considered this circumcision in physical terms. Thus, it is asserted when Paul speaks against circumcision he is primarily thinking in terms of removal of the male foreskin of the *glans penis*. But is this what "circumcision" was mainly considered to be given the backdrop of Galatians? When Paul writes later, "But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished" (5:11), is he *just speaking* of a physical operation? Has he just issued a moratorium for the Galatians to go through a medical procedure, which was even practiced by ethnic groups before the time of Abraham, as well as other ethnic groups in the Ancient Middle East of the First Century? How much was this circumcision a physical act—versus something that had particular motives behind it with a certain result?

By the First Century, the rite of circumcision was extremely important—particularly in the larger Greco-Roman world, and by the Jewish community itself—for a Jew to be identified as "a Jew." T.R. Schreiner indicates, "Genesis 17:9-14 says that circumcision was the covenant sign for the people of God, and that refusal to take on the covenant sign would result in being cut off from the people of God...[I]n the intertestamental period circumcision was typically required for one to become a proselyte to Judaism...any diminution of the rite would naturally inflame both the cultural and religious passions of the Jews."⁹ Much of this was directly caused by the fallout of the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., where circumcision was made illegal on the threat of death, and it took on a hyper-national significance for many (cf. 1 Maccabees 1:60-61; 2:46).

When Paul says that he is persecuted for no longer "advocating circumcision" (NEB), it seems best for readers to view this *not* in the context of a medical procedure—but in lieu of what it would mean for one as a member of God's corporate people. Whereas his opponents would be promoting circumcision as a means to attain justification—inclusion as a covenant member of God's people—Paul argues instead that **this is accomplished via faith in Israel's Messiah**. Messianic author Tim Hegg suggests that a better understanding of "circumcision" (Grk. *peritomē*, περιτομή) is as "a short-hand way of referring to the ritual of a proselyte, the rabbinic ceremony in which a non-Jew was accorded the status of a Jew."¹⁰ So, when we see the later claim brought before the Jerusalem Council, "Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1), while the eternal salvation of a person is in view, this largely does not relate to the physical act of circumcision as much as it relates to ritual proselyte conversion. Obviously, this can reorient some of our approach to what Paul was really arguing against in his letter to the Galatians, and the "circumcision" being advocated among them by Paul's opponents.

Also important to keep in mind is the use of classical rhetoric in Paul's epistle, features of which have been explored in many technical commentaries. While we will not be exploring them to the extent of other commentators, Paul's words to the Galatians in 1:6, "I am astonished" (RSV) or "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Messiah, for a different gospel" (NASU), are important to take note of. These are words of ironic rebuke, as the verb *thaumazō* (θαυμάζω) can mean to "wonder, be

⁹ T.R. Schreiner, "Circumcision," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 138.

Cf. Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp 89-90.

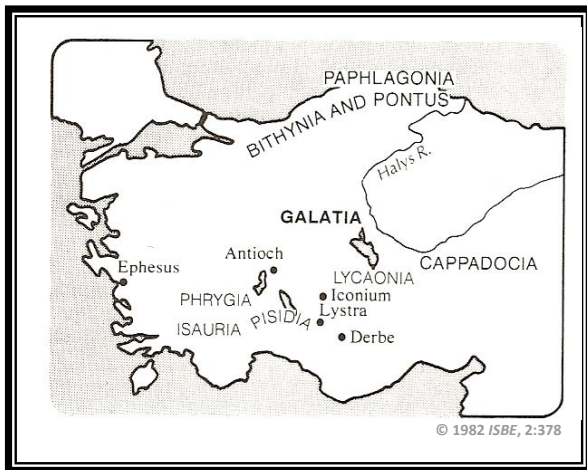
¹⁰ Tim Hegg, *A Study of Galatians* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), 4.

surprised that” (BDAG).¹¹ Paul is not really in “marvel” (KJV) at the spiritual condition of his Galatian audience, but employs this terminology to actually express how concerned he is for them.

(Paul’s visits to Galatia and direct interactions with the Galatians are addressed immediately below.)

WHO WAS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF THIS LETTER?

The target audience of Paul’s letter to the Galatians can be a vigorously debated issue among contemporary theologians. All examiners are agreed that we are to place ourselves somewhere in Central Asia Minor, and that this is a letter which Paul specifically wrote to a group of congregations: “the assemblies of Galatia” (1:2, YLT). Being able to accurately identify the exact audience of Galatians is a debate that continues in contemporary theology, with *Galatia* (Γαλατία) representing either (1) an ethnic group of people, or (2) a geo-political group of people. However, regardless of which side an interpreter favors, the significant majority of the intended audience in Galatia—either ethnic or political—were relatively new, non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua.



The Book of Acts is the principal external witness to the events surrounding the composition of Galatians. Both Acts 16:6 and 18:23 make a reference to *Galatikēn chōran* (Γαλατικὴν χώραν), or the “Galatian region.” In this case, Luke was probably using the term to describe an ethnic group as he linked it with “the Phrygian...region” in Acts 16:6. Many interpreters over the centuries have concluded that Luke’s ethnic Galatians are the same Galatians which Paul is addressing in his letter. However, renewed contact with Asia Minor from the Eighteenth Century to the present has caused many scholars to doubt that Luke’s Galatians and Paul’s Galatians are exactly the same.

A significant number of interpreters believe that as Luke’s common practice was to use local designations for cities and places, that his Galatians

are ethnic Galatians living in North Galatia. Paul in contrast, commonly used Roman provincial names and designations, so his Galatians must be those living in the province of Galatia to the South, regardless of their ethnicity. This is all compounded by the fact that who these congregations were lacks any archaeological evidence in *any* of the proposed locations. This does not mean that these people did not exist, because given the time that Paul interacted with the Galatians, many of the assemblies likely met in homes or other domiciles.

“Galatia” originally referred to a region of Asia Minor inhabited by ethnic Celts, but by the First Century also referred to a province of the Roman Empire. *Galatai* (Γαλάται) was a Greek modification of the term *Keltoi*, as Celts (presumably from Gaul) invaded Greece in about 280 B.C.E., some coming to the aid of King Nicomedes I of Bithynia as mercenaries. Their movements ultimately led to more permanent settlements in Northern Asia Minor, with the migration ending in about 77 B.C.E. These Galatians became a subject kingdom of Rome, in the First Century B.C.E., and would later find themselves being incorporated into a province of a much larger area in 25 B.C.E. after the death of the final Galatian king. Are these the Galatians who Paul writes to?

Up until the Nineteenth Century, it was generally agreed that the target audience of Paul’s letter was a group of people known as the Galatians. These Galatians were ethnic Celts, who later integrated into the local

¹¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 444.

population. Called today the **Northern Galatian Theory**, Paul's audience primary consisted of ethnic Galatians. We know from Luke's testimony in Acts that Paul did establish congregations in Northern Galatia after the Jerusalem Council during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 16:6-8). These Galatians would largely be descendants of the original Gauls who had migrated to the region.

The most support that is found today for the Northern Galatian Theory is largely seen among those who place the composition of the epistle after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. It is assumed from this viewpoint that Paul had to write Galatians because the Jerusalem Council's ruling on the inclusion of non-Jews in the faith community was not enforced, as Luke indicates, "while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe" (Acts 16:4).

Most interpreters until the Nineteenth Century agreed with this premise, but likely because they were dealing with incomplete historical data.¹² The thought that the Galatians in Paul's letter were ethnic Celts likely came from how a later reorganization of the Roman provinces was conducted in 297 C.E., which saw the southern province of Galatia united with other regions, to form the new province of Pisidia, largely leaving "Galatia" to the original ethnic area.¹³ However, even modern advocates of the Northern Galatian Theory, such as Hans Dieter Betz, must conclude "Whether [Paul's Galatians] were originally Greeks, Celts, or a mixture of diverse character is impossible to determine."¹⁴

Sir William Ramsay is often credited with challenging the Northern Galatian Theory in the mid-Nineteenth Century, advocating instead that Paul's target audience was not ethnic Galatians—but instead Southern Galatians. Known as the **Southern Galatian Theory**, any reference to Galatia by Paul is a reference to the Roman province in what is today South-Central Turkey. Acts chs. 13-14 record how Paul and Barnabas traveled throughout the province of Galatia, including: Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-43), Iconium (13:51), the region of Lycaonia (14:6), and Lystra (14:8-19), likely including a return journey including Derbe (14:20) to organize the assemblies planted (14:21-23) on their way back to Antioch. While it is not always the case, a wide number of evangelical Christian scholars today adhere to the Southern Galatian Theory.

The Southern Galatian Theory assumes that Paul is not writing ethnic Galatians as much as he is writing Believers who live in the Roman province of Galatia. This province became established when the last tribal king of Galatia, King Amyntas (36-25 B.C.E.), bequeathed his kingdom to Rome. The Roman historian Cassius attests, "The domains of Attalus and of Deiotarus, who had both died in Galatia, were given to a certain Castor" (*Roman History* 48.33.5).¹⁵ The name Galatia became used for territory in Southern Asia Minor, and included much more than just the ethnic Galatians. *IDB* indicates, "A variety of native peoples, partly Hellenized and Romanized, were thus added to the Galatian tribes living in the core of the province."¹⁶

The Southern Galatian theory proposes that the Galatians whom Paul addresses in his letter would have primarily included the congregations established during his First Missionary Journey, those of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:14-14:28). This is consistent with how Paul commonly used Roman provincial names rather than local designations in his epistles (also followed by Peter in 1 Peter 1:1). Barnabas was present with Paul during his First Missionary Journey, and he is mentioned by name as having been known to the Galatians (2:1, 9, 13). Paul refers to his audience as the "Galatians" (3:1), in a similar way as he refers to his other audiences as the "Corinthians" (2 Corinthians 4:15) or the "Philippians" (Philippians 4:15)—members of a particular geo-political boundary, regardless of their ethnicity. F.F. Bruce remarks that if Paul is using "Galatians" in a more provincial than ethnic sense, it is no different than how the term "British" is often used today:

¹² Cf. Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 5.

¹³ Cf. Longenecker, lxiii.

¹⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 4.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio: *Roman History*, trans. anonymous (1914-1927). Accessible online at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/home.html.

¹⁶ M.J. Mellink, "Galatia," in George Buttrick, ed. at. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:336.

“What comprehensive term could have been used (other than ‘Galatians’) to address Pisidians (or rather Phrygians) and Lycaonians together? We may reflect that the one comprehensive term which is acceptable when Englishmen, Welsh, Cornish and Scots are referred to or addressed together is ‘British’, which ‘ethnically’ is appropriate only to the Welsh and Cornish (and the Bretons, who are part of another political unit). The name Britain, or Great Britain, to denote the whole island, is a political expedient; yet Highland and Lowland Scots would much rather be called British (which they are not ‘ethnically’) than English (which is applicable to them only linguistically, and even so is unacceptable).”¹⁷

Ben Witherington III adds to this: “He could not...call them Phrygians or Lycaonians if he had evangelized a cross section of the residents of this Roman province.”¹⁸

Confusion has taken place because it is easy to assume that when Luke talks about a particular location in Acts it is the exact same place that Paul refers to in one of his letters—but there are frequent exceptions. In Acts 16:1-6 Paul visits a place called Galatia, but it is designated by different names (non-Roman), and it is Paul and Silas who are recorded as having traveled together. But in Acts 14:12 it is Paul and Barnabas (mentioned by name in Galatians 2:1, 9, 13) who are welcomed hospitably like “Hermes and Zeus” in Lystra, and Paul testifies how hospitable the Galatians were when he visited them (4:14-15). When Paul taught in Galatia he was plagued by a physical illness (4:14), when the mountainous Northern Galatia would have been too difficult for a sick man to transverse. The Roman province of Galatia had a sizeable Jewish population, versus scant pockets of Jews in Northern Galatia. Most significantly, no direct appeal is made in Galatians to the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council ruling on the new, non-Jewish Believers entering into the faith community, pointing to the Galatians he addresses as being provincial Galatians *prior* to the Council meeting. Paul’s reference to a visit to Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1-10 would instead concur with his relief mission in Acts 11:30.

As is the opinion of many evangelical Christian examiners, the Southern Galatian Theory is more likely, as Paul is recorded as having visited cities in the province of Galatia in Acts chs. 13-14. “[I]t is more likely that ‘Galatia’ referred to the province than to the territory, for it is not certain that Paul preached the gospel in the latter upon two different occasions” (*ISBE*).¹⁹ This would account for Paul’s intimate relationship with the congregations of Galatia, as indicated throughout his letter.²⁰ **In our analysis of Galatians, we will assume that the Southern Galatian Theory has accurately determined Paul’s target audience**, even though we will be considering the thoughts of various interpreters who hold to the Northern Galatian Theory.

While the native population of this provincial Galatia was largely made up of ethnic Galatians, Greeks, Romans, and other local groups—what of the Jews in Galatia? Assuming that the Southern Galatian Theory is valid, we see that Paul proclaims the gospel first at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-45), until being turned out of the synagogue by its leaders (Acts 13:46-50). At Iconium Paul likewise first teaches about Yeshua to those at the synagogue (Acts 13:51-14:2) until being forced out (Acts 14:3-5). In Lycaonia they are simply said as having “preached the gospel” (Acts 14:7, RSV), without any specific audience being referenced. Later in Acts 14:19, Jews from Antioch and Iconium are said to have come to Lystra to turn the crowd against Paul and Barnabas, an indication that there is probably a Jewish community there that did not want Paul to influence. In Derbe it is likewise said that Paul only “preached the gospel” (Acts 14:20).

We can safely assume that covering such a large area, such as the Galatian province that many of the assemblies Paul and Barnabas planted had mixed numbers of Jews and non-Jews. In Pisidian Antioch Luke records that “many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 14:43). Many of the Jews in the synagogues Paul and Barnabas visited became Believers in Yeshua. Likewise, this must be tempered by the fact that Paul and Barnabas were often met with hostility from the local Jewish community. Many social and ethnic

¹⁷ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 16.

¹⁸ Witherington, 4.

¹⁹ W.M. Ramsay and C.J. Hemer, “Galatia,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:379.

²⁰ Ten specific reasons in favor of the Southern Galatian Theory are offered by D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 458-460.