

Acts and Galatians: The Perfect Dovetail?¹

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Between its first account of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19a) and the first missionary journey (Acts 13:14), the book of Acts devotes no more than sixteen verses to the life of the apostle (Acts 9:19b-30; 11:25, 26, 30; 12:25). Compare this to the sixteen chapters (Acts 13-28) that follow his missionary career from this point on. Our knowledge of Paul's early years as a Christian can be reconstructed from a careful comparison of Acts and his epistles, especially Galatians. According to David deSilva, "Galatians gives us more first-hand information about Paul's early career as a Christian missionary than any other text."² On the basis of the following assumptions a clear picture begins to emerge:

1. Galatians 1:11-24 = Acts 9:1-30

1. Paul confesses to the Galatians how he "used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it," adding "and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Gal 1:13). His religious zeal expressed itself in his murderous persecution of the infant church (Gal 1:23; Phil 3:6). This corresponds well with the Acts account which reports that "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

¹ This article sets out some biographical insights into Paul's life from Acts and Galatians. It thus lays the historical groundwork for the next article, which looks in detail at Paul's expression of emotions in Galatians.

² David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 493.

2. God called Paul through his grace (Gal 1:15), no doubt a reference to his conversion experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-9).
3. Paul was specifically called to preach Christ to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16). This was precisely the message that the Lord told Ananias to convey to Paul: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15).
4. Hence Paul can tell the Galatians that the gospel he preached was received through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-12).
5. After his conversion he was with the disciples in Damascus for some days (Acts 9:19). From there he “went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus” (Gal. 1:17).
6. In Damascus he confounded the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ, and so they plotted to do away with him (Acts 9:22-23), but he got wind of their plot and was let down the city walls by night in a basket (Acts 9:23-25). This is probably the same incident to which Paul refers in 2 Cor 11:32-33.
7. Three years later (probably after his conversion) he went up to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18). These three years may well correspond to the “many days” that had elapsed before the Jews tried to kill him in Damascus (Acts 9:23). In seeking to reconcile the two accounts at this point, however, it is wise to be cautious. Here, says Alan Cole, “we are faced with unsolved and insoluble questions of chronology. The *three years*, for instance, may be counted either from the date of Paul’s conversion, or from his return from Arabia to Damascus. On first reading, the account in Acts sounds as if all these events took place in a few weeks. But we can tell from the speed at which events move in Acts that this is a highly compressed account. If we had the full history of Paul’s movements in early years, we might well find that they present a far more complex pattern than that found in either Galatians or Acts.”³

³ Alan Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (London: Tyndale, 1965), 54.

8. In Jerusalem the disciples were afraid of him, fearing that he was not genuine. But “Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles” (Acts 9:27). At this point there seems to be a serious discrepancy with Paul’s own recollection of events. He tells the Galatians that he “went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:18-19). Perhaps the best way to harmonise the accounts is by understanding “see” in the sense of “becoming acquainted and staying with,” as in the previous verse. The Greek verb *ὁράω* (*horaō*) that is used here can sometimes carry the meaning “visit” (as in Heb 13:23). Taking the evidence of both passages, we can conclude that although he met the other apostles Paul had in-depth visits with only two of them, namely Peter and James.⁴ He is rather adamant on this point. He seems to confirm it with an oath in Gal 1:20: “Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.” As an aside, it is probably worth noting that Paul consulted with Peter and James who would have been treasure troves of information about the historical Jesus. Although Paul had been preaching in Damascus that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God (Acts 9:20-22), and although he knew the gospel (Gal 1:11, 12, 16), he may well have wanted to know more details about the earthly ministry of Jesus. Who better to ask than Peter and James!
9. In Jerusalem, as in Damascus, he was “speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:27-28). Once again he encounters opposition, this time from the Hellenistic Jews, who try to put him to death (Acts 9:29). Paul’s fellow-Christians hear of it, and

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: Acts to Revelation, An Introduction and Survey* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 124, offers a different solution to the problem: “Galatians 1:22-23 initially poses a problem because Acts 9:26-30 suggests that Paul would have become well-known in and around Jerusalem. On more careful inspection, however, this latter passage never delineates how many apostles Paul saw, and what he did in Jerusalem was to talk and debate with the Hellenistic Jews (v. 29).” This approach overlooks the fact that in Acts 9:27 Luke states quite specifically that “Barnabas took hold of him [Paul] and brought him to the apostles.” The wording of this verse does not give the impression that he met only Peter and James.

for his own safety they take him down to Caesarea and ship him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). This harmonises with Paul's own claim: "Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal 1:21). He makes no mention of the fact that he probably had no say in this move. Nor does he mention that after his departure "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace" (Acts 9:31). It was probably not only for his own safety that the brothers escorted Paul to Caesarea. Even so, the churches of Judea who had not met Paul face to face were glorifying God because of him (Gal 1:24).

2. Galatians 2:1-10 = Acts 11:27-30

1. When Barnabas had encouraged the church at Antioch in their initiative to evangelize Greeks (Acts 11:19-23), he went to Tarsus to look for Paul (Acts 11:24). When he found him, he took him to Antioch and they stayed there for an entire year (Acts 11:25; cf. Gal 1:21).
2. In response to Agabus' prophecy that there would be a worldwide famine, the Christians in Antioch decide to send famine relief to the brothers living in Judea. They send their contribution to the elders in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:27-30).
3. Although this visit is only briefly mentioned in Acts, it would appear that Paul gives the "inside story" in Gal 2:1-10.
4. Paul claims that it was because of a revelation that he went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas (Gal 2:2). This could be interpreted as a revelation from the Lord to him, or it could be related to the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11:28.⁵
5. The purpose of the visit was to deliver aid to the brothers in Judea (Acts 11:29-30), a focus which is not lost in the report on the visit

⁵ Thus Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 118, who notes that in Gal 2:2 "Paul explains how he went to Jerusalem 'in response to a revelation' – meshing nicely with Agabus' prophecy in Acts 11:27-28."

in Galatians: “They only asked us to remember the poor – the very thing I was also eager to do” (Gal 2:10).

6. Paul makes it clear that in Gal 2:1-10 the meeting is between Barnabas, Titus and himself on the one hand and the “pillars”, James, Cephas and John on the other. From Acts 11:30 we know that Paul and Barnabas made the visit to Judea. No mention is made of Titus, but then his name never appears in Acts. He is introduced as a Greek and Paul emphasizes that he was not compelled to be circumcised (Gal 2:3). This fits the context of Acts 11 remarkably well, as this chapter records the early evangelization of Greeks in Antioch (Acts 11:20). It is not difficult to imagine that Paul and Barnabas took Titus with them as a “test case” of a Greek convert and they wanted to check with “those who were of reputation” in Jerusalem (Gal 2:2) whether Titus should be circumcised. In Acts 11:30 Paul and Barnabas bring Antioch’s relief package to the elders. This could well be a fitting description of Peter, James (the Lord’s brother) and John. Even though they are elsewhere called apostles, it would also be appropriate to refer to them as elders (cf. 1 Pet 5:1). Hence there need be no contradiction between these passages on this score.
7. The upshot of the meeting in Jerusalem in Acts 11:27-30 was that those who were of reputation made no difference to Paul or his message (Gal 2:6). His preaching of the gospel remained unchanged and there was no need to circumcise Gentiles. Again, this meeting would fit in well with the early evangelization of Gentiles in Antioch. Moreover, it was the church in Jerusalem that had sent Barnabas to check up on the new situation that had developed in Antioch (Acts 11:22). He encouraged the church there, and after fetching Paul from Tarsus had ministered there a further twelve months. Now was a good time to report back to the church in Jerusalem.

8. Placing Gal 2:1-10 in this context makes more sense than assigning a later date when the Gentile mission would have been much further advanced.⁶

3. Galatians Written before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

1. The setting for Galatians seems to be the time Paul and Barnabas spent in Antioch after the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14).⁷ At the end of Acts 14 we are told that they returned to Antioch, reported on their mission and spent a long time with the disciples (Acts 14:26-28).⁸
2. The main issue addressed in Galatians is circumcision, which is precisely the issue that is introduced in Acts 15:1-5. When Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch some men come from Judea insisting: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This resulted in great dissension and debate with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:2). As a result, the church decided that they should all go to Jerusalem to bring this matter before the apostles and elders. This resulted in the Council of Jerusalem which handed down a compromise decision, but one that essentially favoured Paul’s “no circumcision for the Gentiles” policy (Acts 15:6-29).

⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* 2nd ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 464, conclude that “Paul’s two visits to Jerusalem are those of Acts 9 and 11 (Gal. 2 will refer to private contacts on the famine visit on this view; it is hard to date Peter’s vacillation after Acts 15).”

⁷ Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2: 150, “Galatians 2:9 reads like a statement of agreement on respective spheres of missionary service, on the strength of which Paul and Barnabas made ready to evangelize the pagan peoples of Galatia.”

⁸ If this does indeed provide the most likely setting for the epistle, Paul’s readers live in South Galatia and are not the Galatians of Celtic origin further to the North. According to Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 353, “Paul addresses his first letter to the churches in South Galatia just after the first missionary journey but before the Jerusalem Council.” Although the North Galatian theory held sway for most of church history, many scholars today prefer the South Galatian theory, largely due to the significant and influential work by Sir William M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893).

3. If members of the circumcision party, who not surprisingly included ex-Pharisees (Acts 15:5), had made it from Judea as far as Antioch, it is not difficult to assume that they could also have infiltrated Antioch's daughter churches in Cilicia and South Galatia. Hence, they may well have retraced Paul's steps and begun to influence his Gentile converts.⁹
4. If these Judaizers¹⁰ had indeed managed to sway and unsettle those churches that had been established during the first missionary journey, then this provides ample reason for the fiery nature of this Epistle. This is understandable when we remember that these churches have just recently been founded at great personal cost.
5. If Paul wrote to the Galatians after the Jerusalem Council he could simply have cited the decisions of the Council, but there is no hint of that in this epistle.¹¹ The Council endorsed his no circumcision policy – a policy which he practiced on his missionary travels and had now defended in this letter.¹²

⁹ DeSilva, *Introduction*, 498, refers to their efforts as “a cleanup mission.” These “teachers followed along Paul's tracks trying to bring Gentile Christians into conformity with Torah and circumcision. In effect, they wanted to preserve fully the Jewishness of the new Christian movement and keep it firmly anchored within Judaism.”

¹⁰ On the use of this term Greg W. Forbes, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (eds.), *All Things to All Peoples: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 248-49, writes that “the opponents would appear to be Jewish Christian evangelists active in the Greek speaking world. They are of the same mentality as those described in Acts 15:1-5, with the law being central in their doctrine of salvation. Hence the commonly ascribed term Judaizers is apt.”

¹¹ According to Forbes, “Letter to the Galatians,” 246, “Failure to mention the apostolic decree in Galatians is a significant issue . . . Considering the fact that the Galatian Christians appear to have been so easily persuaded by an ultra-conservative Jewish Christianity, knowledge that the Jerusalem leaders themselves supported a law-free gospel could hardly have done Paul's argument much harm!” Likewise, Gundry, *Survey*, 353, writes: “An argument in favour of the South Galatian address and early date is that if Paul wrote the letter after the Jerusalem Council, he would probably have capitalized on that council's decree favouring Gentile Christian freedom from the Mosaic law, the main topic under discussion in Galatians.”

¹² DeSilva, *Introduction*, 495, concludes: “The events in Galatians (let alone Paul's activities prior to Galatians) must logically predate any such decision that was reached in the meeting narrated in Acts 15, since that ruling would have direct bearing both on the question of circumcision raised in Galatia and the question of table fellowship with the Gentile Christians raised in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14).”

4. Galatians in the Context of Acts 13-14

On the basis of the above observations Acts 13-14 provide the most compelling background to Paul's letter to the Galatians. These chapters begin and end in Syrian Antioch, the city from which the first missionary journey was launched and to which Paul and Barnabas returned when it was completed. Of particular significance for our purposes is the work that they undertook in the South Galatian cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13:14-14:23). It is into this context that the epistle seems to fit most comfortably. The following features stand out:

1. *The Prominence of the Gentiles:* As the first missionary journey was the Church's first organised mission to the Gentiles, it is not surprising that they are a strong focus in Acts 13-14. There are in fact more references to the Gentiles in these chapters than in all the preceding chapters of Acts. It was in Pisidian Antioch that Paul and Barnabas first declare to the Jews that they are turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46), a declaration that Paul will repeat to the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18:6) and Rome (Acts 28:28). For this they find scriptural warrant in one of Isaiah's Servant Songs: "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth" (Acts 13:47; cf. Isa 49:6). To this message the Gentiles respond in joy and faith (Acts 13:48). Not all Gentiles react so positively, however. In Iconium some are incited by unbelieving Jews against the apostles (Acts 14:2, 5). In Lystra it seems that the Jews have enough support from the Gentile crowds to stone Paul and drag him out of the city (Acts 14:19). Nevertheless, the overall response of the Gentiles was such that when Paul and Barnabas return to their sending church they can report that God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27; cf. vv. 1, 21). It is this theme that Paul further develops in Galatians.¹³ He reminds them that he was called to preach Christ among the Gentiles (1:16), a calling

¹³ In Paul's correspondence there are more references to the Gentiles here than in any other letter except Romans.

that was later confirmed by Peter, James and John (Gal 2:2, 8, 9). An essential feature of his message is that Gentiles as well as Jews are justified by faith and not by works of the law (2:15-16; 3:8, 14). More than either Peter or Barnabas, Paul understood that one of the implications of this was that there was now no barrier to table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles (2:11-14). These emphases in Galatians flow naturally out of the proclamation of the gospel as reported in Acts 13-14.

2. *The Mention of Barnabas:* Barnabas was Paul's main companion throughout the first missionary journey. His name occurs nine times in Acts 13-14, but he disappears completely from the Acts narrative after chapter 15. He is, however, mentioned three times in Galatians (Gal 2:1, 9, 13), which is more frequently than in all of Paul's other epistles combined (cf. 1 Cor 9:6; Col 4:10). Donald Guthrie explains that "this is more natural if he were known to the readers, which could be so only if the churches in mind are the southern churches. It was only on the first journey that he accompanied Paul."¹⁴
3. *Preaching the Gospel:* Another feature of the Acts account is the fact that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in each of the centres visited. This is indicated either directly by the missionaries themselves (Acts 13:32; 14:15) or by way of editorial comment by Luke (Acts 14:7, 21). In Galatians Paul reminds his readers quite emphatically of the gospel he had preached to them (Gal 1:6-11; 4:13). The very reason that God had set him apart and called him was that he might preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16), a calling that would later be confirmed by the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:2, 5, 7).
4. *Old Testament Quotations:* The only sermon where Paul quotes directly from the Old Testament is in the "word of exhortation" (Acts 13:15) that he delivered in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). According to UBS⁵ he does

¹⁴ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: Tyndale, 1970), 455.

so five times: v. 22 = Psa 89:20 + 1 Sam 13:14; v. 33 = Psa 2:7; v. 34 = Isa 55:3; v. 35 = Psa 16:10; v. 41 = Hab 1:5. Of further significance is Paul and Barnabas' citation of Isa 49:6 in v. 47, when they tell the Jews they are turning to the Gentiles. All of these quotations agree either exactly or substantially with the LXX. A similar use of the Old Testament is found in Galatians, where there are ten quotations. In three of these there is verbatim agreement with the LXX (3:16 = Gen 12:7; 4:57 = Isa 54:1; 5:14 = Lev 19:18). In five there is substantial agreement (3:6 = Gen 15:6; 3:11 = Hab 2:4; 3:12 = Lev 18:5; 3:13 = Deut 21:23; 4:30 = Gen 21:10), while two of the citations read more like paraphrases of the LXX (3:8 = Gen 12: 3; 18:18; 3:10 = Deut 27:26). It is not surprising that Paul should quote from the LXX in a Diaspora synagogue, and it follows that he should continue such usage in his epistle to the Galatians. However, it is not only the form of the quotations that stands out. The overlap in content is equally remarkable. In fact, both Acts 13 and Gal 3-4 make the same point, namely that believing Gentiles are included among the people of God. In his sermon in the Antioch synagogue Paul argues from the terms of the Davidic covenant, while in Galatians he argues from the Abrahamic.¹⁵ In many ways the epistle also unpacks the implications of Isa 49:6.

5. *The Grace of God:* Before the first missionary journey was launched, the church in Syrian Antioch had commended the missionaries to the grace of God (Acts 14:26). In Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas urged their listeners "to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43). In Iconium the Lord "was bearing witness to the word of His grace" (Acts 14:3). Like all of Paul's other epistles, Galatians both begins and ends with the grace of the Lord (Gal 1:3; 6:18). So this is nothing unusual. The intervening references to God's grace, however, are telling. Both the Galatians and Paul have been called by

¹⁵ Cf. E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 124: "The starting-point of his thought is the story of Abraham; the citations from the prophets appear to be interpreted in the light of the Genesis narrative, and *vice versa*, the Torah is understood in the light of its interpretation by the prophets."

grace (Gal 1:6, 15). James, Cephas and John recognised the grace that had been given to Paul (Gal 2:9). By teaching justification by faith and living out this doctrine Paul does not nullify the grace of God (Gal 2:21). On the other hand, those Galatians who are seeking to be justified by law “have fallen from grace” (Gal 5:4). Paul’s references to grace encapsulate the core message of Galatians.

6. *The Emphasis on Faith:* Throughout Acts 13-14 there is a strong emphasis on the faith of those who heard the word. In Pisidian Antioch as many Gentiles “as had been appointed to eternal life *believed*” (Acts 13:48). In Iconium “a great multitude *believed*, both of Jews and of Greeks” (Acts 14:1). The lame man at Lystra “had *faith* to be made well” (Acts 14:9). On their follow up visit to these three cities Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples “to continue in the *faith*” (Acts 14:22) and commended the newly appointed elders “to the Lord in whom they had *believed*” (Acts 14:23). The noun “faith” (πίστις, *pistis*) and the verb “believe” (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*) which are used in these chapters are well represented in Galatians (22x and 3x respectively). Most critical for our purposes, however, is a declaration that Paul made towards the end of his sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:38-39). Literally translated it reads: “Therefore let it be known to you, men and brothers, that through him [whom God raised from the dead] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and that in him everyone who *believes* is justified from all the things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses.” Much of Galatians reads like an exposition of these verses. In Gal 2:16 Paul emphatically repeats the latter part of this declaration: “knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law but through *faith* in Christ Jesus, even we have *believed* in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by *faith* in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.” The contrast between justification by faith in Christ and the impossibility of justification through the Law of Moses, first adumbrated in Paul’s sermon, is then developed in fine detail (Gal 2:19-21; 3:1-14, 22-26; 5:1-6).

Particularly impressive in Paul's argument is his quotation from the prophet Habakkuk, "The righteous man shall live by *faith*" (Gal 3:11; Hab 2:4). This was the very prophet he had quoted so effectively at the end of his sermon in Antioch (Acts 13:41; Hab 1:5).

7. *Miracles*: In Gal 3:5 Paul asks his readers, "Does He then who provides you with the Spirit and work miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" Paul's ministry among the Galatians had not been without miracles. In Iconium the Lord granted Paul and Barnabas "that signs and wonders be done by their hands" (Acts 14:3). Even more dramatically, the healing of the lame man at Lystra forms the centrepiece in the report of their ministry in that city (Acts 14:8-18). There were miraculous events to which Paul could readily appeal in his letter.
8. *The Intensification of Persecution*: Towards the end of his life Paul would remind Timothy, who originally hailed from Lystra (Acts 16:1-2), of the persecutions and sufferings "such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra" (2 Tim 3:11). As it turned out, at each successive location these persecutions became more intense. At Antioch it started at a verbal level, "when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming" (Acts 13:45). This initial opposition soon escalated, however, when the Jews "instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district" (Acts 13:50). In Iconium the persecution became even more intense. There "the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren" (Acts 14:2), so much so that "an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them" (Acts 14:5). What the persecutors merely attempted in Iconium, they succeeded in carrying out in Lystra: "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead" (Acts 14:19). Their

earlier threats had become fully realised – or so they thought. When they had left, Paul “arose and entered the city” (Acts 14:20), perhaps under cover of darkness.¹⁶ The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe about 100 km away – an escape which Paul later attributes to divine intervention (2 Tim 3:11; cf. 2 Cor 11:25). After a successful mission in that town, the apostles very courageously retraced their steps to do follow up work in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch by encouraging the new converts and appointing elders in each of the recently established churches (Acts 14:21-23). Paul, however, never forgot the persecutions he endured. In his letter to the Galatians persecution is a recurring theme. In the opening chapter he reminds his readers that he had himself persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy the faith (Gal 1:13, 23).¹⁷ Then he recalls from the days of Abraham that just as Ishmael, the son born “according to the flesh,” persecuted Isaac, the son “born according to the Spirit” (Gal 4:29; cf. Gen 21:9), the same still holds true today. As “children of promise” (Gal 4:28), his readers should expect to be persecuted.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thus F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 296.

¹⁷ Echoing Gal 1:23, a famous tombstone reads: “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and *appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy*” (italics mine).

¹⁸ There is subtle irony here. In Antioch, Iconium and Lystra it was the Jews who repeatedly instigated the persecution of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19). If Paul is still being persecuted because he refuses to preach circumcision (Gal 5:11), the persecution would again appear to be coming from a Jewish direction. By citing the case of Isaac and Ishmael from Gen 21:9, he is identifying the Jewish persecutors with Ishmael and himself and his Gentile converts with Isaac. He is reversing the traditional interpretation of an ancient text. Now believing Gentiles are the children of promise born according to the Spirit, while unbelieving, persecuting Jews are those “born according to the flesh” (Gal 4:29).

9. It was certainly so in his own case. Because he preached the cross, and refused to preach circumcision, he was still persecuted (Gal 5:11). His detractors, on the other hand, “try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal 6:12).¹⁹ Finally, immediately before his closing farewell, Paul states quite climactically, “I bear on my body the brand-marks (τὰ στίγματα, *ta stigmata*) of Jesus” (Gal 6:17), which is quite possibly a reference to the scars from the stoning he suffered in Lystra (Acts 14:19).²⁰

10. *The Expression of Intense Emotion:* The overt emotions that Paul expresses in writing this letter – his amazement (Gal 1:6),²¹ his fear (Gal 4:11)²² and his perplexity (Gal 4:20)²³ – are nothing if not intense. Equally strong was his former zeal for Judaism. In Gal 1:14 he confessed to having been “more extremely (περισσοτέρως, *perissoterōs*)²⁴ zealous for my ancestral traditions” than many of his contemporaries among his countrymen. So intense was his zeal that he “used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13). That Paul was a man of strong emotions should have come as no surprise to the Galatians. In Lystra, after the healing of the man who had been lame

¹⁹ Cf. deSilva, *Introduction*, 502, “Where the word of the cross causes persecution while the preaching of circumcision relieves persecution, only Jews could be doing the persecuting, and the rival teachers would certainly alleviate pressures from that quarter.” Martin, *Foundations*, 2: 155, traces this back to “the renewed activity of the Jewish Zealots in Palestine in the late 40s and early 50s. Jewish Christians were subjected to pressure to declare themselves loyal Jews at a time of fierce nationalistic upsurge.”

²⁰ Thus David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 412; cf. BDAG, 945: “Paul is most likely alluding to the wounds and scars which he received in the service of Jesus.”

²¹ This is the only occasion in the NT where Paul is described as being amazed.

²² The only other church to whom Paul admits his fears are the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 7:5; 11:3; 12:20).

²³ This is another strong emotion that Paul uses of himself only here and in the Corinthian correspondence (2 Cor 4:8).

²⁴ There are other occasions where Paul uses this comparative adverb to underscore the strength of an emotion (2 Cor 2:4; 7:13, 15; 12:15).

from birth, the priest of Zeus “wanted to offer sacrifice” (Acts 14:13). When Paul and Barnabas “heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd” (Acts 14:14). It was a dramatic gesture probably signifying their horror at what was happening (cf. Num 14:6; 2 Kings 5:7, 8; 6:30; 2 Chron 23:13).²⁵ No doubt all the Galatian churches, and not only the fledgling church at Lystra, would have been aware of the missionaries’ emotional outburst at being mistaken for pagan gods. The horror Paul expressed over the paganism at Lystra is psychologically not far removed from the amazement, fear and perplexity he felt at the Galatians’ threatening defection to another gospel (Gal 1:6-9; 4:8-21). They wanted to be enslaved all over again to “the weak and worthless elemental things” (Gal 4:9), such as their observing “days and months and seasons and years” (Gal 4:10). Circumcision was merely the thin edge of the wedge. If the Galatians received it, it would be tantamount to reverting to paganism (Gal 4:9). Paul’s zeal, horror, amazement, fear and perplexity are all of a piece. The portrait of Paul in Acts and Galatians is a consistent one. He has little sympathy for opposing religious views. When he was a Pharisee, his zeal drove him to persecute the infant church. When he was a missionary he was horrified by expressions of pagan worship. As the apostle to the Galatians he is amazed, afraid and perplexed that they are reverting back so quickly to a gospel of salvation by works.²⁶ It is not difficult to see what he was passionate about.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this incident, see Stephen Voorwinde, “Paul’s Emotions in Acts,” *RTR* 73 (2014): 78-79.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 156, understands Paul’s emotions in this letter slightly differently. He claims that Paul “would be *shocked* at how easily they, or some of them, had succumbed to the teaching of whoever it was who was ‘troubling’ them. He would be personally *hurt* (this comes through at various points in the letter) that they would be disloyal to him after all they had seen him go through on their behalf” (italics mine).

Conclusion

If Paul's letter to the Galatians was indeed his earliest surviving correspondence, it fits well into the historical context provided by Luke in the book of Acts. As Paul Barnett has noted, "Paul's letter to the Galatians was written in the late forties, soon after his return from the regions described in Acts 13-14. The primary consideration here is that the book of Acts has a detailed and lengthy account of Paul's visit to these cities of the Anatolian plateau, which he later revisited and strengthened (Acts 16:6; 18:23)."²⁷ Acts and Galatians are therefore mutually illuminating. Galatians fills out some of the details omitted by the book of Acts, while Acts provides the broader narrative within which the epistle can be placed. If Paul did indeed write when he was still fresh from his return to Syrian Antioch after the first missionary journey, it is understandable that he should say, "I am amazed that you are *so quickly* deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). The intensity of his recent sufferings in Galatia helps to explain the rawness of his emotions as he writes to the churches. The book of Acts in general and chapters 13-14 in particular set the stage for what was to be one of Paul's most personal and influential epistles. Seen in this light the letter provides us with unparalleled insights into what made the apostle tick. To gain these insights we need to look carefully at Paul's overtly expressed emotions. It is to a detailed examination of these that the next article is dedicated.

²⁷ Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 293.