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PREVIEW

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**Jewish Christianity in Galatians: A study of the teachers and  
their gospel**

Arnold, James Phillip, Ph.D.

Rice University, 1991

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PREVIEW

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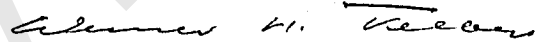
JEWISH CHRISTIANITY IN GALATIANS:  
A STUDY OF THE TEACHERS AND THEIR GOSPEL

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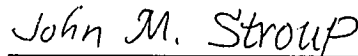
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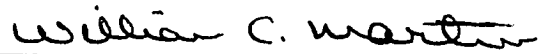
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Jewish Christianity in Galatians: A Study of the Teachers and Their Gospel**

**J. Phillip Arnold**

The subject of this study is the identity of the Jewish Christian teachers in Galatians and their alternative gospel. This investigation concerns their origins, their theology, and their place in Second Temple Judaism and Jewish Christianity. It is discovered that they are not "legalists" or reducible to mere "opponents" of Paul. Instead, the teachers are Jewish Christian charismatic nomists proclaiming their interpretation of the gospel to the Galatians.

In Chapter One, a history of research on the identification of the teachers is presented from the patristic period to the modern period. Programmatic issues are developed which provide direction and parameters for this study.

Chapter Two examines the teachers' historical origins and their own "apostolic" authority as well as their relation to Paul. The chapter also investigates the teachers' understanding of Abraham and the covenant of circumcision, as well as their use of Moses and the Sinai covenant.

In Chapter Three the soteriology and the christology of the teachers' gospel are developed. Their gospel's use of the Law (nomos) as a medium of charismatic revelations (pneuma) is

examined. The function of circumcision and the calendar for accessing heavenly revelations is explored. The teachers' christology is seen to portray Jesus as a Teacher of the Law whose "law of Christ" provides the hermeneutic by which selective obedience to the Law is determined.

Chapter Four attempts to locate the teachers and their tradition in Jewish and Jewish Christian history and sources. Jewish intertestamental literature, including the pseudepigrapha and Qumran sources, is investigated. Also, the teachers' specific relationship to the Jerusalem community--the "pillars" and the pseudadelphoi is examined. Other Jewish Christian law-observant traditions similar to the teachers' tradition are located in Colossians, the Kerygmata Petrou, and the Book of Elkesai.

The teachers are shown to be Jewish Christian charismatic nomists with an integral gospel and independent Gentile mission. They are part of a Torah-observant tradition within the Jesus Movement which offered the venerable and wondrous Jewish Torah to the Gentiles as a means for experiencing greater degrees of charismatic life in the Spirit.



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There are many persons who have contributed to the creation and completion of this project--relatives, friends, and academic associates. Their encouragement and inspiration will always be remembered.

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I want to express a sincere word of respect and appreciation to my parents, David Lee Arnold and Vera Irene Wilson Arnold. The years of dinner-table discussions of philosophical, religious, and historical issues nurtured the spirit of questioning which has inspired my studies. And a mother's willingness to answer and encourage a child's questions prepared me to ask many more. To you both I express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude for your gifts of love and care and for your faith in me and my work.

A final word: I must also thank the Jewish Christian teachers for loving the Torah so much to carry it to faraway Galatia--their activity caused Paul to write Galatians. And

I join others who are forever indebted to Paul for his writing the refreshing and liberating letter of Galatians--a letter which calls into question all forms and all structures and all powers belonging to this "present evil age."

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW



## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION, HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND, SITUATION AND FOCUS OF THIS STUDY**

##### **A. Background**

By 53 C.E. congregations of the Jesus Movement--originating in faraway Palestine--had been established in distant Galatia by Paul, a Hellenized Jew, who had entered the Movement about three years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Although he had never seen Jesus while alive, the former Pharisee claimed to have been appointed in a vision by the resurrected Jesus as his representative to the entire Gentile world.

Important background information about the Gentile Galatian believers and their theology can be discovered from Paul's letter written to them soon after the establishment of the congregations.<sup>1</sup> From his letter, now part of the New Testament, we learn that Paul's original proclamation convinced a number of Galatians to forsake their Gentile religion and worship the God of Israel, revealed in Jewish Scripture. They also accepted Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord, through whom forgiveness of sins and charismatic gifts of the Spirit were to be received. The inspired converts were formed into several Paulinist congregations throughout the region.

## B. Situation

If nothing had disturbed these zealous Galatian believers after the founder's departure, we today would not have the revolutionary and influential document: the 2,183-word letter to the Galatians.<sup>2</sup> However, a serious controversy developed very soon after Paul left for other mission fields farther west. A cursory overview of the Galatian situation/controversy at the time of the letter's arrival will set the stage for our study.

Using a mirror-reading technique (see Methodology below), and attempting for the moment to avoid the more controversial questions, we may summarize the situation as follows.

1. Apparently within several months of Paul's departure, other teachers--proclaiming a "different gospel" (heteron euaggelion, Gal 1:6) about Jesus--gained powerful influence over the Galatian converts. When Paul received information that another or alternate "gospel" was causing significant changes to transpire in "his" Galatian congregations, he dictated an impassioned letter to the affected churches about 54 C.E. That canonical letter remains our only primary source specifically concerned with that controversy.

2. While agreeing with Paul on the necessity of Gentile repentance from idolatry and the need to worship Yahweh, the newly arrived Jesus-followers taught the Galatians that they were obligated to observe the Jewish Torah which Jesus was said to have taught. Primary among the requirements of the

Law were: a) the rite of circumcision and b) the observance of sacred days.<sup>3</sup> The letter itself specifically and repeatedly refers to these two issues: a) 6:12 tells us: "[they] compel you to be circumcised," and in 5:12 Paul's irritation erupts: "I would that those who oppose you would castrate themselves!" b) Paul seems only slightly less annoyed in 4:9-11: "You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I fear that I may have labored in vain over you."

3. Eager to perfect their new-found faith, many of the Galatians began to submit to this nomistic teaching and obey these "works of law" (3:10). The new teachers encouraged the Galatians' infatuation with them, disparaged Paul's position, and indicated that they possessed greater authority, deeper knowledge, and perhaps greater spiritual gifts than he.

4. These new teachings threatened at minimum to split, and possibly at worst to destroy the Galatian churches--at least in Paul's view. H. D. Betz, in a recent magisterial work on the whole Galatian letter, certainly does not overrun the evidence when he avers that the problem is that of the Galatian believers "changing 'denominations'"<sup>4</sup>

In our view, "changing denominations" understates the situation. Here competing gospels clash, the founder fights for his once held leadership, and, most important, the believers--and their salvation?--are threatened with being devoured in the titanic conflict.

### C. The Purpose and Focus of This Study

The drama of gospels in conflict which boils to the surface throughout Galatians has long invited scrutiny and comment. However, given the complexity and problematics of this brief but mighty letter, it will not be our purpose to present an interpretation of its entirety, much less to elucidate or systematize Paul and his theology. Rather, in light of recent research and newly published materials from the first century B.C.E<sup>5</sup> this study will attempt 1) to examine and identify the teachers (often called "opponents"), 2) to offer a fresh synthesis of the history and theology of those who taught the Galatians an "alternative gospel," 3) to locate both teachers and "gospel" more precisely than previously possible within a history of religions tradition. In so doing this study examines the possibility that the teachers belong to a Jewish Christian alternative tradition which possessed a fully "authentic" and integral gospel and mission. As a corollary to the above we will also have reason to reevaluate the Reformation's understanding of the polemic in Galatians--an understanding that remains to this day viable in many quarters, but which is coming under increasing criticism.

The above-stated threefold task is admittedly a complex one, as shown in the words of Helmut Koester: "the question of the identification of Paul's opponents is one of the more difficult questions of New Testament scholarship."<sup>6</sup> Cognizant of this and other difficulties, we nevertheless believe that

with a close and concentrated examination of the teachers and their alternate gospel advances can be made. An important note on terminology and a presentation of the structure of this study will take us directly to a history of research.

#### D. Terminology and Outline

In order to avoid confessional or prejudicial treatment of those who presented a different gospel from that of Paulinist Christianity, this study will refrain from reducing those who are the focus of investigation to "attackers," "errorists," or even merely "opponents" of Paul. Following the lead of W. Kelber<sup>7</sup> and J. L. Martyn<sup>8</sup> in striving for greater objectivity, the newcomers to (or uprisers, if they can be shown to be from within) Galatia will be referred to as "teachers," because--as will be demonstrated--they 1) taught the Galatians to obey part or all of the Torah, 2) preached an alternative gospel, and 3) saw themselves as followers of the Teacher Jesus (see Chapter Three for arguments).

The order of investigation is as follows. The rest of Chapter One includes two primary sections. First, it presents a brief history of research from the patristic period to the advent of critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, and a selective look at major contributions and questions since then. Second, a section on methodological considerations is presented. Chapter Two focuses on the historical origins and authority of the teachers, including their relation to Paul

and other Christian teachers, as well as on their general theology--their message's appeal to the covenant, Abraham, Torah, and Moses. Evidence will be presented to show that their theology is cogent and integral; it will be argued that the term "gospel" is not inappropriate for that message. Chapter Three develops the soteriology and christology of the alternative gospel with regard to 1) the teachers' understanding of the relationship of nomos to pneuma, and 2) the teachings of Jesus. Chapter Four will then attempt to locate the teachers and their gospel within the history of religions, i.e., in the spectrum of Second Temple Judaism<sup>9</sup> and early Christianity. In order to lay the foundation for our synthesis, we must now turn to the history of research relevant to our purpose.

## II. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

### A. Introduction

Why is such a history, even briefly presented, necessary? It is imperative for several reasons. First, it serves to gain perspective on the letter as a whole although our focus covers less than the entirety of Galatians. Second, a survey will help us understand the diversity of scholarly opinions regarding the specific target of this study, the alternative gospel. That is to say, an endeavor of this nature creates an awareness of the spectrum of interpretations of the alternative gospel proffered by various interpreters, and

their reasons for such opinions. Thirdly, the insights of earlier scholars often provide material on which subsequent scholarship builds. That will be the case here; after surveying and sorting we will be in a position to offer and defend a new synthesis.

As regards procedure, we shall attempt to disclose the gradual unfolding of Galatian research by locating important concepts and ideas contributed by scholars, as well as locating points of departure from which new interpretations arose. The history of Galatians research is not an ever-ascending ladder which moves upward in step-by-step fashion to greater degrees of "truth" about Galatians. Rather, the story of Galatian scholarship unfolds in an helical shape--a shape which advances our understanding through reversal and return. A review of Galatian research is, after all, a review of readers encountering a text and, as such, presupposes the complexity and mystery resident within a great text.

Ancient and modern exegetes agree that the Galatian letter represents Paul's attempt to convince his audience of the validity of his interpretation of the gospel. But a great diversity of opinion exists regarding the question of why it was necessary for Paul to defend and explain his gospel in such a polemical fashion. Although interpreters understand that the letter posits the presence of an alternative gospel from that of Paul's, their interpretations diverge over 1) the content of the alternative gospel and 2) the identity of its

proponents. And there is more disagreement. Some theories consider the teachers of the alternative gospel to have arrived from outside the Galatian congregations. Others insist that they arose from within. Definitions of the content of their gospel range from "legalism," on the one hand, to "gnosticism" on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Amid the plethora of competing interpretations in Galatian scholarship, two primary issues which repetitively surface are of paramount importance for understanding the Galatian situation and the teachers' place in earliest Christianity. The first issue is an historical one concerning origins and authority, i.e., how the teachers of the alternative message relate to the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem, particularly to the three "pillars," James, Peter, and John. Were the proponents of the alternate gospel legitimate representatives of the Jerusalem community, including the apostles? And what does this mean about the teachers' relation to and opinion of Paul and his teachings? The second issue is a theological one concerning soteriology and the content of the alternative gospel. Does its soteriology teach--in line with the Reformation's identification--that obedience to the Law is the means by which God's favor is merited in contrast with Paul's emphasis on grace and faith? Or does their Torah/law teaching have some other purpose, more in line with first-century concerns? Put another way, are