

GALATIANS: A LETTER OF ADMONITION

BY LINDA OWEN

In approximately 285 B.C., the Celts migrated from Europe into central Asia Minor. These barbarian tribes overran the peninsula, levied tribute on cities and kings, and hired themselves out as mercenary soldiers. Gradually Greek kings pushed them into the central highlands of Anatolia, where they established themselves in the region of Ancyra (modern Ankara). Later, during the Roman conquests, the territory of Galatia was annexed to the Empire; and in 25 B.C., Galatia was expanded to become a Roman province under Augustus. Included in the expansion were several districts in southern Asia Minor: Pisidia and parts of Lycaonia and Phrygia.¹ In Paul's time, the Roman province included a large area of central Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Many residents were ethnic Greeks.

Letter to Galatian Churches

Because Paul's epistle to the Galatians was not addressed to any particular churches, it is impossible to be certain whether the churches of Galatia were located in the traditional territory of the ethnic Galatians ("North Galatia") or in the expanded Roman province of Galatia ("South Galatia"). The commonly held belief among scholars is that the letter was written to churches established during Paul's first missionary journey, which were all in cities (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) in the southern part of the Roman province (Acts 13:14-14:24). Other commentators theorize that Paul was addressing the churches founded in "North Galatia" during the second missionary journey (Acts 16:6) and later visited a second time (Acts 18:23). The letter itself gives few specifics, except that Paul had visited the churches at least once, and perhaps twice, before writing the pastoral letter (Galatians 1:8; 4:13-15). There is insufficient information to resolve the issue completely.

Dating the epistle is likewise difficult. The only certainty is that the letter must have been written after the events described in Galatians 2:1-14. In the letter Paul mentioned two visits to Jerusalem

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(Galatians 1:18; 2:1), but Acts records five visits (Acts 9:26; 11:27-30 and 12:25; 15:1-4; 18:22; 21:17-18). Probably Galatians 1:18 and Acts 9:26 document Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (A.D. 35); and Acts 15:1-29 and Galatians 2:1-10 record his meeting with the Jerusalem Council (dated 48 or 49). If so, the epistle may have been written as early as 48 or during the eighteen months Paul spent in Corinth in 50-51 (Acts 18:11). Another theory is that Paul wrote Galatians while he was in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-20:1), about 53-55, perhaps near the same time as writing Second Corinthians to another troubled congregation.

Paul's epistle is clear about two points, however: The churches of Galatia were churches Paul had founded (Galatians 1:8-9; 4:8-11), and the letter is addressed primarily to Gentiles converted from paganism (4:8; 5:2; 6:12).

Paul's Conversion (Acts 9)

Saul of Tarsus (Paul was his Roman name.) was of pure Jewish descent (Philippians 3:5) and a Roman citizen (Acts 23:6). As a well-educated Pharisee, he was dedicated to the outward observance of the law of Moses and affirmed it as "the embodiment of knowledge and truth," the one sure guide to God's will (Romans 2:17-20). Before his conversion, Paul regarded the church's claims about a Messiah who was crucified as blasphemy and the gospel as a scandal. Known far and wide as a zealous inquisitor and persecutor, Paul caused havoc in the church (Acts 8:3) as he sought to destroy the Christian faith.

When Stephen was stoned by a mob after being condemned by the Sanhedrin, Paul was described as approving of his death (Acts 8:1). Undoubtedly, Paul was more than an onlooker, for witnesses laid their clothes at his feet as if he was in a position of authority (7:58). After that, Paul continued the persecutions on a large scale. Christians were scourged in the synagogues, cruelly dragged from their homes, and put into prison (Acts 8:3; 22:4; 26:11). Since Paul admitted his fervor in punishing both women and men (Acts 8:3; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:13), we may infer that many of them may have been put to death, as Stephen was.

While traveling to Damascus to bring back