

NEIL MARTIN

# Regression in Galatians

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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530





Neil Martin

# Regression in Galatians

Paul and the Gentile Response to Jewish Law

Mohr Siebeck

*Neil Martin*, born 1973; 2008–11 Vice President of Innovation for Zondervan Harper Collins in Grand Rapids, Michigan; 2011–13 Associate Pastor of Crossroads Bible Church in Grand Rapids; 2019 DPhil in New Testament at Oxford University; currently Biblical Studies Tutor at the Pastors' Academy in London as well as serving on the staff of Oxford Evangelical Presbyterian Church.  
orcid.org/0000-0001-7294-9010

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οἱ ὑπομένοντες τὸν θεὸν  
ἀλλάξουσιν ἰσχύς



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If Gentile Christians in Galatia were under pressure to embrace Jewish Law, why did Paul accuse them of going back to something they had done *before*? Was it because they were thinking about Judaism in the way they used to think about their pagan past?

As soon as the idea formed in my mind, I was hooked. Might this help explain Paul's notorious negativity about law in the letter? Might it even clarify the central dichotomy between works of the law and faith? By the autumn of that year, the question had become a DPhil proposal, by the following summer I had moved with my whole family to Oxford to begin an academic journey that would go on to stretch and energise me more than I could ever have imagined.

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Seven years on from the beginning of this journey, it’s a poignant moment to be finally releasing the fruits of my labours into the world. This project has been a companion, a teacher, a task-master, an adversary, and a source of inspiration for longer than anything else I have ever worked on. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Next time I ask a smart alec question in class, though, I’ll make sure the answer doesn’t need *quite* so much Greek!

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All scripture references are cited from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### 1. Regression in Galatians

Paul's letter to the Galatians prickles with restless concern. Jewish Christian Influencers are teaching his Gentile readers that faith in Christ requires thoroughgoing identification with the Jewish people and their religious customs. If they capitulate – in Paul's mind at least – a return to *the norms of their pagan past* will necessarily follow.

In what sense could this possibly be true? Is Judaism now equivalent to pagan worship in Paul's mind? And if not, why does he oppose the Galatians' openness to Jewish calendrical commitments and dietary restrictions and even to circumcision with such passion? Why not rather welcome these things as encouraging signs of commitment? In the ancient world, conversion to Judaism involved a radical reconstitution of ethnic identity – “abandoning,” as Philo has it, “kinsfolk,... country,... customs,... temples and... gods” (*Virtues* 102). So why does Paul describe it in Galatians using the language of *regression*?

Gal 4.8–11, with its extraordinary concentration of regressive terminology, stands at the centre of this interpretative enigma:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly στοιχεῖα?<sup>1</sup> How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

The interest in “days, and months, and seasons, and years” to which Paul alludes in these verses has been triggered, we assume, by the ministry of the *Jewish* Christian Influencers at work among his readers. The reference to “beings that by nature are not gods,” however, clearly signals the simultaneous relevance of their past *pagan* commitments to the present crisis. In some sense, accepting Jewish Law is reanimating that past – even to the point where their knowledge of God is in doubt. Paul's use of the verb ἐπιστρέφω (Gal 4.9) powerfully captures the sense of returning to a past state. For the Galatians, in Paul's opinion, Jewish Law traced the path back to slavery.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul's use of the notoriously fluid term στοιχεῖα in Galatians will be analysed in detail in Chapter 4. Until that point in the argument, the word is rendered in the original Greek.

This passage, however, is only the tip of the regressive iceberg.<sup>2</sup> Paul frames his diagnosis in regressive terms in Gal 3.3, strikingly dichotomising terms for beginning (ἐνάρχομαι) and completing (ἐπιτελέω). The paired narratives of 3.23–29 and 4.1–7 are predicated on the danger and folly of regression: Those who trust in Christ have been liberated from the supervision of the law as a παιδαγωγός (3.24–5) – how can they now willingly return to this state of bondage? Those who trust in Christ have entered into their long-promised inheritance as sons of God (4.4–5) – how can they now willingly return to the state of heirs under “guardians and managers” (ὕπὸ ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους – 4.2)? Regression broods over Paul’s allegorical interpretation of the Abraham narrative in 4.21–31 – embracing Jewish law implies turning back from Sarah to Hagar, from the new covenant to the old. Regression is reemphasised in 5.1 – “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit *again* to a yoke of slavery” (emphasis mine). Capitulation to the Influencers in 5.4 entails “falling away from grace” (ἐκπίπτω). The striking use of the Aorist, ἐτρέχετε, in 5.7 highlights the fact that the Galatians are *no longer* running well. Even in Paul’s retelling of the Antioch incident, the problem with Peter’s behaviour is couched in regressive terms. Peter had built again (πάλιν οἰκοδομῶ) “the very things that [he] once tore down,” thus demonstrating his identity as a “transgressor” (2.18) – a fault from which Paul is clearly keen to exonerate himself (cf. 5.11).

Throughout Christian history, careful readers of the letter have wrestled with the tension that this diagnosis of regression introduces into Paul’s argument. Augustine captures the problem with typical clarity in his commentary on Gal 4.8–9: “When [Paul] says *turn back* he is certainly not saying that they are turning back to circumcision – they had never been circumcised” (*Com. Gal.* 33.3). Even if the Galatians had been enthusiastic participants in local Jewish communities prior to Paul’s arrival, regression hardly covers their new passion for *exclusive* devotion to the God of Israel. Augustine prefigures traditional reformation exegesis in his response to this difficulty, bridging the gap between paganism and Judaism *from the Jewish side*. Like pagans, he argues, Jews were obsessed with the “slavish” observance of legal rites to the extent that they were “carnal” (*Com. Gal.* 34.4). Only when Judaism had been subjected to this “carnal” distortion can it be equated to paganism and embracing Judaism to regression. By making these equations, Paul was launching a direct assault on his religious past.

But should the same Paul who willingly divided the work of global evangelisation with law-observant Jewish Christians in Gal 2.9 be thought to condemn Jewish rites as the equivalent of enslavement to pagan gods only two chapters later? Not all early Christian authors were willing to accept this result. For

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<sup>2</sup> Elliott, 2003, 254–5.

Jerome, Jewish law was only “weak and miserable” in comparison to the new dispensation revealed in Christ (*Com. Gal.* 4.9). His interpretative instinct remains influential today thanks, in large part, to J. Louis Martyn and John Barclay, for whom Sabbath-observance and circumcision are equivalent to paganism in Galatians only in the sense that they represent a return to the logic of “the old age” prior to Christ’s coming.<sup>3</sup> Shaped by Paul’s emphasis on “special days, and months, and seasons, and years,” Ambrosiaster’s concentration on calendrical observances as the key point of contact between the Galatians’ pagan background and the Jewish Christianity of the Influencers (*Com. Gal.* 4.10) also finds a modern echo in the work of Martinus de Boer.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasising the rhetorical impact of Paul’s regression language is not, however, the only way to facilitate more positive interpretations of his attitude to his Jewish heritage. The problem in Galatia might have had less to do with the unacceptability of Jewish legal observances themselves than it did with their use for purposes the apostle deemed unacceptable. Following James Dunn and N. T. Wright, many interpreters trace the origins of the Galatian crisis to the use of law as a racial identity marker without which Gentiles lacked the necessary qualifications for fellowship with Jews.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, contextual studies have sought solutions to the regression problem in a deeper understanding of the Galatians’ religious background. For Justin Hardin, Brigitte Kahl, Bruce Winter, and Thomas Witulski, the Galatians’ submission to Jewish law was an attempt to negotiate their obligations to the emperor cult, “normalising” their abstention from participation in various ways.<sup>6</sup> For Susan Elliott and Clinton Arnold, their attraction to Jewish law is to be understood with reference to the analogous attractions of local pagan cults.<sup>7</sup> Recent contributions from the “Paul within Judaism” school question whether the argument of Galatians applies to Jews at all, explaining the extremity of Paul’s concern on the basis that legal observances were inappropriate for Gentiles though remaining thoroughly appropriate for Jews.<sup>8</sup> The specific accusation of regression, however, remains unexplained.

Each of these interpretative possibilities will be subjected to detailed scrutiny in the chapters that follow. Wherever regression is explicitly confronted, however, we find the attempts to explain Paul’s logic inadequate. None of the alternatives satisfactorily tackles *both* the bluntness with which the Apostle associates his readers’ behaviour with their pagan past *and* the tension between

<sup>3</sup> Martyn, 1997*a*, 393–400; Barclay, 2015, 389–91; 404–10.

<sup>4</sup> De Boer, 2011, 252–61.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Dunn, 2006*b*, 352–3; Dunn, 2008, 8–9, 12, 17, 23–8; Wright, 1991, 3; Wright, 1997, 29–35.

<sup>6</sup> Hardin, 2008; Kahl, 2009; Winter, 1994, 123–43; Winter, 2015, 226–49; Witulski, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, 1999, 661–83; Elliott, 2003; Arnold, 2005, 429–49.

<sup>8</sup> Thiessen, 2016; Fredriksen, 2017; Wyschogrod, 2004, 188–201.

his apparent acceptance of law-observance among Jews (Gal 5.3, 6; 6.15) and his insistence upon its dangers among Gentiles (3.4, 4.11, 5.2, 4).

## 2. Proposal

In this study, I propose that Paul's warnings about regression are more central to his overarching argument than has been acknowledged in extant works. As I read his intentions, the heart of the problem with the Galatians' incipient conversion lay *neither* in the supposition that Judaism was inherently "legalistic," *nor* in the supposition that Jewish legal observances, though valuable in themselves, were being used to erect false boundaries around God's covenant community. The problem lay rather in their capacity to trigger *the reanimation of religious assumptions to which the Galatians had become habituated in their pagan past* (Gal 4.8–11) fundamentally distorting and even eviscerating their Christian faith (4.11; 5.2–4).

As in 1 Cor 8.1–13 – where Paul, I argue, addresses a situation closely parallel to the situation in Galatia – "strong" Christians were encouraging "weak" Christians to embrace practices that were powerfully associated with religious assumptions rooted in their pagan background. In Galatia, however, the problem was not actual re-immersion in local cults.<sup>9</sup> The problem was exposure, under the auspices of Jewish Christianity, to basic components of religious practice familiar from their past, and the consequent reanimation of the assumptions habitually associated with those practices in the present.

Paul, I argue, did *not* equate paganism and Judaism in Galatians, neither did he deny that it was possible or desirable for ethnic Jews to remain law-observant as believers in Christ. His concern focused on the fundamental components of religious practice they shared. He did not believe that Jewish Christianity, as it was being (mis)appropriated by his readers, was the same thing as Jewish Christianity as it was being practiced by ethnic Jews, and his critique of this (mis)appropriation of Judaism should not be understood as a critique of Judaism itself. His concern was rather with *the Galatians' reception of Jewish law*. Paul feared that the ministry of the Influencers was reawakening expectations characteristic of the Galatians' *pagan past* – expectations about the efficacy of religious works that Paul deemed inimical both to Judaism and to faith in Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Contra Martin, 1995, 437–61. See also Hardin, 2008, 141–2.

### 3. Consequences

In the light of this proposal, I conclude that the dispute between the Apostle and the Influencers in Galatia was less theological than it was pastoral and missiological. Paul's animus towards the Influencers was not focused so much on *what they said* as it was on *who they were saying it to*, and on their failure to anticipate or accommodate the weaknesses that he perceived among this audience – weaknesses connected to the enduring magnetism and intuitive plausibility of their entrenched religious presuppositions.

These conclusions have significant consequences for our reading of the letter. The Galatian crisis becomes a worked example of Paul's larger theology of accommodation – a concrete manifestation of the dire consequences that he anticipated for “weak” Christians exposed to the inconsiderate behaviour of “strong” Christians (1 Cor 8.11; Rom 14.15, 20–21). The key dichotomy between faith and works in Gal 2–3 is also radically recontextualised. The emphasis shifts from a comparison between faith as Paul saw it and works as they appeared to his Jewish contemporaries, to a comparison between faith viewed from an integrated Pauline/Jewish perspective and works viewed from the pagan perspective – or at least from the pagan perspective *as Paul conceived it*.

### 4. Methodology

Where were the Galatian churches? When was the letter written? Who were the Influencers in Galatia and what were their motives? These classic contextual questions, kindled by the frustrating reality that we are eavesdropping on just one side of a many-sided conversation, rightly occupy the attention of all serious exegetes. In this study, while competing solutions are reviewed and the boundaries around what can be known with confidence are assessed and respected, I neither attempt, nor defend, a complete reconstruction of my own. Definition is sought only to the extent that it is necessary to adjudicate the proposal.

Extrabiblical data illuminating potential components of the Galatians' religious background are used to define the envelope of possible options, to shape and test the proposal, and to facilitate the assessment of alternative solutions. The quest for a complete, objective, or prescriptive account of this background, however, is explicitly eschewed as illusory. I do not seek to discern or to define the essential attributes of pagan, Jewish, or Christian worship, or to mount an objective comparison between them. My focus lies rather on Paul's assertion that embracing Jewish-Christian observances entailed regression *for his readers* and *on what he thought this meant*.

Other contributors to the regression question have sought to identify *features that are unique to the religious background of the region* and to use these

features to a greater or lesser extent to control exegesis.<sup>10</sup> While sources that may constitute evidence of distinctive local religious practices and assumptions are considered in this study, however, I do not make such distinctiveness a criterion for consideration. I am interested in *both* the total religious experience of the Galatians – including commonplaces of belief and practice as well as local peculiarities to the extent that we have access to either from the available data, *and* Paul’s distinctive personal perspective on that experience as we find it encoded in his correspondence, interpreted in the light of his larger Jewish milieu.

## 5. Argument

In broad outline, the argument of the following chapters alternates between biblical exegesis and scrutiny of extrabiblical data, before drawing conclusions. Exegesis moves progressively from a wide to a narrow field, from situating Paul and the Galatian letter in their larger chronological and geographical context to engagement with the specific concerns of the Galatian crisis and regression as Paul’s central diagnostic motif. Assessment of extrabiblical sources from the region begins with the Graeco-Roman religious background and progresses to the Jewish religious background.

### *Chapter 2: Galatians in Context: Where? When? Who?*

Chapter 2 situates the project within the larger landscape of research into the underlying historical context of Galatians, exploring the major options and defining the limited number of commitments which will form the handrails for our discussion as it progresses.

While noting the historical importance of the debate about northern and southern Galatian destinations for the letter and the present (and perhaps decisive) renaissance of the southern option, for this project, the viability and importance of decoupling questions about location from questions about the readers’ pre-existent religious sensibilities is stressed.

Chronological questions are pursued in some depth, weighing the relative strength of the various sources and datums relevant to the foundation of the Galatian churches and the writing of the letter with reference to Jewett, Campbell and other key interlocutors, and drawing on travel data made available through the Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World, ORBIS.<sup>11</sup> For this project, however, the primary conclusion is uncontroversial:

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Elliott, 1999; Elliott, 2003; Arnold, 2005, 429–49; Witulski, 2000, 204–18.

<sup>11</sup> Jewett, 1979; Campbell, 2014; [www.orbis.stanford.edu](http://www.orbis.stanford.edu).

whenever Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, the congregations he addressed were still relatively immature.

Paul, the Galatians, and the Influencers are each briefly introduced on the basis of the available data. Here it becomes apparent that agnosticism with respect to the identity and motives of the Influencers is not only *necessary* for secure exegesis but that it also forms *no obstacle* to satisfying exegesis. For structural efficiency in the argument that follows I assume the Influencers were ethnic Jews, but the underlying logic of the proposal is unaffected by alternative characterisations.

### *Chapter 3: Galatians in the Pagan Religious Context of Asia Minor*

Chapter 3 begins to probe the question of the Galatians' religious background. The letter famously, and infuriatingly, offers us only *Paul's* perspective on the crisis it addresses; there are no sources to which we can appeal to adjudicate the nature of the problem as *his readers* would have seen it. Literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources may still be consulted, however, in an effort to define the possible range of the Galatians' religious influences and to inform our judgements about the relative probability and compatibility of each.

In upland Anatolia we find commonalities at the level of religious practice both within the region and spanning its borders, as well as local idiosyncrasies; no one cult can be elevated with any confidence to the status of an interpretative key. Boundaries between sacred and profane space are carefully guarded. Past acts of devotion are memorialised with a particular focus on the creation of tangible and enduring monuments. Religious actions are repeated according to sacred calendars. Local cults display an attentiveness to religious ethics driven more, it seems, by a concern to keep doing what has worked in the past than by fear. Diachronic factors emerge as of particular importance. Diverse conceptions of divine-human reciprocity are attested.

Extant attempts to expound Galatians in its pagan religious context inform our understanding but none of them adequately represents the range and balance of these influences or avoids distortion in consequence. Empire-critical exegeses of the Galatian crisis are examined, as are appeals to the ritual practice of the Cybele cult and to the Lydian-Phrygian confession stelae as possible backgrounds for the attraction of circumcision, but none provides a comprehensive survey of the kinds of powerful and enduring religious assumptions upon which Paul's warnings about regression in Galatians seem to hang.

### *Chapter 4: Paul and Returning to Paganism*

Chapter 4 turns once more to Paul himself – to the assumptions about pagan religion evident in his Jewish milieu, evident in his wider correspondence, and embedded in the argument of Galatians itself.



Paul, the first-century Jew, is interpreted first within the first-century Jewish debate about Gentiles and Gentile religion, identifying the principle danger of regression as idolatry – the endowment of human beings with roles and functions reserved to God. Paul’s analysis of Gentile converts using the language of “weakness” (associated with longstanding habituation to pagan religious assumptions) and “strength” in 1 Corinthians 8 (perhaps also in Romans 14–15) then leads us back into Galatians, where similar pastoral concerns are evident. A detailed exegesis of Paul’s regression language follows, centring on a rigorous reassessment of the enigmatic phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Gal 4.3 that takes into consideration every known instance of στοιχεῖα in the literature of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. In Galatians, I conclude that στοιχεῖα functions as a reference to the “fundamental components of religious behaviour” common to pagan and Jewish worship.

In dialogue with Richard Hays’ influential analysis of the narrative substructure of the letter, I conclude that “enslavement under the στοιχεῖα” in Galatians 4 is equivalent to “imprisonment under in the law” and “life under the curse” in Galatians 3, and that all three expressions have relevance to Jews *and* Gentiles.<sup>12</sup> Gentile perceptions of “works” are found to be just as important, if not more important, than Jewish perceptions in the crucial interpretative debate about “the works of the law” in Galatians 2 and 3, noting in particular the striking contrast between Jewish and Gentile knowledge in Gal 2.15–16: Jewish Christians (probably *all* Jews) “know that a person is justified not by the works of the law.” “Gentile sinner[s],” however, lack this knowledge and the protections afforded by it in their appropriation and practice of religious observances. Pagan, and not Jewish, presuppositions about the efficacy of works in divine-human interactions emerge as the foil against which the letter’s call to action is designed to make sense.

The chapter concludes with a brief excursus exploring vulnerability to the reanimation of entrenched pagan religious assumptions as a theme in the growth and spread of the church in the early centuries of the Christian era.

### *Chapter 5: Galatians in the Jewish Religious Context of Asia Minor*

In Chapter 5, our attention shifts to Jewish influences in Galatia and among the Galatians. Even if Paul believed his readers’ habitual religious expectations were inimical to his own in many ways and that they remained dangerously close to the surface of their experience, ready to re-emerge at any moment, why would he think *Jewish Christianity* particularly likely to trigger this re-emergence? And why would he conceive of this danger as somehow more acute than the equivalent danger associated with his own vision of Christian

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<sup>12</sup> Hays, 2002.

discipleship, which was itself associated with religious observances like baptism (Gal 3.27) and various ethical laws (5.13–6.10).

Following the pattern established in Chapter 3, Chapter 5 assesses these questions in the light of extant literary and epigraphic sources and the material culture of Asia Minor in the early Christian period. Lessons for Galatians are appropriated by tracing the interplay of actions and reactions within and between pagan and Jewish communities. Evidence of Jewish distinctiveness is related to evidence of pagan hostility, pagan hostility to Jewish engagement, Jewish engagement to pagan sympathisation, pagan sympathisation to Jewish integration, and Jewish integration to cases of pagan conversion. In each case, tensions and outlying examples fill out the complexities of the landscape.

Applying this material to Galatians, we explore the possibility that Paul's readers were former Godfearers and that Paul's regression vocabulary describes a return to Godfearing behaviour in their new Christian context or at least a movement in the general direction of a Godfearing past. In the former scenario, the incompatibility of the Influencers' call to circumcision and the Godfearing lifestyle – with its characteristic engagement in the Jewish community and its enthusiasm for socially-acceptable elements of Jewish piety without any sense of exclusive commitment – is particularly striking. In the latter, the focus of Paul's concern on his readers' regression to their former religious affiliations (Gal 4.8) forces the conclusion that, in his mind, law-observant Jewish Christianity was *equivalent to paganism*, directly contradicting the evidence of 2.6–10. Even if this difficulty could be resolved, it is far from clear that conversion would have yielded the benefits of “social normalisation” that have been claimed for it.

I conclude that Paul's concerns are best interpreted in conjunction with primary source data suggesting not only that Judaism in Asia Minor in the period was capable of accommodating and reimagining many of the trappings of pagan religious devotion to its own ends, but that pagans also reimagined Jewish traditions according to their own presuppositions. Through the practices used by Jewish Christians to articulate their new faith, Paul's readers were expressing the quintessential religious expectations of their old faith.

On the susceptibility of Paul's own gospel to similar accusations, the important question is not whether it *eliminated* the dangers associated with the Galatians' former pagan commitments, but whether it *minimised* them in comparison to other options. Noting the transition from warnings to ethics in the movement from Gal 3–4 to 5–6, and flagging avenues for further research, I suggest that Paul deliberately minimised exposure to observances with the potential to reawaken entrenched religious assumptions for *new converts*, and that he laid out a path of spiritual transformation for *established believers* designed to neutralise their influence in the longer term.

*Chapter 6: The Galatian Reception of the Influencers' Message*

In Chapter 6, responses to the regression problem tied less closely to specific facets of the underlying religious context take centre stage. Dialogue with Torah-observant portraits of Paul highlights the importance of the distinction between Jewish law as observed by Jewish Christians and Jewish Law as observed by Gentile Christians.<sup>13</sup> None of these portraits, however, provides a compelling explanation for the extent of the danger Paul associates with the latter while apparently embracing the former not only for others but also for himself. Dialogue with scholars treating Paul's regression language as a rhetorical ploy highlights the importance of both the similarities and the differences between the Influencers' concept of Jewish calendrical observances, food laws, and circumcision, and the equivalent concept in the minds of Paul's Galatian readers.<sup>14</sup> Dialogue with both groups facilitates the clarification of the proposal under development.

The danger of Jewish observances for Paul's readers lay neither in their fundamental inappropriateness for Gentiles nor in high-level *religious assumptions* about worth and reciprocity that the Influencers and the Galatians may or may not have held in common. The danger lay rather in their common dependence on *basic elements of religious practice* – the calendrical observances and vows and purifications and memorialisations of devotion that undergirded Jewish Christianity and every form of pagan devotion attested within the envelope of options observable in our region and period. In Paul's mind, the enduring strength of the association between these *στοιχεῖα* and the religious expectations they had encoded in the Galatians' pagan past left his readers profoundly vulnerable. Far though it may have been from the Influencers' intentions, Jewish Christian practice for Paul's Gentile converts threatened to reawaken the assumptions of their former religious lives, destroying their Christian faith from within.

Selections from Ignatius, Justin, and Origen augment this reconstruction of the Galatian crisis, highlighting continuing awareness of Jewish law as a threat to Gentile Christians (even when it was deemed appropriate for Jewish Christians) and the consequent potential for a return to the clutches of the former evil age. Origen, in particular, sees Paul's regression motif as a reference to the reanimation of pagan thoughtforms under the guise of Jewish practice, drawing on Galatians in his *Homilies on Exodus* to explain the Israelites' persistent inclination to return to Egypt.

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<sup>13</sup> Thiessen, 2016; Fredriksen, 2017; Wyschogrod, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> De Boer, 2011, 252–61; Martyn, 1997*a*, 393–400; Barclay, 1988, 63–4; Barclay, 2015, 329–446.

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