

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GALATIANS 2:16

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BRG400 – Introduction to Biblical Studies

Assignment 3b: Exegetical Study of Galatians 2:16

This paper is an exegesis of Galatians 2:16 – “. . . yet we know that a person is justified [*reckoned as righteous*] not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ [*the faith of Jesus Christ*]. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ [*the faith of Christ*], and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” It shows that salvation comes to all persons through Christ – it does not come through the law, which is broadly understood as the body of religious practices that governed the lives of Jews.¹

Historical Setting and Background

Paul had gone to Damascus and in its vicinity he had an encounter with Christ that radically changed his life.² Recognizing that the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead changed what he had known about Jesus as a Pharisee.³ He now knew that Jesus was truly the Messiah with authority to relativize the law.⁴ Consequently, if the law was not an absolute, then Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jews.⁵

¹ PHEME PERKINS, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, in *Reading the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 162.

² JEROME MURPHY-O-CONNOR, “The Life of Paul”, in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 266.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Sometime before Paul permanently left Antioch in the spring of 52 A.D., Jewish Christians from Judea insisted on the necessity of circumcision.⁶ Despite the convincing case made by the Judaizers – Jews were the Messianic people; Jesus had been circumcised; and Jesus had observed the law – the leaders of the Jerusalem church agreed with Paul and Barnabas that circumcision was not necessary for Gentile Christians (Gal 2:9-10).⁷ There were some Gentiles who became Jews, receiving circumcision and taking on the full observance of the Jewish law.⁸ However, Paul refers to persons who were preaching this view among Gentile converts as “false brothers” and “spies” in Gal 2:4.⁹

Also, a delegation from James came to Antioch from Jerusalem.¹⁰ They insisted on strict observance of Jewish dietary laws (Gal 2:11-14).¹¹ This meant that Gentile members of the church effectively had to become Jews in order to maintain the unity of the community.¹² Some scholars think that this episode in which some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem refused to associate with Gentile Christians (Gal 2:11-14) was the occasion for the Jerusalem council ruling in Acts 15:28-29.¹³ The incident revealed to Paul that any acceptance of the law inevitably led to legalism, which displaced Christ from the central position that was his right.¹⁴ Paul saw that the law was a dangerous rival to Christ (Gal 2:15-21).¹⁵

⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Perkins, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, 162.

⁹ Ibid. Perkins adds that these people may also be the “dogs” against which he warned his Philippian converts (Phil 3:2-21).

¹⁰ Murphy-O'Connor, “The Life of Paul”, 267.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Perkins, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, 162.

¹⁴ Murphy-O'Connor, “The Life of Paul”, 267.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Book of Galatians

Around the spring of 53 A.D., Paul became aware of the presence of Judaizers among the converts in Galatia.¹⁶ In response, he wrote Galatians whose argument is directed against the Judaizing emissaries who had wished to impose the law.¹⁷ To the Galatian converts Paul insisted that they accept the responsibility of freedom.¹⁸ Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism (Acts 15).¹⁹

Alternatively, other scholars state Galatians was written to converts in south Galatia (Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra) and so was written after the first missionary journey of Paul (Acts 13-14) and before the Apostolic Council in 50 A.D.²⁰ There are no letters of Paul from the period of time between his conversion in the mid-30s and 49 A.D. Galatians is the only letter addressed to converts that Paul made on his first missionary journey.²¹

Galatians is a crucial letter in many regards, including the fact that “this letter also clearly enunciates the notion of what was later called orthodoxy, namely, that there are right and wrong conceptions of and representations of the gospel, and there are nonnegotiable truths involved. . . . Paul is most exercised in this letter to prevent the Galatians from submitting to circumcision and the requirement of obeying the Mosaic law, which was being urged on them by Jewish Christian agitators who likely came from

¹⁶ Ibid., 268.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Perkins, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, 162.

²⁰ Ben Witherington III, “Letters and Homilies for Converts”, in *The New Testament Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 52.

²¹ Ibid.

Jerusalem”.²² The letter is concerned with two major themes.²³ The first covers the implications of the fact that believers are saved by grace through faith.²⁴ The second addresses how Christians should then live in view of the basis of their salvation.²⁵ “In a world where the essence of religion was seen as having to do with priests, temples, precisely performed liturgies, and sacrifices, Paul is enunciating a religion which has right thinking and right living as the essence of the matter, and rituals playing only a secondary role.”²⁶

Galatians 2:16

The verse under discussion, Galatians 2:16, is a part of the basic proposition or thesis statement (known in rhetorical terms as the *propositio*) of the book which is found in Galatians 2:15-21.²⁷ The verses prior to this thesis statement, Galatians 2:1-14 (see also Gal 1:1-24), indicate a heated dispute among various groups over the conditions under which a Gentile convert might be included in the Christian community.²⁸ There were some who rejected the agreement that had been come to in the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) – that Gentiles did not have to become members of Israel by accepting circumcision.²⁹

²² Ibid., 53.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 53-54. Witherington comments that the issue of behaviour and rituals is also addressed in the second earliest letter – the letter of James to Gentile converts in the Diaspora written at the Apostolic Council in 50 A.D. (see Acts 15). This letter was taken along by Paul and his co-workers on his second missionary journey. The letter acknowledges that Gentile converts were being pestered by Judaizing Christians, and it also recognizes the need not to burden Gentiles with a lot of Jewish requirements (notes taken from page 54 of Witherington III’s article).

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Perkins, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, 161.

²⁹ Ibid.

In the Epistle, this verse first mentions the words “justify” or “justification”, and “law.”³⁰ The term “justify”, a forensic term borrowed from the law courts, means “to declare righteous or innocent” (the opposite is “to condemn” or “to pronounce guilty”).³¹ Justification expresses the judicial action of God, apart from human merit, according to which the guilty are pardoned, acquitted, and then reinstated as God’s children and as fellow heirs with Jesus Christ.³² The words “we have come to believe in Christ Jesus” implies an act of personal commitment, not just assenting to the facts concerning Christ, but actually running to him for refuge and seeking mercy.³³ Interestingly, the article (“the”) is *not* present in the phrase “works of the law.”³⁴ This means that Paul’s emphasis is not on the Jewish law (the law of Moses) at all, though it includes it, but rather on any system of attempting to please God by good deeds (the introduction of the article into the NRSV text is a defect in this version).³⁵

Conclusion

In summary, the exegesis of Gal 2:16 shows that the way to God lies only through Jesus, not Moses or any other system.³⁶ Since even Jews must believe in Christ to be saved, there is no reason to require that Gentiles come under the law in any sense.³⁷ Salvation comes to people from God’s love through faith in Jesus – there is no need to add any additional rites, religious or otherwise, to assure one’s salvation.³⁸ In fact, attempting to

³⁰ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, *Galatians*, by James Montgomery Rice (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 448.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 448-449.

³³ *Ibid.*, 449.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Perkins, “Christians: Jew and Gentile”, 163. An example is in the fact that Jesus replaces the Jewish temple and the major Jewish feasts.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 166-167; 172.

“add the law” to that faith is really a rejection of that salvation and a return to slavery (Gal 2:15-21; 3:1-5; 5:1).³⁹

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³⁹ Ibid., 166.