

SEON YONG KIM

# Curse Motifs in Galatians

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Seon Yong Kim

# Curse Motifs in Galatians

An Investigation into Paul's  
Rhetorical Strategies

Mohr Siebeck

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Seoul, September, 2020

Seon Yong Kim



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## List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Part 2, <i>Principat</i> . Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–
AnSt	<i>Anatolian Studies</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentary
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BDF	Blass, Friedrich, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961
BGU	<i>Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden</i> . 15 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1895–1937
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BWK	G. Petzl, <i>Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens. Epigraphica Anatolica</i> 22; Bonn: Habelt, 1994, 1–178
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CIG	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . Edited by August Boeckh. 4 vols. Berlin, 1828–1877
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> . Berlin, 1862–
DT	A. Audollent, <i>Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt</i>
DTA	R. Wünsch, ed., <i>Inscriptiones Atticae aetatis Romanae, defixionum tabellae, inscriptiones Graecae</i> III.3, Appendix
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion

HThKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEH	Lust, Johan, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996
<i>MAMA</i>	<i>Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua</i> . Manchester and London, 1928–1993
<i>MM</i>	Moulton, James H., and George Milligan. <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament</i> . Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997
<i>NIB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTL	New Testament Library
SEG	Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
<i>SIG</i>	<i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . Edited by Wilhelm Dittenberger. 4 vols. 3rd ed. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–1924
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
Smyth	H. W. Smyth, <i>Greek Grammar</i> . Revised by Gordon Messing. Harvard University Press, 1984
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
<i>TAM</i>	<i>Tituli Asiae Minoris</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by Ernst Jenni, with assistance from Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## Note on Translations and Citations

Classical texts (both translation and text) are cited from the Loeb Classical Library editions where available. For works not included in that series, such as inscriptions and papyri, I used existing translations. To these translations, I make some modification where necessary, for more literal rendering.

The translations from the New Testament (the Nestle-Aland 27<sup>th</sup> edition) and the LXX (Rahlfs) are mine.

Footnotes, citations, bibliography, and abbreviations are formatted according to *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2014).



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

“Teasing out the logic of Galatians continues to be surprisingly difficult.”<sup>1</sup> This is the confession of a competent Pauline scholar who has read and studied Galatians for decades, and I could not agree more. Why is grasping the logic of Paul’s argument in Galatians so challenging? Many factors may contribute to the difficulty in construing this letter of Paul, such as Paul’s extremely dense prose and poetic ellipses, some underlying logics that are not immediately clear to modern readers, and the presumptions and religious *mentalité* shared by Paul and his audience. In addition, centuries-old interpretations and theological debates and their legacy burden the exegete, making her or his reading laden with theological and abstract categories and conceptions that must have been foreign to Paul’s first audience in Galatia. In other words, the very character of the Pauline corpus as the *letters* (namely, letter as the voice of only one party in the conversational communication) – the analysis of which inevitably requires some kind of “mirror-reading” and circular reasoning – and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* already make any historical-critical approach to Paul a difficult prospect.

With these things in mind, after pondering over the difficulties in the exegesis of Galatians, I came to itemize four major factors and features in the text of Galatians itself that complicate my attempt (and, I believe, that of many others) to understand the letter. First, the predominance of the curse theme and the related issues, such as a series of polarities and antitheses, and some radical rereading of Scripture that distinguish Galatians from the rest of the *corpus Paulinum*, are some of the most puzzling features and stumbling blocks to unraveling Paul’s logic. Paul’s deployment and utilization of the curse motif in Galatians in relation to his talk of the Jewish law seems in many places strained and puzzling (especially with regard to the value judgment concerning the law, and the Sinai covenant, in Gal 3:10–14, 4:21–31), and is unique if compared with, among others, Romans, which is not occupied with any specific curse theme in relation to the discussion of the law.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John M. G. Barclay, “Paul, the Gift and the Battle over Gentile Circumcision: Revisiting the Logic of Galatians,” *Australian Biblical Review* 58 (2010): 36.

<sup>2</sup> Yet the formula of “God handed them over to ...” in Rom 1:24–28 could be construed in light of a curse motif. I will address this passage in due course. Other possible curse



Why did Paul see the curse motifs as appropriate for his combative argument facing the problem of gentile circumcision in Galatia? And why did Paul stick to the employment of the curse motif even in some places where his argument seems weak, unsupported by Scripture, and thus vulnerable to counterattack? What is the relationship among this pervasive curse theme, the so-called doctrine of justification by faith, faith of or in Christ, and his rejection of “works of the law”?<sup>3</sup>

Second, Paul’s repeated reversal of the plain sense<sup>4</sup> of Scripture sometimes makes it appear that Paul sometimes uses “Scripture against Scripture”<sup>5</sup> (for instance, his antithetical juxtaposition of LXX Deut 27:26, Hab 2:4, and Lev 18:5 in Gal 3:10–14, 4:21–31). How are we to understand Paul’s complex appropriation of Scripture, which sometimes upholds the literal meaning of the texts (e.g., Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:16) and other times recommends an inversion of the literal sense of the texts (e.g., his retelling of the story of Hagar and Sarah in 4:21–31), as well as some omissions and additions to the original Scripture? And how could Paul’s radical reversal of the traditional, or plain, reading of Scripture expect to work out and affect the Galatian audience as he intended? Did Paul not perceive the apparent vulnerability of his subversive reading? Does his radical reading have something to do with his heavy employment of the curse theme? Can we understand Paul’s mode of appropriation of Scripture in light of the Greco-Roman (including the Jewish) literary customs and conventions? And how can our understanding of Paul’s engagement with Scripture affect our appreciation of Paul’s relationship with Judaism?

Third, although this point is largely ignored by commentators, Gal 5:4 poses a particularly serious challenge, because it not only posits an antithesis between “works of the law” and faith or grace but also speaks of a dire consequence for any attempt to be justified in the law: namely, being cut off from Christ and falling from grace. In other words, Gal 5:4 essentially declares that the Galatian believers *must not* receive circumcision; otherwise,

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motifs in Paul’s letters may occur in 1 Cor 5:5, 16:22, and Rom 9:3. But none of the letters employs the curse motif as heavily as in Galatians.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, to narrow down the meaning of each term – *justification, faith, works of the law, etc.* – requires a highly complex and lengthy discussion in terms of semantic, linguistic, cultural, and religious meanings and implications for a proper understanding. Here, I simply adopt a popular phrase (“the doctrine of justification”) and translation (justification, faith in Christ, works of the law, etc.) for convenience’s sake.

<sup>4</sup> What I mean by “plain sense” is based on John Barton’s reasonable and flexible definition in his book *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 101–16. We will discuss various mode of ancient reading of written documents, such as allegorical, typological, literal reading, and early Jewish interpretation, in due course.

<sup>5</sup> I owe this phrase to Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” *NIB* 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 257.

they will be cut off from Christ – a cancellation of “union with Christ.”<sup>6</sup> It is true that many exegetes try to answer, and partially achieve success in answering, the question of why Paul insists that the gentile convert *need not* be circumcised. Yet their answers do not adequately address the question of why Paul in Galatians claims that the gentile converts *must not* get circumcised. One cannot simply leap from “need not” to “must not” without some substantive justifications and explanations. This huge gap between “need not” and “must not” has been neither recognized nor properly addressed as the subject of serious investigation. For instance, in his acclaimed book *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, Richard Hays comments on the gist of Paul’s argument in Galatians as follows: “Paul is contending that Gentile believers in Jesus need not – indeed, must not – become Torah observers.”<sup>7</sup> In a very similar manner, Paula Fredriksen asserts, “This is the context – Paul’s unwavering apocalyptic conviction – within which we should set his equally unwavering insistence that gentiles-in-Christ need not, indeed *must not*, be circumcised.”<sup>8</sup> This unexamined, slippery movement from “need not” to “must not” in scholarly treatments turns out to be very problematic for a precise probe of the logic of Galatians.

Fourth, several significant and popular topics in Jewish writings (especially with regard to their view of gentiles and of law observance), such as atonement and purity concerns, are virtually absent in Galatians.<sup>9</sup> This silence seems to me quite strange, especially given that Galatians deals with some “faults” or “errors” of the Galatian converts and Paul’s so-called opponents,<sup>10</sup> which could be directly related to divine punishment (2:14; 5:4, 10, 21). Why

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<sup>6</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 550: “This is the clearest indication in Paul’s letters that it is possible for a Christian to be excluded from the body of Christ.” Cf. Paul’s more moderate stance in 1 Cor 5:1–4.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 105.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content; or, Retrospect Is the Mother of Anachronism,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 50.

<sup>9</sup> E. P. Sanders insists that Paul imbues somewhat new and fresh content – the meaning of transformation and transference – into the language of righteousness and its cognate, and he notes some implications of purity in that language: “In the two usages outside of Galatians and Romans – 1 Cor. 4.4 and 6.11 – the passive verb ‘to be justified’ or ‘righteoused’ means ‘to be held innocent’ (4.4) or ‘to be cleansed’ (6.11). These two passages may refer to an aspect of transformation, but in the immediate context they are not parallel to being ‘one person in Christ Jesus’ and the like. Even in Romans, the passive form of *dikaion* does not always mean ‘be transformed’: e.g. Rom. 2.13.” “Covenantal Nomism Revisited,” *JSQ* (2009): 52–53 n.58. In Galatians, the language of purity is virtually muted.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, I use the term *opponent* to refer to the missionaries who “agitate” the Galatian assemblies for convenience’s sake, although I know that the term *opponent* is not neutral and is only reflecting Paul’s point of view.

did Paul underscore the faults of gentile circumcision and thoroughly employ the curse motifs in relation to the law – the curse of the law – but not mention the availability of the atonement system (either through the Christ-event or through the Jewish law)?<sup>11</sup> According to a prominent New Perspective on Paul scholar, the “wrong understanding of the law” and “the too narrow understanding of covenant”<sup>12</sup> by Jews, including Jewish Christ-followers like Paul’s opponents in Galatia, are the main faults that Paul finds unacceptable in light of the Christ-event. Yet, as R. Barry Matlock perceptively points out, “it is not entirely clear why *this* sin cannot be covered in the usual way, by repentance and atonement.”<sup>13</sup>

I contend that some chronic and pervasive problems of the current scholarship lie beneath all these four particular exegetical conundrums – unexamined employment of theological and abstract concepts, categories, polarities, and language, such as “divine and human agency” and the dichotomy between conditionality and unconditionality, in construing Paul’s words. Particularly problematic in current scholarship is an undue emphasis on the cognitive and abstract aspects of the “faults” and “errors” of the agenda and the praxis of Paul’s opponents in Galatia, such as “misunderstanding of the role of the law,” and “wrong (ethnocentric) attitude regarding Gentile believers.”<sup>14</sup> A representative example of this line of explanation regarding “what was wrong with works of the law in Paul’s view” is that of James D. G. Dunn. When he comments on Gal 3:10–14, Dunn insists that “to thus *misunderstand* the law by giving primacy to matters of at best secondary importance was to fall short of what the law required and thus to fall under the law’s own curse.”<sup>15</sup> The curse of the law is “the curse of a *wrong understanding* of the law.”<sup>16</sup> In his comments on Gal 4:21–31, Dunn continues to claim that “to limit participa-

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<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge, there has been no exegete who raises this question, except R. Barry Matlock (for his study, see n.13 below). I have had the same question since my reading of Sanders’s two major books on Paul (particularly his emphasis on the availability of the atonement system in Judaism).

<sup>12</sup> These two phrases in the quotation marks are those of James Dunn’s. For my critique of Dunn’s reading, see below, and chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> R. Barry Matlock, “Helping Paul’s Argument Work? The Curse of Galatians 3.10–14,” in *Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at the Manchester–Lausanne Seminar of June 2008*, ed. M. Tait and P. Oakes, LNTS 401 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 164.

<sup>14</sup> For a succinct critique of these features of the “New Perspective on Paul,” see R. Barry Matlock response to Dunn’s *Theology of the Apostle Paul* (R. B. Matlock, “Sins of the Flesh and Suspicious Minds: Dunn’s New Theology of Paul,” *JSNT* 72 [1998]: 67–90) and his other sharp essay (Matlock, “Helping Paul’s Argument Work? The Curse of Galatians 3.10–14,” 163–65). For a more extended discussion on this matter, see chapter 1 of the present study.

<sup>15</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Works of the Law and the Curse of the Law,” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 135. My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 137. Italics mine.

tion in the promise to a relationship *κατὰ σάρκα* is to *misunderstand* the promise.”<sup>17</sup> Given this, Wayne Meeks’s critique of a certain trend in historical-critical scholarship decades ago is unfortunately still pertinent:

Those who do continue to regard themselves as historical critics fill the learned journals with articles that depict a strange world, one that seems composed exclusively of theological ideas or compact mythic complexities or purely individual “self-understandings.”<sup>18</sup>

As we will see below, some of the most scrupulous and obsessive religious artifacts in antiquity in relation to transgressions – namely, the Lydian-Phrygian confession inscriptions – do not overly concern the “transgression” of *misunderstanding*. This calls for reexamination of our reading of Paul’s letter within its religious and cultural background. In other words, it is imperative for the students of Paul’s letters to seriously self-scrutinize whether they impose some modern categories or concepts into their exposition of Paul’s texts.

Upon further investigation, not only did I realize that these four particular problems are insufficiently studied in the previous scholarship, but also I came to realize that all four of these “problems” are more or less interrelated, coming under a heading of what could be called the curse motif. Although, of course, there may be no universal key to unpack and resolve all these interpretive difficulties, I nevertheless became convinced that we will be better at construing Galatians (a) if we pay closer attention to the specific rhetorical situation that Paul is facing, and to the means of persuasion available to Paul, who was significantly disadvantaged compared to the absolutely superior position of his opponents – namely, their physical presence among the Galatians – and (b) if we focus on the religiosity and cultural assumptions of his Galatian audience, since it is upon these bases that Paul designed his argumentation to affect his first addressees.

The thesis of the present study is that Paul’s complex argumentation for dissuading the Galatians from the demand to circumcise can be better understood in light of ancient rhetorical strategies (both Jewish and pagan) that were commonly employed in *agonistic* discourse;<sup>19</sup> that is, his contention was

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<sup>17</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The Theology of Galatians,” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 182, emphasis mine. Although Dunn regrets that the phrase “the curse of a wrong understanding of the law” is one of his “less happy phrases,” his basic tenet virtually remains unchanged. See his latest comment on the issue: “Jewish ‘attitude’ to Gentile ‘sinners’ was a make or break issue for the gospel, the gospel of justification by faith” (“The New Perspective: Whence, What and Whither?” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, 31). His italics.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>19</sup> This means that I focus on the process of rhetorical invention/discovery of argument (*inventio*) rather than arrangement (*τάξις*) in this study.

“tailored” and “contextualized” to become a shot aimed at agitating<sup>20</sup> the πᾶθος of his audience, such as their fear of curses and their (former) religious formalism, so as to wrest their minds from the grip of his opponents, who enjoyed by far the better argumentative position (for instance, they could have dismantled Paul’s scriptural interpretation in detail, repeatedly, before the Galatians).<sup>21</sup> Paul’s main aim was not to battle with his opponents in Galatia regarding the significance of gentile circumcision after the coming of Christ, mainly in scriptural terms. However excellent and cogent Paul’s reading of Scripture might be, Paul was well aware of the fact that it was vulnerable from the outset, exactly because of his physical absence and the opponents’ presence in Galatia.<sup>22</sup>

Given these vulnerabilities and disadvantages, the best available means of persuasion that Paul had was not an offer of a comprehensive and detailed interpretation of Scripture but an appeal to fears. An appeal to emotions and feelings of the audience was commonly considered one of the most powerful tools.<sup>23</sup> In other words, *the main target of Paul’s argumentation in Galatians was the Galatian converts*, not his opponents. His heavy employment of the curse theme, his complex appropriation of Scripture, his silence on the Jewish atonement system, and his thoroughly negative caricature of his opponents – all these are the products and constructions of Paul’s rhetorical strategies to affect the decision of the Galatians-in-Christ. It will be shown that all of these interpretive features can be properly understood and explained in light of ancient rhetorical customs, such as the ability to argue for either side, adaptabil-

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<sup>20</sup> The title “agitators” has been often adopted by the interpreters of Galatians referring to Paul’s opponents in Galatia with some negative nuance. In reality, from the neutral point of view, *both* Paul and his opponents agitated the mind of the Galatian audience by their arguments. In antiquity, the two parties in agonistic discursive situation normally possessed similar argumentative weapons that were taught and cultivated in their paideia and broader cultural milieu. For this point, see below.

<sup>21</sup> So correctly John M. G. Barclay: “one also suspects that the agitators, who had all the advantages of personal presence in Galatia, would have had little difficulty in countering most of Paul’s points.” *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 95.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Cicero’s worry about the misrepresentation of his view due to his absence: “Of the political situation I shall say little. I am terrified by now for fear the very paper may betray us. So henceforward, if I have occasion to write to you at any length, I shall obscure my meaning with allegories”; *De re <publica> breviter ad te scribam; iam enim charta ipsa ne nos prodat pertimesco. itaque posthac, si erunt mihi plura ad te scribenda, ἀλληγορίας obscurabo. Letter to Atticus, 2.20.3* (Shackleton Bailey, LCL).

<sup>23</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2.6 (Russell, LCL): “a judge who is overcome by his emotions gives up any idea of inquiring into truth; he is swept along by the tide, as it were, and yields to the swift current”; *omnem veritatis inquirendae rationem iudex omittit occupatus adfectibus: aestu fertur et velut rapido flumini obsequitur*. An appeal to feeling is “the most powerful means to securing our aims”; *ad optinenda quae volumus potentissimum* (Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2.2).

ity in appropriating contested word meanings in written documents (e.g., literal versus allegorical), and affecting the *πάθος* of the audience.

I will also demonstrate that the curse motif is not only a powerful tool for Paul to dissuade the Galatian circumcision but also a window through which we can glimpse Paul's understanding of the nature of the gospel: his presentation of the characteristic of the gospel is formulated to highlight the *normative* feature of the Christ-event, so as to insist that any violation of or deviation from its basic norm, or rule – *κανών* (Gal 6:16) – should bring about some divine judgment. Let me unpack each point in a moderate detail here. A fuller demonstration of each point will be the focus of the following chapters.

First, Paul's extensive appropriation of the curse theme is a distinctive feature of Galatians, and this requires explanation. If, as E. P. Sanders insists, it is correct that Paul's statements on the law vary in correspondence to different situations ("different questions, different answers"),<sup>24</sup> a pressing question arises: Why does Paul heavily employ the theme of curse in Galatians? Put another way, what rhetorical situation makes Paul appeal to the curse motif so extensively? Why does Paul *not* use the argument based on the curse motif in Romans, where a similar problem of the relationship between the law and faith is at stake? What is the exact relationship between gentile circumcision, the gospel, and curse logic according to Paul's argument?

An easy answer to the first two questions might look like this: because his opponents in Galatia first introduced the curse theme into their propaganda for gentile circumcision. This suggestion, however, cannot stand when we take into consideration the following two points: (a) it is Paul himself who heavily utilizes the curse motifs in various ways (in other words, there is no necessary reason for Paul to appropriate the curse motifs in such a *thorough* manner, even if his adversaries already appealed to them in their persuasive efforts); (b) Paul does not indicate or imply that the agenda of his opponents has anything to do with curse-threatening. If Paul's opponents in Galatia argued that the Galatians' *uncircumcision* must invoke a curse or divine punishment (probably based on Gen 17 and Deut 27:26), Paul presumably would have simply responded that this was not the case. Yet Paul did not do that. Rather, Paul's point is that getting circumcision *should bring about* an accursed status: believers' dislocation from Christ and fall from grace (Gal 5:4). It is thus more likely that Paul is the one who introduced and elaborated the curse theme in Galatians. How, then, can we make sense of Paul's radical insistence on the close relationship between gentile circumcision and curse? And why did Paul see fit to introduce and employ the curse theme while addressing the matter in Galatians? If it is correct that Paul introduces the curse theme in such an extensive manner, he must have a good reason for doing

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<sup>24</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 3.

that: it is in effect a tool to dissuade the Galatians from circumcision. The present study seeks to substantiate this proposal.

Second, how is Paul's view of the Jewish law and his reading of Scripture related to the curse theme in this letter? In pursuit of the answer, I take the following remark of Hans Dieter Betz to be seminal for the present study:

The letter to the Galatians is more than the carrier of an apologetic argument, but in addition it assumes the power of a magical letter. The combination of curse and blessing also places the entire document in the context of "sacred law." In a manner analogous to that of other religious and quasi-religious communities, Paul treats the Galatian churches as religious societies, which have their own constitutive law and which sanction them by curse and blessing. Hereby, he places the entire content of the letter at the high level of "sacred law." Thus, obedience becomes a matter of life or death. Furthermore, the employment of curse and blessing presupposes a situation of legal conflict. In this conflict the letter provides the opportunity for the final and non-negotiable decision (see on the concept of *κάνών* ["rule"] in 6:16). This phenomenon is known from the traditions of "sacred law" in the ancient Near East, the Old Testament, Judaism, Greek religions, Roman religions, and primitive Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Betz's construal contains many fresh and valuable insights but was unfortunately never substantiated enough for generating some new perspective on the issue. Among his fine observations, Betz's notes on the presence of the magical element<sup>26</sup> in the letter and on the characteristic of the letter as a "sacred law" have weighty merits that deserve more thorough exploration. My contention is that Paul tactfully and sometimes tacitly draws on the various aspects of the ancient practices of magic and curse in order to render his overall argument persuasive and binding, by appealing to a religiosity widely shared among the Galatians – such as a fear of curses, the formulaic nature of Ro-

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<sup>25</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 50–51. On the notion of "sacred law" in the New Testament in general, see Ernst Käsemann, "Sätze Heiligen Rechtes im Neuen Testament," *NTS* 1.4 (1955): 248–60. For a recent critique of the category "sacred law," see R. Parker, "What Are Sacred Laws?" in *The Laws and the Courts in Ancient Greece*, ed. E. M. Harris and L. Rubinstein (London: Duckworth, 2004), 57–70. See also Eran Lupu's critique of the academic category of "sacred law": "the corpus of Greek sacred laws is, in fact, much more diverse, and the term sacred law itself, as it is used inclusively in this corpus, transcends common epigraphical genres, being, to an extent, an artificial modern construct, albeit drawing upon ancient precedents. The corpus contains a diverse assortment of laws, decrees, statutes, regulations, proclamations, treaties, contracts, leases, testaments, foundation documents, and oracles. These may be issued by federations, states, civic subdivisions and magistrates, royalty, sanctuaries, religious organizations, or private individuals." Lupu, *Greek Sacred Law: A Collection of New Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 4. However, I decide to use the term "sacred law" by putting emphasis on its characteristic of inviolability.

<sup>26</sup> Yet I do not think that Galatians is a kind of magical letter, as Betz sees it. Rather, it is more proper to say that one of the intended functions of Galatians is a carrier of a written curse.

man religion, and widespread abhorrence of magicians. I will also argue that in so doing Paul particularly appeals to the fundamentally *normative* nature of the Christ-event: it calls for obedience and for the consistency of the principle of *from faith* on the part of the believers *from beginning* (“getting in” in Sanders’s term) *to end* (“staying in”), just like “sacred laws.”<sup>27</sup> Anything that deviates from this “from faith” principle would be hit by curse and punishment.

The normative nature of the gospel is also to be seen in its being sealed with a curse (Gal 1:8–9; cf. 5:21) for protecting its integrity and completeness as a kind of “sacred law,” whereby any nonconformity to the gospel of faith and any attempt to add, omit, or change the gospel should result in the accursed status. I maintain that Paul’s employment of the curse motifs was an inevitable rhetorical move and yet an ingenious strategic choice, since it is one of the most effective means available to him, given that his opponents in Galatia enjoyed significant advantages over him in terms of persuasion: they had already persuaded significant numbers of the Galatians to be circumcised, and in the presence of the Galatian believers they could dispute, dismantle, and even distort Paul’s scriptural argument and his construals of the implications of the Christ-event. Thus, it is important to note that Paul’s language of curse is not a mere tool or threatening *gesture*; rather, it possesses a strong persuasive force that directly touches the nerve of the Greco-Roman and Jewish religiosity and *πάθος* of the audience.

Paul intentionally highlights the unusual theme of “curse of the law” as an avenue for dissuading the Galatians from circumcision. In other words, in formulating his argumentation Paul makes every effort to associate works of the law, including circumcision, with the notion of curse – for instance, see his description of the Christ-event as a de-cursing process (Gal 3:13–14), his summary of the pre-evangelized life of the Galatians as “slavery” under evil forces, his tortured interplay with Deut 27:26 LXX in Gal 3:10 (an argument against Scripture, which is itself based on Scripture), his portrait of his opponents as practitioners of the evil eye (3:1), and his solemn warning against circumcision in 5:2–5 with implicit reference to the *kārēt* (כרת) penalty (“being cut off from the covenant people”). This must have been a very strange theological move in the eyes of Jewish people at the time. Paul’s complex view of the law has strong situational characteristics. His main target was the Galatians-in-Christ, and he was not so concerned about presenting a correct, objective, and comprehensive “view of the law,” which would and should

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<sup>27</sup> For a similar expression with somewhat different meaning, see Dunn, “The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism,” in *Thessalonians, Philipppians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. Jouette Bassler, vol. 1 of *Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 125: “the outworking of God’s saving power will be consistent with its initial decisive expression.”



sound acceptable even to the ears of “non-Christianized” Jews and Jewish believers. Put another way, Paul employs the curse theme and highlights the notion of the normative nature of the gospel in order to maintain the proposition that the Galatians *must not* get circumcised.

Paul did not want to lose his Galatians followers. This is the real reason for his writing the letter, and this is the social reality underlying Paul’s argument for “must not.” For Paul, to say “one must not do ‘works of the law’” is not enough. He goes further, asserting, “if one attempts to be justified in the Law, s/he is cut off from Christ, and falls from grace” (Gal 5:4), which amounts to the cancellation of “salvation” or “union with Christ.” According to Paul’s report of the Antioch incident, Cephas was immediately under condemnation (by God) when he withdrew from the table fellowship with gentile believers. In his exhortation, Paul solemnly warns that those who do “works of the flesh” (5:19) will not inherit the kingdom of God (5:21).

The question of the underlying logic or assumptions in this line of Paul’s argument based on curse and threat has not been addressed adequately in previous scholarship. I hope the reading offered in the present study will shed new light on this important problem. The following dictum of E. P. Sanders is to be kept in the mind of any interpreter of Paul: “Historians have to look for cultural assumptions.”<sup>28</sup> An assumption is seldom voiced because it is obvious to the ones who hold it. It is presupposed. Despite the fact that any investigation of some cultural assumption is more or less a circular endeavor, the task of the historian is to reconstruct plausible assumptions and context that are documented or evidenced elsewhere and then to test whether these reconstructed cultural assumptions and contexts have some explanatory power to illuminate our texts.

The backbone of the present study is a demonstration of the following ten correlated points, all of which converge in our thesis that in Galatians Paul appeals to some specific cultural and religious assumptions held by his audience, especially the religious formalism and fear of curse, so as to dissuade them from being circumcised:

- (1) Paul presents his gospel as an *inviolable norm* and divinely issued commandment, any slight breach of which must result in some divine punishment, or even in the worst case, the accursed status (so, Gal 1:8–9; 5:4, 21; cf. 2:14).
- (2) In Galatians, the Christ-event is described particularly as a way to receive redemption from the curse of the law and the present evil age (or Aion as a deity), and this implies that Paul’s picture of the world (presented to the Galatian audience) is divided into the two realms: cursed zone and safety zone: no middle or “gray” area between! This provides the rhetorical rationale for urging Christ-believers to “stick to and stay in the safety zone”

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<sup>28</sup> E. P. Sanders, “Covenantal Nomism Revisited,” *JSQ* 16 (2009): 30.

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