

GALATIANS 1–2 WITHOUT A MIRROR

REFLECTIONS ON PAUL’S CONFLICT WITH THE AGITATORS¹

Justin K. Hardin
(justin_hardin@pba.edu)

Summary

Despite its dangers and pitfalls as an interpretive technique, mirror reading continues to enjoy pride of place as the preferred method for reconstructing the situation in Galatians. But does reflecting back the opposite of the text aid our understanding of Paul’s letter, or does it merely distort the picture? In this essay, we will discuss Paul’s conflict with the agitators in Galatians to reveal the inherent methodological problems of mirror reading this letter. Specifically, we will address the question whether the agitators in Galatia were questioning Paul’s credentials, prompting Paul to write his lengthy narrative in Galatians 1–2. We will then evaluate recent scholars who have sought to retire the mirror in their interpretation of Paul’s narrative, before ourselves providing a fresh reading of Paul’s aims in Galatians 1–2. We will suggest that Paul was not defending himself (or his gospel or anything else) in Galatians. Rather, Paul was constructing a self-contrast with the agitators in an effort to persuade the Galatians to turn back to the one true gospel and to reject the judaising tactics of the agitators.

1. Introduction

Nearly three decades ago in his landmark ‘Mirror-reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case’, John Barclay famously argued that the reconstructive exercise of ‘mirror reading’ is fraught with pitfalls

¹ This essay is a revision of the Tyndale New Testament Lecture, presented at the annual Tyndale Fellowship Conference, Cambridge, July 2011. I am grateful for the energetic and critical discussion that ensued on that occasion.

and perils.² Mirror reading, of course, is the very specific exercise whereby an interpreter reflects back the opposite of a biblical text to discern the situation presupposed in the text (and thus should not be confused with other tasks in the reconstructive process).³ In his essay, Barclay outlines several hazards when attempting to mirror read Galatians,⁴ before proposing a method in which reflections in the text should be placed on a sliding scale of probability, from reconstructions that are virtually certain to those that are incredible.⁵ Although Barclay's clarion call has not entirely eradicated the production of ingenious hypotheses, his study has become the definitive methodological classic on the interpretation of Galatians.⁶

² John M. G. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case', *JSNT* 31 (1987): 73-93, which was originally delivered at the annual Tyndale Fellowship Conference (1986) by D. R. de Lacey, who read the paper in Barclay's absence. Mirror reading, to be sure, is a specific exercise and should not be confused with other methods of reconstructing the situation behind the text (e.g. historical reconstruction). For a helpful recent discussion of mirror reading with respect to Paul's ethics, see Nijay Gupta, 'Mirror-Reading Moral Issues in Paul's Letters', *JSNT* 34 (2012): 361-81.

³ A simple example from 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 will illustrate the difference between mirror reading and other types of historical reconstruction. Why did Paul instruct the assembly of the Thessalonians to avoid sexual immorality (see the very helpful discussion in Gupta, 'Mirror-Reading Moral Issues', 370-73)? If we were to mirror read these verses, we might conclude that Paul gave these instructions because the Thessalonians were opposing Paul's teaching on sexual purity. Thus, we are reflecting the opposite scenario to explain Paul's instructions. Mirror reading these verses, of course, is not our only interpretive option. One might, for example, argue that Paul provided these instructions because his Jewish monotheism was intimately connected with sexual ethics. This latter conclusion is not mirror reading because we have not sought to read the opposite scenario behind Paul's instructions. In other words, interpretive techniques must not wear the mirror-reading label unless they read the reverse of Paul's explicit statements.

⁴ See further, Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 79-83, where he offers four pitfalls: (1) undue selectivity, (2) over-interpretation, (3) mishandling polemics, and (4) latching onto particular words. Although these are generally important warnings, one can take them too far. On the pitfall of mishandling polemics, for example, Barclay (75-76, 80-81) assumes wrongly that Paul's statements about the agitators in Gal. 6.12-13 cannot be trusted because Paul's anger would have clouded his objectivity. For a detailed critique on this point, see Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First-Century Social Context of Paul's Letter* (WUNT 2.237; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 94-102.

⁵ Cf. E. P. Sanders's sliding scale of probabilities when discussing the historical Jesus (*Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM): 326-27). See further Barclay, 'Mirror Reading', 84-90, who sets out and then tests the following seven criteria: (1) type of utterance, (2) tone, (3) frequency, (4) clarity, (5) unfamiliarity, (6) consistency, and (7) historical plausibility.

⁶ Barclay's essay is cited approvingly even by those who throw off his methodological yoke. See, e.g., J. L. Martyn's creative reconstructions of the agitators

With so many distorted images bouncing back to the modern interpreter, however, should we even employ a reflective device in the reconstructive task? Barclay admits that this technique is ‘a good deal more difficult than is usually acknowledged’, but he is nevertheless optimistic that one can reasonably avoid these pitfalls through ‘a carefully controlled method of working which uses logical criteria and proceeds with suitable caution’.⁷ Indeed, Barclay assumes mirror reading is ‘essential’, even if ‘extremely problematic’.⁸

What might we see in an *unreflected* text, that is, if we were to read Galatians without a mirror altogether? This is the question that will occupy the present study. Rather than assuming mirror reading is essential, we will contend that this technique is problematic methodologically and that reflecting upon the text without a mirror will enable us to see much more clearly both the crisis in Galatia and Paul’s aims in his letter to the Galatian churches.⁹

As the subtitle indicates, we will devote our attention to Paul’s conflict with the agitators in Galatians. Our energies will be focused here not only because this conflict is the foundation upon which the situation of the letter is constructed but also because three traditional views—all of which are reflected from reading Galatians with a mirror—require reconsideration: (1) that the agitators came from outside Galatia; (2) that they were legalists who actually believed their own judaizing message; and (3) that they were actively maligning Paul’s apostolic status and his practice as an emissary of Jesus the Messiah.

(whom Martyn calls ‘Teachers’) in *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997): esp. 302-306, 367, 399-40, who cites Barclay approvingly (120 n.100; 142 n.164). More recently, see Douglas A. Campbell, ‘Galatians 5.11: Evidence of an Early Law-Observant Mission by Paul?’ *NTS* 57 (2011): 325-47, who mirror reads Gal. 5.11 whilst simultaneously acknowledging Barclay’s warnings (337 n.36).

⁷ Barclay, ‘Mirror-Reading’, 84.

⁸ Barclay, ‘Mirror-Reading’, 74. For a similar view, see Moisés Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), who states that we are forced to ‘read between the lines’ (104) and that the method is ‘unavoidable’ (106).

⁹ It should also be noted that I am not attempting to set out a detailed critique of Barclay’s method, which I have found to be generally sound and helpful. Pauline scholars are in his debt for providing such a robust method for reconstructing the Galatian situation.

To be sure, recent scholars have begun to challenge some, if not all, these long-established understandings of the agitators.¹⁰ In this essay, our aim will be to evaluate the view that the agitators were denigrating Paul's character/status as an apostle and that in Galatians Paul was defending himself (or his gospel or anything else) against such charges.¹¹ In doing so, we will highlight the procedural folly of

¹⁰ In my previous work on Galatians, I have argued (1) that the agitators were home grown—i.e. they were from Galatia, not Jerusalem or Syrian Antioch or Ephesus or anywhere else (although it is unclear whether they were part of the Galatian churches at the time of Paul's visit or whether they entered the believing community after Paul left Galatia), (2) that the agitators were not legalists, but were Jewish Jesus-believers who fully accepted Paul's gospel but perverted it in Galatia for practical reasons, and (3) that the agitators were not attacking Paul's apostolic status/character (Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, 92-102). The task of this essay is to unpack my third claim. For a similar view to mine on this point, see Debbie Hunn, 'Please God or Pleasing People? Defending the Gospel in Galatians 1–2,' *Biblica* 91 (2010): 24-49. Although Hunn is on the right track at various points in her helpful essay, our readings diverge on several critical points (see Sections 3 and 4 below).

On the Galatian origins of the agitators, see, e.g. Nanos, *Irony*; 143-58; L. Thurén, 'Was Paul Angry? Derhetorizing Galatians' in *The Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture: Essays from the 1996 Malibu Conference*. ed. S. E. Porter and D. L. Stamps (JSNTSSup 180; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999): 302-20; esp. 313-14; A. Du Toit, 'Alienation and Re-Identification as Pragmatic Strategies in Galatians', *Neotestamentica* 26 (1992): 279-95, esp. 407; George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward an Understanding* (SBLDS 73; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 161; J. B. Tyson, 'Paul's Opponents in Galatia', *NovT* 10 (1968): 241-54; P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (SNTSMS 10; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), esp. 191-92; D. W. B. Robinson, 'The Distinction between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians', *ABR* 8 (1965): 29-48.

On the view that the agitators were not 'legalists', see, e.g., Bruce W. Winter, 'The Imperial Cult and Early Christians in Pisidian Antioch (Acts XIII 13-50 and Gal. VI 11-18)' in *Actes du 1er Congrès International sur Antioche de Pisidie*. ed. Mehmet Tasçalan and Christine M. Thomas (Collection Archeologie et Histoire de L'Antiquite Universite Lumiere-Lyon; Lyon: Kocaeli, 2002), 67-75; Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (First Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994): 123-43. On the view that agitators were gentile proselytes, see Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. Frank Clarke (London: SCM, 1959), a view more recently expanded and developed in Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), esp. 295.

On the question of maligning Paul's apostleship, see, e.g. Jerry L. Sumney, 'Servants of Satan,' 'False Brothers,' and Other Opponents of Paul (JSNTSup; Sheffield Academic, 1999), 134-59; Johan S. Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation in Galatians 1–2', *HTR* 87 (1994): 1-16; Bernard Lategan, 'Is Paul Defending His Apostleship in Galatians?' *NTS* 34 (1988): 411-30.

¹¹ Given its cherished status among the vast majority of scholars (e.g. Augustine, Jerome, Victorinus, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and the vast multitude of Galatians scholars in the past two centuries), I openly admit the potential imprudence of challenging the view that the agitators were attacking Paul's apostolic status and

fastening a reflector over the text and instead will seek to understand Paul's conflict with the agitators without a mirror. Our argument will be advanced in three sections. First, we will critically assess the mirror-reading view that Paul was defending himself against any charges from the agitators. Secondly, we will evaluate some recent alternatives to this consensus that remove the Galatian mirror, and thirdly we will seek to provide a fresh reading of Paul's aims in Galatians 1–2 that opens up promising pathways for understanding Paul's broader aims in writing to the Galatian churches.

2. Galatians 1–2 with a Mirror: The Agitators and Paul

Paul began his letter with emphatic force by proclaiming both positively and negatively the agency/source¹² of his apostolic status:

Παῦλος ἀπόστολος οὐκ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ δι' ἀνθρώπου ἀλλὰ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (1:1).

Paul the apostle, neither from people nor by anyone, but by Jesus the Messiah and God the Father who raised him from the dead.¹³

By the time we reach verse 10, Paul had made yet another claim:

Ἄρτι γὰρ ἀνθρώπους πείθω ἢ τὸν θεόν; ἢ ζητῶ ἀνθρώποις ἀρέσκειν; εἰ ἔτι ἀνθρώποις ἤρεσκον, Χριστοῦ δοῦλος οὐκ ἂν ἦμην (1:10).

For am I now pleasing people, or [am I pleasing] God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of the Messiah.

During the ensuing narrative, in which he rehearsed his two visits to Jerusalem, Paul even interrupted the storyline to provide an oath:

ἃ δὲ γράφω ὑμῖν, ἰδοὺ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι οὐ ψεύδομαι (1:19).

Now the things I am writing to you—Look! Before God!—I am not lying.

Clearly, Paul's opening barrage of assertions and denials reveals the gravity of his correspondence. This conclusion is further supported by observing other unique features of this letter, such as his refusal to

integrity. But the question remains open because Paul never stated explicitly in his letter that the agitators had put his credentials in the dock.

¹² Interpreters continue to debate whether *διὰ* indicates agency or whether it simply carries the same force as *ἀπό* (see de Boer, *Galatians*, 21-22).

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, all ancient translations are my own.

provide the customary thanksgiving (replacing it instead with a scathing rebuke, 1:6-9),¹⁴ his calling the Galatians fools not once but twice (3:1-5), and his wish that the agitators would mangle their own reproductive members (5:12).¹⁵ That Paul was irritated, that he was not in the mood to mince words, that he thought something critical was at stake, is all self-evident. What is unclear is why he made such pointed assertions and denials about his credentials. Why did Paul think it necessary to announce his divinely appointed apostleship, to point out he was no longer a people pleaser, to swear an oath? More to the point, why indeed did Paul feel the need to sketch an autobiography for the first third of this letter?¹⁶

Throughout the history of interpretation, the commonest answer has been that Paul was on the defensive. After Paul left Galatia, the agitators had infiltrated the churches and were (1) challenging Paul's apostolic authority and (2) claiming that Paul flip-flopped with regard to his teaching on circumcision to match the dispositions of his audiences—an attempt to 'please people' (cf. 1:10). In response to this 'counter-biography',¹⁷ Paul hastily penned a letter to the churches to set the record straight.

On this understanding, in fact, Paul wrote the lengthy narrative in Galatians 1–2 precisely to tackle these charges head on and to reestablish his authority among the Galatian readers. After all, Paul's hearers could not have been expected to accept his theological convictions if they did not think him a legitimate teacher in the first instance. Thus, Paul's aim was chiefly to provide the *real* biography, the *true* story about his divinely appointed apostolic calling and independence from, and yet partnership with, the Jerusalem believers.

This understanding of the situation goes right the way back to John Chrysostom,¹⁸ our earliest extant commentator on Galatians:

But the deceivers ... misled the simpler ones saying: 'It is not necessary to put up with Paul. For he appeared yesterday—that is, today—but they, the ones around Peter, appeared from the first. And he has become a

¹⁴ Even the church of Corinth, troubled though they were (judging from Paul's correspondence), received the courtesy of a thanksgiving (1 Cor. 1.4-9).

¹⁵ For Galatians as a letter of ironic rebuke, see Nanos, *Irony*, esp. 32-61.

¹⁶ Surely he did not provide this information about the 'unknown years' of his ministry simply to tease modern scholars seeking to reconstruct his life.

¹⁷ For this language, cf. Campbell, 'Galatians 5.11', 337.

¹⁸ On the history of interpretation of Galatians, see now John K. Riches, *Galatians through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

disciple of the apostles, but they of the Messiah. And he is alone, but they are many, even pillars of the Church'. Now they also brought charges of hypocrisy, saying: 'It even appears that he himself, the one who abrogates circumcision, also proclaims these things [circumcision] elsewhere, preaching to others differently than he does to you'. Therefore, since he saw the gentiles completely set ablaze ... he wrote the letter, an apology to all these things.¹⁹

Chrysostom thus argued that backstage in the Galatian drama were deceivers misleading the Galatians by heaping criticisms on the apostle. This has been the view regularly rehearsed in recent scholarship on Galatians. In his helpful commentary, for example, T. R. Schreiner has argued afresh for this ancient understanding of the letter's situation.²⁰ Utilising Barclay's sliding scale of probabilities,²¹ Schreiner reconstructs the situation in Galatia. Among those items in the 'virtually certain' category, Schreiner concludes 'that the opponents disputed the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship',²² and he then reconstructs three implied charges against Paul: (1) his gospel derived from the apostles; (2) he deliberately distorted the gospel in Galatia by not insisting on circumcision for gentiles;²³ and (3) his motives were disingenuous—he wanted to please people.²⁴ But how certain is this conventional understanding when put under scrutiny? To find out, we will need to assess critically the three arguments most commonly put forth in support of this understanding.

¹⁹ Chrysostom, *Hom. Gal.* 1:1.

²⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (ECNT 9; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). See now Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013): 67 (cf. 84-85), where he states that '[t]he most likely reason for this concern [that Paul had been chosen by God and not humans] is that the agitators were attempting to undermine Paul's authority with the Galatians by arguing that his status and teaching depended on the Jerusalem apostles, whose views (as represented by the agitators) should therefore trump Paul's'.

²¹ Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 88-90.

²² Schreiner, *Galatians*, 33 (citing Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 87); cf. 73, where he avers that '[o]ne of the most important themes in Galatians is Paul's apostolic authority'; cf. 326-27, where on Gal. 5.11 he states that 'the most likely view is that the opponents accused Paul of inconsistency, in that he preached circumcision among the Jews' (326-27; contrast 35, where he cautiously notes it is merely 'possible but much less certain' that Gal. 5.11 reflects a false charge).

²³ Cf. Campbell, 'Galatians 5.11', 327-28, who assumes on Gal. 5.11 that 'a blatantly false claim is being made by Paul's opponents' and further adds that '[i]t seems almost certain then that his opponents have raised this matter [his previous circumcision message in 5.11] as part of their counter-biography' (337). For a response to Campbell's argument, see my Justin K. Hardin, "'If I Still Proclaim Circumcision'" (Gal. 5.11a): Paul, the Law, and Gentile Circumcision', *JSP* 3 (2013): 145-63.

²⁴ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 40.

2.1 *Defensive Tone*

Advocates of the traditional view often begin by noting Paul's defensive tone. On Galatians 1–2, for example, Schreiner writes: 'the defensive tone of the text suggests that the legitimacy of his apostleship was under attack ... Furthermore, Paul explicitly defends himself against the charge of pleasing people (1:10)'.²⁵ Of course, this argument assumes the conclusion (Paul is being attacked) in the premiss (Paul is defensive) and therefore requires circular argumentation.²⁶ Employing this logic, of course, one could conclude that behind any Pauline assertion in Galatians stands the opposite attack.²⁷ The real question is not whether it is *possible* that Paul was being defensive—it is surely possible—but whether this hypothesis is more likely than one that does not require mirror reading.²⁸ Betz has reminded us that '[n]ot every rhetorical denial is an accusation turned around!'²⁹ Nevertheless, scholars often resort to arm-waving phrases like 'apparently',³⁰ 'evidently',³¹ the text 'strongly suggests',³² and

²⁵ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 34; cf. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 87: 'Paul's extended self-defence in Gal. 1-2 makes it virtually certain that the validity of his gospel and his apostleship was under attack'; cf. Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 105, who concurs that it is 'natural' to mirror read these statements.

²⁶ Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 77, argues that circularity is inevitable, but surely this does not mean the method is necessarily legitimate. On the pitfall of circular reading, see also Hunn, 'Pleasing God', 27-28.

²⁷ E.g. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 84.

²⁸ Again, Barclay assumes every assertion requires some form of mirror reading. I do not think this is the case, especially if we can understand straightforwardly from the text why Paul makes a particular assertion.

²⁹ H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 56 n.115.

³⁰ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 74, on Gal. 1.1: 'The defensive statement regarding his apostleship indicates that he responds to charges about the legitimacy of his apostleship ... Apparently, some opponents doubted the credibility of Paul's apostleship, arguing that his gospel had a human origin' (cf. further instances of circular reading: 'Paul's self-defense in Gal. 1–2 also leads us to the conclusion that the opponents criticized Paul, maintaining that he had no right to nullify the Torah' (50); 'Apparently, the Jewish opponents claimed that Paul failed to preach the whole gospel, which included the requirement of circumcision. Paul omitted circumcision to curry favor with the Gentiles in Galatia (cf. 5:11). Paul began the letter defending his apostolic authority, and here he rebuts the notion that he is pleasing people. Hence, it seems that Paul engages in an apologetic of his apostleship' (89)).

³¹ Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 64, on Gal. 1.10: 'Paul is evidently rebutting a charge'; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990), 18: 'Evidently the Judaizers were claiming that Paul only presented half a gospel in his evangelistic mission in Galatia'.

‘nothing is more natural’,³³ whilst simultaneously heralding the view as virtually certain, as if the theory has been proven from Paul’s explicit statements.³⁴

If there were any evidence outside Galatians suggesting Paul was being attacked in Galatia, the charge of circularity could at least be mitigated. But as Barclay has already pointed out, the only evidence we have for understanding the crisis in Galatia comes from Paul’s letter itself.³⁵ And we should be reminded of J. S. Vos’s observation that ‘[n]owhere in the letter to the Galatians did Paul explicitly present the legitimacy of his apostolate as the controversial point’.³⁶ In this regard, the view that Paul had a defensive tone in response to the agitators’ criticisms is borne from a subjective judgment regarding the *feel* of the letter. But how can one be sure she or he has ascertained Paul’s tone correctly?

We have already observed that Paul was furious,³⁷ and so we will not labour that point any further. When we turn to Galatians 4:19-20,

³² J. D. G. Dunn, *Galatians* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 25, on Gal. 1.1: ‘The fact that Paul puts the negative part of the definition first strongly suggests that he was rebutting and rebuking an alternative way of defining his apostolic status’.

³³ Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 105, on Gal. 1.1-12: ‘Since nothing like it [Paul’s negation] occurs in the opening of the other letters, one instinctively suspects that something about the situation in the Galatian churches must have evoked such a denial ... For virtually all interpreters, nothing is more natural than to see here [Gal. 1.11-12] a response to accusations’. Martyn, *Galatians*, 476-77, on Gal. 5.11, takes for granted that the agitators were trumping up charges against Paul.

³⁴ Thus in practice, these sorts of arguments are deductive, not defeasible or probabilistic.

³⁵ Barclay, ‘Mirror-Reading’, 73. *Contra* Ian J. Elmer, *Paul, Jerusalem and the Judaizers: The Galatian Crisis in Its Broadest Historical Context* (WUNT 2.258; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), who unconvincingly creates a grand conflict between the ‘Hebrews’ and the ‘Hellenists’ of Acts 6, which he then reads back into Galatians before seeking to harmonise this understanding with the rest of the *Hauptbriefe*. For a helpful methodological critique, see Davina C. Lopez, review of Ian J. Elmer, *Paul, Jerusalem and the Judaizers: The Galatian Crisis in Its Broadest Historical Context* (2009) in *Review of Biblical Literature* (September 2011).

³⁶ Vos, ‘Paul’s Argumentation’, 13. By contrast, Silva assumes that because Paul refers explicitly to opponents, ‘this feature alone creates a certain presumption that his antitheses, even if they have a rhetorical flare, correspond to historical realities’ (*Interpreting Galatians*, 106). This is not a sound presumption to make. Similarly, S. Chester mentions without support that the traditional view of Paul’s conflict with the Galatians has more evidence than alternative views (‘Paul and the Galatian Believers’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, ed. Stephen Westerholm (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 65).

³⁷ See, e.g., Gal. 1.6; 3.1-5; 5.12.

however, we can add to this observation a second point regarding Paul's tone:

19 τέκνα μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνω μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῆ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν· 20 ἤθελον δὲ παρεῖναι πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἄρτι καὶ ἀλλάξαι τὴν φωνήν μου, ὅτι ἀποροῦμαι ἐν ὑμῖν (4:19-20).

My little children, for whom again I am in labour pains until the Messiah should be formed in you—I wish that I were now with you and that I could change my voice, because I am at a loss about you.

In these verses, we learn not only that Paul rather would have changed his 'voice' (φωνήν) but also (and more crucially) that he painted a maternal image to describe his feelings for the Galatians.³⁸ Thus, we can reasonably conclude that Paul's tone is desperately *protective*.³⁹ Furthermore, if we give full weight to Paul's protective-kinship imagery, we can make perfect sense of Paul's passionate assertions and denials in Galatians 1 without the assumption that Paul was responding to charges against him. Here I shall provide a simple illustration to make the point. An exasperated parent asserts to her contumacious teenager the following:

Listen to what I am trying to tell you! I am your mother! I'm not one of your friends from school who would use you and then throw you under the bus when convenient! Don't listen to them! You are *my* child, and I want what's best for you! So stop being a fool by listening to those silly so-called friends!⁴⁰

From this statement alone, would anyone straightaway assume this poor woman's maternal status was being questioned, prompting her to

³⁸ See Beverly R. Gaventa, 'The Maternity of Paul: An Exegetical Study of Galatians 4:19' in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, ed. R. T. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 189-201; Beverly R. Gaventa, 'Our Mother St Paul: Toward the Recovery of a Neglected Theme', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 17 (1996): 29-44, esp. 37, who has already shown the importance of this maternal metaphor in Paul, linking the child-birth theme with Paul's apocalyptic frame of thought—Paul hoped the new creation would be formed in them in the Messiah. See also Philip A. Harland, 'Familial Dimensions of Group Identity (II): 'Mothers' and 'Fathers' in Associations and Synagogues of the Greek World', *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 57-79, who has recently compared Paul's maternal and paternal metaphors with their use in Graeco-Roman associations to show that Paul's aim was both to exert moral authority and to foster group cohesion through fictive kinship.

³⁹ On the tone of 4.12-20 in the light of persecution, see esp. A. J. Goddard and S. A. Cummins, 'Ill or Ill-Treated? Conflict and Persecution as the Context of Paul's Original Ministry in Galatia (Galatians 4.12-20)', *JSNT* 52 (1993): 93-126.

⁴⁰ Disclaimer: this harangue is purely fictional and is not based on any personal situation or conversation I have either experienced or overheard!

assert her status as a mother? Would anyone say that she was being defensive because these friends from school were claiming the mother was inferior either to them or to someone else? Using Barclay's method, must we conclude that, at the very least, this teenager was in danger of forgetting that this woman was, in fact, her mother? Of course not.

Here it may be helpful to point out a limitation in Barclay's helpful methodology. On the first criterion (types of utterances) for mirror reading he states that 'we may assume that, *at least*, those to whom he writes may be in danger of overlooking what he asserts, and *at most*, someone has explicitly denied it'. With regard to Paul's denials, he explains that 'we may assume that, *at least*, those whom he addresses may be prone to regard what he denies as true, and *at most*, someone has explicitly asserted it'.⁴¹ Barclay then allows that a whole range of options may be stationed between these two poles.

But as we have observed in our illustration above, the outer limits are not vast enough to accommodate the full breadth of options. With regard to Paul's assertions, Paul may well have affirmed something not because his readers were in danger of overlooking it, but because he wanted to provide persuasive, perhaps even contrastive, information. In our example above, it is certainly possible that, *at most*, the teenager's friends are actively challenging the mother's status. And it is certainly possible that, *at least*, perhaps due to a temporary case of amnesia, the daughter is in danger of overlooking who her mother is. And there may be a whole range of possibilities between these two extremes.⁴² A very natural reading is that the mother was asserting her identity to claim superiority over the daughter's friends from school. Unfortunately, this type of option is not available on Barclay's methodology because it is assumed that mirror reading is essential in polemical texts such as these.

The same criticism can also be mounted against the assumption that Paul's denials *at least* imply the readers were prone to regard these denials as true. Again using the above example, the mother's denial that she was a friend from school was provided simply as a contrast with these influential friends. Without any external evidence to help us, we can still make sense of the text by concluding the mother was being

⁴¹ Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 84 (italics his).

⁴² It would also be possible, but very unlikely, that the mother is stating these things because the daughter has metaphorically forgotten who her mother is.

rhetorical, exerting her protective moral authority as her mother over against the negative influencers from school. And we reached this conclusion without employing the technique of mirror reading, without assuming the mother was being defensive because she was being directly attacked.

Of course, these conclusions are all glaringly obvious when discussing the example of the dismayed mother above. And this point brings us back to the claim that Paul was being defensive in Galatians. We can all agree that Paul was exasperated with his dear children, but why must we assume Paul's credentials were being directly challenged? Yes, these Galatian children were being tempted to follow the agitators, but do we have any evidence that the agitators were whispering 'inferior apostle' or 'people pleaser' in the ears of the Galatian readers? Such an understanding is purely conjectural. One may feel that 'nothing is more natural',⁴³ but this hardly constitutes evidence.

As Vos has reminded us, nowhere in this letter did Paul state explicitly that he was defending himself;⁴⁴ neither did he explicitly reveal that there were charges against him (as we do find in 2 Corinthians 10:10).⁴⁵ Indeed, the view that Paul was being defensive is purely in the eye of the beholder, and the beholder has already determined the conclusion by using a mirror.⁴⁶ But the reflection has distorted the image. Those who see Paul's assertions and his denials as defensive have fallen into what Barclay has called the pitfall of over-interpretation.⁴⁷

2.2 *Agonistic Culture*

The first argument bolstering the traditional view has been knocked down, but one might still reasonably attempt to uphold this view by putting forth a second argument, namely, that it is very likely the agitators were accusing the apostle of being inferior and being a

⁴³ Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 105.

⁴⁴ See above n.36.

⁴⁵ This point is also discussed in Beverly R. Gaventa, 'Galatians 1 and 2: Autobiography as Paradigm', *NovT* 28 (1986): 309-326, here 312.

⁴⁶ Or perhaps by reading 2 Cor. 10-13 into Galatians. For an excellent study on 2 Cor. 10-13, see now Sigurd Grindheim, *The Crux of Election: Paul's Critique of the Jewish Confidence in the Election of Israel* (WUNT 2.202; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

⁴⁷ Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 79.

hypocrite. After all, this sort of technique was in keeping with the agonistic culture of Paul's day in which *ad hominem* arguments were commonly adduced alongside objective arguments. P. Esler points out that 'the highly competitive nature of this culture means that it is most unlikely that people would have been causing trouble in Galatia by arguing against Paul's message, without expressing hostility to the man himself'.⁴⁸

This is certainly a fair point, and it does carry with it some force. Nevertheless, this suggestion also runs aground in two ways. First, it is not at all certain from the evidence in Galatians that the agitators were directly and maliciously attacking Paul's gospel. Again, we are assuming the conclusion (Paul was being attacked personally) in the premiss (Paul's message was being attacked).

J. Sumney has argued for more methodological precision by expanding Barclay's method to account for various types of contexts, whether polemical, apologetic, didactic, or epistolary.⁴⁹ After a careful investigation of Paul's direct references to the agitators in Galatians, Sumney concludes the opposite of the traditional view—that the agitators probably did not at all consider themselves to be enemies of Paul.⁵⁰ On his reading of Galatians, they sadly got Paul's gospel muddled up in their preaching efforts. Paul was outraged at such a magnanimous blunder, and his letter therefore serves as an example of how to lose friends and spawn enemies.

Even if Sumney's broader conclusions are unconvincing,⁵¹ he is nevertheless correct to point out that the agitators may well not have been attacking Paul's apostleship. Neither did Peter maliciously attack Paul personally in Antioch when he was charged with 'not walking in the truth of the gospel' (Gal. 2:14) for withdrawing table fellowship with Gentiles. Undermining the gospel could have taken all shapes or

⁴⁸ Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1998), 71 (cf. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 74). On Paul and agonistic metaphors, see the classic treatment in Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (NovTSup 16; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967). For psychological portrait of Paul, see Terrance Callan, 'Competition and Boasting: Toward a Psychological Portrait of Paul', *Studia theologica* 40 (1986): 137-56.

⁴⁹ For his method, see further Sumney, 'Servants of Satan', 13-32.

⁵⁰ Sumney, 'Servants of Satan', 134-59, here 158: 'It is important to recognize that these Galatian teachers do not view themselves as opponents of Paul'.

⁵¹ For a critique of Sumney's understanding of the situation, see Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, 94-97.

forms, and attacking it maliciously along with its representative is only one possible option. It is by no means the only one.

Secondly, B. R. Gaventa has helpfully pointed out that on occasion authors such as Seneca and Pliny included assertions and denials in their letters not to defend themselves from charges, but to provide an example to others.⁵² The blade of the argument cuts both ways. It is certainly *possible* that the agitators were heaping charges as part of the common agonistic method of debate, which would explain Paul's assertions and his denials in Galatians 1–2. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that Paul's narrative was provided for more didactic reasons.⁵³ Here I am not attempting to argue for this alternative understanding as much as I am pointing out that the traditional view that Paul was responding to criticism still lacks evidence that would place it in the 'virtually certain' category.

2.3 The Oath (Galatians 1:20)

At this point, we should turn to the third argument commonly put forth in support of the traditional view that Paul was defending himself from charges in Galatians. In Galatians 1:20, it is sometimes argued that Paul provided an oath as a rebuttal of counter claims that Paul was dependent upon the Jerusalem leadership. Here then is further evidence that the agitators were attacking Paul's apostolic status. Longenecker represents well the consensus:

His use of an oath here in Galatians suggest that his judaizing opponents were claiming in particular that it was during his first visit to Jerusalem that Paul both learned the gospel from the Jerusalem leaders and received his authority to be an apostle. Against such claims, Paul affirms in the strongest manner possible the surety of his two lines of defense and puts his readers on guard against any challenge to what he has said.⁵⁴

We need not return to the circular argumentation needed to sustain this conclusion. Instead, we can simply point to the faulty assumption that this oath suggests someone was in danger of denying the accuracy of

⁵² See further Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 322-26. Much more work needs to be done in finding suitable Graeco-Roman epistolary parallels to Galatians. See, however, Nanos, *Irony*, 32-61, who convincingly shows that Galatians is a letter of rebuke, even if his view that the letter is also ironic is more highly contested.

⁵³ Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 322-26.

⁵⁴ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 40. See also, e.g. Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians*. trans O. C. Dean (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 33.

Paul's words. Perhaps Paul supplied the oath simply to reveal a surprising bit of information, to underscore the importance of what he was saying, or to achieve another purpose that escapes our scholarly imagination.

A straightforward reading, which also fits within the context of Galatians 1:15-20, is that Paul provided the oath to emphasise that even at his first opportunity to please people in Jerusalem, he did not do so. J. P. Sampley has helpfully recognised that oath taking in Graeco-Roman practice often emphasised the seriousness of what was being either affirmed or denied.⁵⁵ B. Witherington is thus correct when he warns against reading this verse as evidence that Paul was responding to real or even imaginary charges on the ground in Galatia.⁵⁶ It is unnecessary to mirror read 1:20 to make sense of the oath's relationship to the surrounding narrative.

Furthermore, none of the other Pauline oaths are suggestive,⁵⁷ and they certainly do not affirm that Paul provided the oath in Galatians 1:20 in response to any counter claims. Of these verses, perhaps the best parallel is 2 Corinthians 1:23, where Paul stated that he did not make another trip to the Corinthians because he wanted to spare them from another painful visit. The oath simply comes at a point in the narrative to express Paul's commitment to the Corinthians and his genuine concern for the health of their relationship. Perhaps some of the Corinthian Jesus-believers doubted the genuineness of Paul's concerns, but the text cannot help us to confirm whether this was the case.

In conclusion, when utilising Barclay's method of mirror reading, it may certainly be possible that the agitators were attacking Paul's apostolic credentials and/or his integrity as a proclaimer of the gospel. But it is by no means self evident or 'virtually certain'. Indeed, the method of mirror reading employed to reach this conclusion has serious methodological flaws. And thus an explanation that does not require

⁵⁵ J. Paul Sampley, "Before God, I Do Not Lie?" (Gal. 1. 20): Paul's Self-Defence in the Light of Roman Legal Praxis', *NTS* 23 (1977): 477-82, here 482, who wrongly suggests Paul was probably responding to the accusation that his gospel was mediated through the apostles.

⁵⁶ Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 122-23, who, to be sure, suspects that Paul may be forestalling accusations with a preemptive oath. Thus, Witherington still relies on the assumption that Paul was responding to charges.

⁵⁷ See Rom. 1.9; 9.1; 2 Cor. 1.23; 11.10; 1 Tim. 2.7.

mirror reading is preferred. It is therefore time to reopen the question on Paul's conflict with the agitators and whether Paul was seeking to respond to accusations in Galatians. Indeed, there are a few alternatives already on offer, but these too must be assessed.

3. Galatians 1–2 without a Mirror: Three Alternatives

3.1 Lyons/Gaventa/Dodd: Narrative as Paradigm

The year before Barclay delivered his stimulating paper on mirror reading, G. Lyons published his dissertation on the autobiographies of Galatians and 1 Thessalonians. Lyons asserted that mirror reading is a useless procedure fraught with methodological problems and that it should therefore be abandoned.⁵⁸ He sought instead to understand Galatians 1–2 in the light of Graeco-Roman autobiographies. After surveying the writings of Isocrates, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Josephus, Lyons concluded that the widespread apologetic function of this genre eventually gave way to the writing of autobiographies in order to win the admiration of one's readership.⁵⁹

Lyons then applied his findings to the autobiographies in Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, concluding that Paul's aims were not apologetic but paradigmatic, in which the apostle presented himself as worthy of admiration and thus emulation. Lyons further supported his thesis by arguing that Paul's narrative in Galatians must be read in the light of 4:12-20.⁶⁰ In these verses, Paul appealed to the Galatians to become as him, and thus Lyons asserted that Galatians 1–2 was written 'as a paradigm of the gospel of Christian freedom', which Paul's readers were to emulate by walking firmly in the steps of Paul and his gospel.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography*, esp. 105-12.

⁵⁹ Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography*, 53. Gaventa has pointed out, however, that one might do this by defending themselves against their attackers, and so the difference is slight (Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 324).

⁶⁰ On the central function of 4:12-20, Lyons follows Nils A. Dahl, 'Paul's Letter to the Galatians: Epistolary Genre, Content, and Structure' in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*. ed. M. D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 134-39; John Bligh, *Galatians in Greek: A Structural Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Detroit: University Press of Detroit, 1966), 51.

⁶¹ Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography*, 170-76. See also James D. Hester, 'Epidictic Rhetoric and Persona in Galatians 1 and 2' in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*. ed. M. D. Nanos (Peabody:

The following year, B. R. Gaventa published an article in which she also sought to link Paul's narrative with ancient Graeco-Roman literature. Whilst Lyons appealed to the autobiographical genre, however, Gaventa insisted that we must turn to the epistolary genre for our cue. Specifically, she observed that Seneca and Pliny often disclosed personal accounts in their letters in order to establish themselves as models for emulation.⁶² Applying these results to Galatians 1–2 and linking this narrative to Galatians 4:12, Gaventa reached similar conclusions as Lyons, albeit on different grounds.⁶³

A decade later, B. J. Dodd argued for a paradigmatic function of Galatians 1–2, again reaching the same destination from a different route. Dodd's study was devoted to understanding Paul's paradigmatic use of the first-person pronoun in Galatians. On Dodd's view, the Galatian readers would have understood Paul's use of ἐγώ (esp. 1:10) as an invitation to imitate his life, climaxing with his call to imitate him in 4:12: 'Become as I'. (γίνεσθε ὡς ἐγώ). With regard to the narrative, Paul set up people pleasing and God pleasing as two mutually exclusive options for the Galatian readers, and Paul hoped they would emulate his example by not being people pleasers.⁶⁴

Although this understanding of the narrative has not gathered many followers—perhaps due to the unfortunate timing of Lyons' and Gaventa's work, published just before Barclay's storming essay⁶⁵—

Hendrickson, 2002), 181-96, here 188, who agrees with Lyons on this point. Unlike Lyons, however, Hester's aim is to place Galatians within a loose epideictic framework. For a critical assessment of the recent attempts to place Galatians within a rhetorical framework, see Philip H. Kern, *Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul's Epistle* (SNTSMS 101; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), who has convincingly argued that Paul's letter does not fit neatly into any rhetorical form.

⁶² Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 322-26.

⁶³ Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 326, concludes that Paul 'not only defends himself and his gospel, but also offers himself as a paradigm of the work of the gospel' (cf. 313, 317, where she rightly argues that Paul's gospel and his apostleship were inextricably linked). To be sure, Gaventa does not deny an apologetic aim, but simply argues it would not have been the *sole* driving force of Paul's narrative.

⁶⁴ Brian J. Dodd, 'Christ's Slave, People Pleasers and Galatians 1.10', *NTS* 42 (1996): 90-104, here 96: 'When they read/hear Paul's "I am not a people pleaser", they will want to conclude, "Neither are we"'. In this regard, Dodd argues that in 4.12, Paul referred to their imitation of Paul with reference to his past activities in Galatia, whilst 1.10 refers to their imitation of Paul with reference to the present. The chief problem with this view is that both Gal. 1–2 and 4.12-20 rehearse past events, not present ones.

⁶⁵ For a recent critique of this view, see Hunn, 'Pleasing God', 29-34 (the paradigm view on Galatians). For a critique of Lyons, see, e.g. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading', 84, 93 n.39 (on Galatians); Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 104-08 (on Galatians); Jeffrey A. D.

they did well to question whether the narrative was Paul's (defensive) attempt to revitalise his authority and credibility. Nevertheless, we can observe three primary difficulties with a paradigmatic understanding of Galatians 1–2. First, J. S. Vos has correctly pointed out that Galatians 4:12 is far too removed from Galatians 1–2 to be its interpretive lense.⁶⁶ If Paul had written the narrative to provide an example worth emulating, why then did he sandwich a hefty amount of material (Galatians 3:1–4:11) between the narrative and the appeal?⁶⁷ Gaventa suggests that a call for imitation at the outset of the letter would have been impossible given the crisis in Galatia. Thus, Paul waited until later in the letter for such an appeal, by which time the Galatian auditors would have been in a better position to accept Paul's message.⁶⁸ One wonders, however, whether the Galatians would have fully recovered from the shock of hearing the sharp rebukes found in chapters 1 and 3. And thus the large gulf between the explicit appeal of 4:12 and the narrative makes it unlikely that the former is the interpretive key to the latter.

A second difficulty arises when we consider the details of Paul's narrative. Again, Vos reminds us that it would be impossible to emulate the details of Paul's experience in Galatians 1–2, not least Paul's experience of the revelation of Jesus.⁶⁹ Dodd attempts to soften this critique by proposing that the narrative simply provides a guiding principle for the Galatians to emulate. In Galatians 2:11–21, for example, Paul represented the freedom they enjoyed in the Messiah, whilst Peter represented their desires to please people and to capitulate

Weima, 'An Apology for the Apologetic Function of I Thessalonians 2:1–12', *JSNT* 68 (1997): 73–99 (on I Thessalonians). When mentioning B. R. Gaventa, Schreiner simply asserts that 'Gaventa underestimates the apologetic function of Gal. 1–2' (Schreiner, *Galatians*, 74). But as we have seen above, it is precisely the 'apologetic function' that is in question.

⁶⁶ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 15.

⁶⁷ For the view that Gal. 4:8–20 was originally a separate letter written to address concerns about the imperial cult, see T. Witulski, *Die Adressaten des Galaterbriefes: Untersuchungen zur Gemeinde von Antiochia ad Pisidiam* (FRLANT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000). For a critique of this view, see Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, 129–32.

⁶⁸ Gaventa, 'Paradigm', 322: 'An explicit appeal based on their former relationship would have been impossible at the outset, but it might be effective at this late point in the letter'. On the other hand, Dodd argues that the Galatians would have understood the function of the narrative from the paradigmatic 'I' in Galatians 1:10, but he agrees that the explicit and confirmatory verse does not come until Galatians 4:12 ('Christ's Slave', 90–104).

⁶⁹ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 15.

to the message of the agitators.⁷⁰ Dodd's response is certainly possible, but it is difficult to imagine that Paul wanted them to read the narrative this way without providing any explicit clues.⁷¹

What is more, this view seems to confuse the relationship between the narrative and the situation in Galatia. All three scholars assume the foil to Paul in the narrative was the Galatian hearers. On this assumption, the churches were seeking to please people by listening to the agitators; they were the ones who were not walking straightforward in the gospel. It seems more likely, however, that the agitators, not the Galatian churches, were the foil to Paul in the narrative. Indeed, the agitators were the ones Paul charged with people pleasing in the climactic ending to this letter (6:12-13). The agitators were the ones accused of not walking straightforward in the gospel by preaching a circumcision message (5:2-12; 6:12-13). The agitators were the ones who had separated themselves from these Gentiles (4:17), as Peter had done in Antioch.⁷² The divergence was not between Paul and the Galatians but between Paul and the agitators.

In sum, the view that in Galatians 1–2, Paul was providing an example for the Galatians to emulate is unsuccessful, although we agree with the view that Paul's aim in the narrative was meant to elicit a particular action from Paul's hearers.

3.2 Versepunt and Vos: Narrative as Defence of Paul's Law-free Gospel

In a second attempt to read Galatians 1–2 without a mirror, both D. Versepunt and J. S. Vos (independently) concluded that Paul's narrative was to demonstrate the independence of Paul's Law-free gospel to gentiles, in response to the agitators' judaising message.⁷³ A year after

⁷⁰ Dodd, 'Christ's Slave', 102.

⁷¹ In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, for example, Paul explicitly invited the Corinthians to understand Israel's wilderness wanderings as an example *not* to imitate.

⁷² On this understanding, we can understand why Paul called the Galatian readers fools just after this narrative (3:1-5), not because they were being people pleasers themselves, but because they were listening to the people pleasers. This understanding would accord well with Paul's strong language in Gal. 3:1: Ὁ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν ('Galatian fools! Who has bewitched you?').

⁷³ D. J. Versepunt, 'Paul's Gentile Mission and the Jewish Christian Community: A Study of the Narrative in Galatians 1 and 2', *NTS* 39 (1993): 36-58. This essay was followed a year later by Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', p. 3, who was agnostic on whether Paul was responding to charges against his apostleship: 'We do not know what the opponents may have said about Paul' (cf. Lategan, 'Defending', 411-30).

Verseput's essay, J. S. Vos undertook a similar study. Both Verseput and Vos set out to test their hypotheses by undertaking a detailed exegesis of Galatians 1–2. Vos argued, for example, that the function of 2:1-10 was to uphold the veracity of Paul's gospel because it had been endorsed, confirmed, and defended vigorously in Jerusalem. He concluded: 'In Galatians 1–2 as a whole Paul defended the truth of his gospel in the face of a contrary gospel and gave instruction as to its nature'.⁷⁴

Perhaps the most important contribution of Verseput and Vos is their detailed exegesis of the narrative. In particular, Vos convincingly argued that the fourfold uses of 'for' (γάρ) in Galatians 1:10-13 must be allowed to carry their full explanatory weight.⁷⁵ Far from seeing 1:10 as a transitional verse, Vos rightly demonstrated the importance of reading it in the light of 1:6-9.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Verseput is on the right track when he states that the Antioch incident was recalled climactically 'to demonstrate the nature of his resolute opposition to all encroachment on Gentile freedom'.⁷⁷

Ultimately, however, these attempts are unconvincing for at least two reasons. First, Vos assumed the agitators were accusing Paul of preaching a gospel that was not supported in the scriptures.⁷⁸ In this way, Vos did not entirely let go of the mirror; he simply found a different image to reflect back. To be sure, the agitators were obviously preaching a different gospel to Paul's (1:6-7; 6:12-13). But it is not at all clear that they were attacking Paul's gospel by saying that it was contrary to scripture.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 16; cf. the similar conclusion in the extensive discussion of Verseput, 'Paul's Gentile Mission', 44-51.

⁷⁵ Thus, Vos argues that the γάρ in 1:13 serves as the grounds of 1:12; the γάρ in 1:12 serves as the grounds of 1:11; the γάρ in 1:11 serves as the grounds of 1:10; the γάρ in 1:10 serves as the grounds of 1:6-9. See below for my slightly different way of linking these verses together, whilst maintaining the force of the γάρ. Regarding the textual variant in 1:11 and the arguments for preferring γάρ (over δέ) as the original reading, see Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 43-49 (cf. Moo, *Galatians*, 95-96).

⁷⁶ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 10-11; cf. 8: 'Only if one interprets the relation of Gal. 1:6-9 to what follows in the way proposed here will it be possible to do justice to the fourfold γάρ in Gal. 1:10-13 and to give Gal. 1:10 a clear function within the argumentation as a whole'. Martyn, *Galatians*, 137, does not allow the γάρ of Gal. 1:10 to have its full force because he wrongly thinks that doing so 'produces what one must call a truly tortured line of thought'. But see our reading below.

⁷⁷ Verseput, 'Paul's Gentile Mission', 57.

⁷⁸ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 3.

⁷⁹ See, e.g. Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 2, who argues it is very possible the agitators were appealing to Genesis 17. Given that Paul discusses Abraham and

What is more, Vos slightly tweaked Paul's argument to fit his hypothesis. According to Vos, for example, Paul's rebuke in 1:6-9 was meant to demonstrate Paul's gospel was true whilst the agitators' gospel was false. Vos's reconstruction of 1:6-9 is as follows:

- la. The gospel is true if it is proclaimed by a true servant of God and Christ.
- lb. The gospel is false if it is proclaimed by a flatterer and a servant of humans.
2. The content and the tone of Gal. 1:6-9 demonstrate that I am not a flatterer and a servant of humans but a true servant of God and Christ.
3. Consequently, the gospel I proclaimed to you is true.⁸⁰

But this reconstruction seems a far cry from what the text actually states.⁸¹ Even a cursory reading of 1:6-9 reveals that Paul was *assuming* the veracity of his gospel, not attempting to prove it. Rather, the aim of these verses was first to rebuke the Galatians for listening to the agitators, and secondly, to pronounce a curse on anyone who would dare to preach another gospel—*because* his gospel was the only true gospel. Vos's explanation therefore runs aground on Paul's actual argument. Although Verseput's reading is preferable at least on this minor point, unfortunately his detailed exegesis of Galatians 1:13–2:21 is detached entirely from 1:6-10, and therefore he does not perceive the connection between the two.

3.3 Hunn: Narrative as Proof of Paul's Divinely Revealed Gospel

If the first two attempts to read Galatians without a mirror have stumbled, we must now turn to a third and final instalment. In a recent essay, D. Hunn argues that the aim of Galatians 1–2 was to prove that Paul's gospel was divinely revealed. Her thesis is set out in three progressive steps. Hunn begins by arguing that Paul set up two categories of people: people pleasing or God pleasing (1:10). Secondly, she attempts to show through a detailed exegesis of the narrative that these two categories drive the narrative of Galatians 1–2, indicating

Genesis 15 in Romans as well—and there in much more detail—it is equally plausible that Paul turned to Genesis 15 in his discussion (Gal. 3) for his own theological reasons, not simply to counter any agitators' arguments from Genesis 17.

⁸⁰ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 10.

⁸¹ Vos, 'Paul's Argumentation', 10, even admits that when read in this way, Paul's argument becomes circular.

that Paul was a God pleaser, not a people pleaser.⁸² Thirdly, and crucially, Hunn asserts that this theme of God pleasing provides the ‘grounds for vv. 11-12 that his gospel is from God’.⁸³ On Galatians 2, for example, she believes that Paul’s defence of the gospel in Jerusalem and in Antioch shows that he was not a people pleaser, which in turn demonstrates proof that his gospel was true.⁸⁴ Thus, the aim of Paul’s narrative was to prove the divine nature of Paul’s gospel.

Hunn is correct that Paul’s narrative must be read in the light of 1:10, a narrative in which Paul established that he was not a people pleaser.⁸⁵ Having said this, her view that 1:10 serves as the grounds for 1:11-12 misunderstands the use of the γάρ in 1:11 by interpreting it as a conclusion (‘therefore’). On her reading, the statement in 1:10 that Paul was not a people pleaser serves as proof that Paul’s gospel was divinely given (1:11). If we understand the γάρ correctly, however, Paul denied being a people pleaser *because* his gospel did not come from people, but from God. Because Hunn gets the logic of 1:10-14 backwards, she misses what seems to be the broader aim of Paul’s narrative.

In sum, we have evaluated three different interpretations of the narrative in Galatians, which do not make use of mirror reading. We have suggested that they are on the right track and raise important points, even if they are not entirely satisfactory in their details. We must therefore return afresh to Paul’s narrative to determine whether there is a more compelling alternative that reads the narrative without a mirror.

4. Galatians 1–2 without a Mirror: Paul and the Agitators

To understand the aim of Paul’s narrative in Galatians 1–2, we begin by observing that the agitators and Paul always feature side by side in Galatians, with Paul always in stark relief.⁸⁶ Perhaps the most obvious place to see this contrast at work is in the letter’s climactic ending. In Galatians 6:12-13, Paul provided crucial information about the motives

⁸² Hunn, ‘Pleasing God’, 48.

⁸³ Hunn, ‘Pleasing God’, 38.

⁸⁴ Hunn, ‘Pleasing God’, 47.

⁸⁵ For my earlier articulation of this point, see Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, 99-101.

⁸⁶ Cf. my discussion on this point in Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult*, 97-101.

of the agitators by stating that they were preaching circumcision to avoid persecution because of the cross of the Messiah. Paul emphatically offered himself as a counter-example:

Ἔμοι δὲ μὴ γένοιτο καυχᾶσθαι εἰ μὴ ἐν τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, δι' οὗ ἔμοι κόσμος ἐσταύρωται ἀγὼ κόσμῳ. οὔτε γὰρ περιτομὴ τί ἐστιν οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις (6:14-15).

But may it never be for me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, through whom the world is crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision is anything nor uncircumcision, but new creation (6:14-15).

Whereas the agitators were not willing to suffer, hoping instead to boast in their safety, Paul would only boast in the cross. Indeed, he even bore on his body the marks of the Messiah (6:17). Whereas the agitators were denying the new creation by preaching circumcision for gentiles, Paul would only emphasise the new creation.

We see this contrast at work again in Galatians 5:7-12, a passage in which Paul asked the Galatian believers who hindered them from running in line with the truth of the gospel. Paul then heaped judgment upon this group before offering himself in total relief:

Ἐγὼ δέ, ἀδελφοί, εἰ περιτομὴν ἔτι κηρύσσω, τί ἔτι διώκομαι; ἄρα κατήργηται τὸ σκάνδαλον τοῦ σταυροῦ (5:11).

But I, brothers and sisters, if I were still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? [If I were still preaching circumcision,] then the stumbling block of the cross is nullified.

If the agitators were hoping to avoid persecution by preaching a message of circumcision to gentiles, Paul was suffering for his circumcision-free message to gentiles. Thus, instead of seeing charges reflected in these verses, we do better to see Paul in contrast to the agitators.⁸⁷ It should be noted that we are not mirror reading (i.e. reflecting the opposite) to reach this conclusion.

If we turn back to chapter four, we see a final contrast between Paul and the agitators. In 4:13-16, Paul recounted his past relationship with

⁸⁷ On Galatians 5:11 in relation to this point, see Hardin, 'If I Still Proclaim Circumcision', 160-61. In this article (which is largely a response to Campbell, 'Galatians 5.11'), I argue against the view of Campbell that Paul preached circumcision to gentiles some time after the Damascus Road and only later changed his mind. Instead, I provide a fresh reading in support of the traditional view that in Gal. 5:11 Paul was referring to a circumcision message to gentiles *before* Paul's experience on the Damascus Road.

the Galatians, reminding them how warmly they received him even in the light of his ‘weakness of the flesh’. Paul then revealed the sinister motives of the agitators, claiming that they were excluding the Galatian believers (4:17). Again, he suddenly offered himself as a counter-example, here employing the maternal imagery we discussed above:

18 καλὸν δὲ ζηλοῦσθαι ἐν καλῷ πάντοτε καὶ μὴ μόνον ἐν τῷ παρεῖναι με πρὸς ὑμᾶς. 19 τέκνα μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνῳ μέγρις οὐ μορφωθῆ Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν· 20 ἤθελον δὲ παρεῖναι πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἄρτι καὶ ἀλλάξαι τὴν φωνήν μου, ὅτι ἀποροῦμαι ἐν ὑμῖν (5:18-20).

Now it is good always to be sought after with good motives and not only when I am present with you. My little children, for whom again I am in labour pains until the Messiah should be formed in you—I wish that I were now with you and that I could change my voice, because I am at a loss about you.

Whereas Paul came to the Galatians because of a weakness in the flesh and desired to be with them during this crisis, the agitators were shutting out these fledgling gentile believers until they submitted to their judaising message (4:17). Again, this conclusion does not come from reading the opposite of the text.

Having now noted these deliberate contrasts between Paul and the agitators, we must determine why Paul offered himself in contrast to the agitators. I suggest a rather simple solution that does not require a mirror: Paul presents himself as a foil to the agitators so the Galatians would realise the folly of chasing after their judaising tactics. In other words, Paul’s integrity was meant to shine in sharp relief to the people-pleasing motives of the agitators. This tactic was in service of Paul’s aim to win the Galatian churches back to his gospel.

4.1 The Aims of the Narrative in the Light of Paul’s Self-contrast

If we are correct in our understanding of Paul’s self-contrast with the agitators, we are now in a much better position to understand the aims of Paul’s narrative. On the heels of 1:7-9 where Paul referred to the troublemaking work of the agitators, he offered himself once again in contrast, stating that he was not a people pleaser but a God pleaser and a slave of the Messiah:

Ἄρτι γὰρ ἀνθρώπους πείθω ἢ τὸν θεόν; ἢ ζητῶ ἀνθρώπους ἀρέσκειν; εἰ ἔτι ἀνθρώποις ἤρεσκον, Χριστοῦ δοῦλος οὐκ ἂν ἤμην (1:10)

For am I now pleasing people, or [am I pleasing] God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of the Messiah.

On this understanding of 1:10, Paul was not responding to any charges. Neither was he providing himself as a paradigm or proving that his gospel was true or that his gospel was of divine origin. Rather, Paul was offering himself as a foil for the agitators, who were guilty of being people pleasers. Indeed, this is precisely where Paul ends in his climactic closing (Gal. 6:12-13; cf. 5:11).⁸⁸ Paul was not on defence; he was on attack. And thus Paul's aim in this verse—and indeed in the narrative as a whole—was to persuade the Galatians that they should not follow the agitators. Instead, they should become like Paul (4:12).

In this regard, B. Witherington is certainly correct when he states that 'Paul sees himself as in competition with the agitators over the hearts and minds of the Galatian converts'.⁸⁹ And it is precisely in this narrative that he saw the battle won or lost, as he demonstrated his devotion to please God and thus his superiority over the agitators who were people pleasers, peddling a perverted gospel to avoid persecution.

Paul then provided a series of statements in support of 1:10, which explains the curse of 1:8-9.⁹⁰ It will suffice simply to set out the logic of 1:6-14:

1:6-7 Rebuke: **I am amazed that you are turning to another gospel** by following after the agitators who are preaching a perverted gospel.

1:8-9 Declaration: Curses on all those who preach another gospel

1:10	Reason for curses:	I am a God, not people, pleaser (cf. agitators: 5:11; 6:12-13)
1:11	Reason for God pleaser:	For my gospel did not come from people
1:12	Reason for God pleaser:	For it came through revelation of Jesus the Messiah

⁸⁸ Thus, we have not resorted to mirror reading in reaching this conclusion. For Gal. 6:11-18 as the interpretive key of the letter, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, 'Gal. 6:11-18: A Hermeneutical Key to the Galatian Letter', *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 90-107. For these verses in the light of the Roman imperial cult(s) in Galatia, see my Hardin, *Galatians*, 85-115.

⁸⁹ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 130.

⁹⁰ *Contra* Verseput, 'Paul's Gentile Mission', 39, who sees the γάρ of 1:13 in support of 1:11. Because Verseput begins his discussion at Gal. 1:13-14, he does not recognise the significance of the entire argument that began in 1:6-9 with Paul's rebuke and runs right through to the end of chapter 2.

1:13–2:21 Reason for God pleaser: For you heard about my former manner of life when I formerly was a people pleaser but am no longer...

4.2 Paul's Narrative from 1:15–2:21: A Chiastic Reading

If we have proposed the aim of Paul's narrative as introduced in Galatians 1:10-14, we must finally examine the remaining sections of this narrative to determine whether it will hold up under scrutiny. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to undertake a lengthy exegesis of this passage. Instead, we will content ourselves with a brief overview of each narrative block. I suggest we read the narrative chiastically:⁹¹

- A ὅτε δέ ('but when') + ἀφορίζω: God set apart Paul for gentiles (1:15-17)
- B ἔπειτα ('then') + years + Paul in Jerusalem (1:18-20)
- C ἔπειτα ('then') + Paul in Syria and Cilicia, i.e. gentile mission (1:21-24)
- B' ἔπειτα ('then') + years + Paul in Jerusalem (2:1-10)
- A' ὅτε δέ ('but when') + ἀφορίζω: Peter set himself apart from gentiles (2:11-21)

We begin with Paul declaring that after God had set him apart to be a light to the Gentiles, he did not seek anyone's approval or advice. Instead, he went straightaway to fulfil his gentile mission (1:15-17). Paul then stated that he went up to Jerusalem three years later, a time when he could have curried favour with the apostles in Jerusalem. And yet during this fifteen-day visit, Paul only saw Peter and James the brother of the Lord. Of all the times when he could have been a people pleaser, he thus refused, even providing an oath to emphasise that he did not avail himself of the opportunity to be a people pleaser (1:18-20).

The centre of the chiasmus then comes with 1:21-24, in which Paul describes his evangelistic efforts among gentiles in Syria and Cilicia. Note here Paul deemphasised his apostolic status in these verses, highlighting instead that Paul's mission to gentiles was met with praises to God among Jews in Judaea.⁹² As the centre of the chiasmus, they furthermore highlight the centrality of Paul's gentile mission and

⁹¹ Although the present thesis does not rely upon reading this section as one giant chiasmus, such a shape commends itself for two reasons: (1) the common use of chiasmus when retelling narrative, and (2) key verbal and temporal markers in the narrative.

⁹² See also Hunn, 'Pleasing God', 38.

the radical change from his former life in Ἰουδαϊσμός.⁹³ It is even reported that ‘he is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy’. And in response, the believers in Judaea praise God, not Paul (1:23-24).

The narrative then steps down in reverse order. Paul again went up to Jerusalem, this time after fourteen years. Again his concern was not to please people, but to confirm the truth of the gospel; not even Titus was compelled to be circumcised on that visit (2:1-10). Finally, the outer edge of the chiasmus (2:11-21) looks back to Paul’s initial calling (1:15-17).⁹⁴ In Antioch, Paul not only refused to please people but also was willing to confront Peter, who was acting as a people pleaser. The verbal contrast between Peter and Paul here is particularly striking. Peter set himself apart (ἀφώριζεν) *from* gentiles (2:12), whereas God had set apart (ὁ ἀφορίσας) Paul *for* gentiles (1:15).

In addition, the comparison between Peter and the agitators in Galatia are instructive in that both seemed to believe Paul’s gospel,⁹⁵ but both succumbed under external pressure and thus withdrew from gentiles. For Paul, this would not do. As Barclay has recently suggested, perhaps the key moment in the narrative comes right at the end of chapter 2, where Paul stated that he would not nullify the gift of God (i.e. Jesus himself).⁹⁶ Peter had momentarily fallen under pressure, thereby disregarding the new age in the Messiah. Paul, however, would stand firm as a pleaser of God and as a slave of the Messiah (cf. 1:10). And it is at this point in the letter that Paul turned back to the Galatians and rebuked them for following the agitators (3:1-5), who were not worthy of being followed.

⁹³ On the meaning of Ἰουδαϊσμός, see Matthew Novenson, ‘Paul’s Former Occupation in Ἰουδαϊσμός’ in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul’s Letter*. ed. M. W. Elliott, and S. J. Hafemann, N. T. Wright, J. Frederick (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014). I am grateful for his sharing with me a prepublication draft of this essay.

⁹⁴ For a recent discussion on the famous debate between Jerome and Augustine on the Antioch incident and whether Peter and Paul were play acting, see esp. Jason A. Myers, ‘Law, Lies and Letter Writing: An Analysis of Jerome and Augustine on the Antioch Incident (Galatians 2:11-14)’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66 (2013): 127-39.

⁹⁵ Crucially, I am taking Paul’s accusations in Gal. 6:12-13 seriously, i.e. that the only reason the agitators were compelling the Galatian gentiles to be circumcised was to avoid persecution (see above n.4).

⁹⁶ See John M. G. Barclay, ‘Paul, the Gift and the Battle over Gentile Circumcision: Revising the Logic of Galatians’, *ABR* 58 (2010): 36-56, who argues convincingly that Paul’s logic is built upon the view that Jesus was himself the ‘norm-breaking gift’ (38).

If our understanding of the narrative is correct, we are now in a position to answer the questions raised at the outset of this essay. Why did Paul think it necessary to announce his divinely appointed apostleship, to point out he was no longer a people pleaser, to swear an oath? Why indeed did Paul even feel the need to sketch an autobiography for the first two chapters of this letter? The answer may be found when we understand Paul's self-portrait in contrast to what he says about the agitators in Galatians. Paul admitted he was formerly a people pleaser, but once Jesus the Messiah was revealed in him, everything changed. Paul had received the gift, and this resulted in a radical reorientation of his priorities. No longer was he concerned with pleasing people. The new creation had been announced through the Messiah, and thus gentiles were to receive salvation without being circumcised.

And yet in Galatia, the agitators did not share this perspective but were still concerned with pleasing people, unwilling to be crucified with the Messiah. In the light of this crisis, Paul's narrative aim was to provide himself as a foil to the agitators in an effort to persuade his dear children not to fall prey any longer to the judaising message of the agitators. This understanding best explains Paul's assertions and his denials (1:1, 10-12) and it provides a coherent shape to the entire narrative without resorting to the distorting effects of mirror reading.

5. Conclusions

We began this essay by challenging the traditional view that the agitators were maligning Paul's apostolic status and his practice as an emissary of Jesus the Messiah. Utilising Barclay's method of mirror reading, we concluded that it may be possible that the agitators were attacking Paul's apostolic credentials and/or his integrity as a proclaimer of the gospel, but that it is by no means self evident or 'virtually certain'. We also concluded that a simpler explanation that did not require mirror reading is to be preferred.

Secondly, we critically assessed three alternative views that do not attempt to mirror read Paul's narrative in Galatia. Although all three arguments provide significant contributions to the debate, each have particular shortcomings. Instead, we argued that Paul's aim in the narrative was to contrast himself with the agitators so that the Galatian

auditors would see the folly of listening to the agitators' judaising message. To substantiate this reading, we first observed other passages in Galatians where Paul stood in relief to the agitators before arguing for this contrast specifically in 1:10. In his narrative Paul was therefore not on the back foot but on the front foot. Paul contrasted himself to the agitators to persuade his hearers to resist the agitators and to return to Paul and his gospel.

When reading Galatians, scholars have traditionally used a piece of reflective glass, which is held up in front of the letter to determine what situation was being reflected back from the text. As Barclay pointed out many years ago, this exercise is fraught with difficulty. We have agreed with this conclusion, but we have disagreed with the view that mirror reading Galatians is *essential*. We have instead cut a new path in the hopes that fresh and promising pathways for understanding Paul's letter to the Galatian churches await us, if only we would read the text of Galatians without a mirror.