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Paul and identity construction in early Christianity and the Roman Empire

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Author:
F. Manjewa Mbwangi[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pwani University, Kilifi, Kenya

[2]Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Fednand M'bwangi,
manjewarev@gmail.com

The question of what subjects Paul addresses in his letters has been a matter of debate in New Testament scholarship. This debate shows the evolution of Pauline studies, whereby early scholars argued that Paul addressed topics ranging from questions of human existence, to relations between Jews and Gentiles, and even topics connecting Paul with the Roman Empire. Most of these scholars view Paul mainly from a religious perspective, particularly in terms of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. However, viewing Paul from a Jewish versus a Christian religious perspective only fails to present the multivalent function of the Pauline corpus. This article employs social identity theory to read Galatians 3:1–10 in order to defend the argument that Paul employs his letters to construct a superordinate identity for his community which embraces not only political perspectives but also has religious and economic trajectories.

Contribution: The application of identification, contest and comparison, concepts derived from sociology, to analyze Galatians 3:1-10 in reference to 1st century economic, religious and political contexts to explain the multivalent nature of early Christian identity, contributes to multidisciplinary research aspects of Biblical studies which is in tandem with the scope of *HTS Theological Journal*.

Keywords: social identity theory; Roman Empire; economic identity; religious identity; political identity; assimilation; culture.

Introduction

The importance of the discussion concerning the function of Paul's letters in constructing the identity of his community during the emergence of Christianity in the 1st century CE is grounded in the notion that Paul's letters are mostly read in churches today, just as has been the case during the expansion of Christianity from the Middle East to other parts of the world. That means that Paul's letters have not only been instrumental in shaping the identity of Christians in the 1st century, but over the years they have also influenced the emergence of new forms of Christianity in the name of revival or reformation. For instance, during the 16th century CE Reformation, Paul's concept of justification by faith in Romans 1:17 'warmed' Martin Luther's heart sufficiently to call for a freedom of worship which later ignited the emergence of the Reformation that gave birth to Protestant denominations.

Furthermore, Protestant ideology has continued to effect socioeconomic policies in Europe, Britain and other parts of the world. Consequently, this study will broadly consider debates on the main concern of Paul's letters before we focus on Paul's Letter to the Galatians to illustrate the argument proposed for this article.

Dunn (1992), focusing on the religious aspect, regards the letters of Paul as revealing a multi-layered narrative theology that grapples with the 'supreme questions of the reality and human existence'. This is especially exemplified in Paul's letter to the Romans (Dunn 1992:17–18, 25). Similarly focusing on the religious aspects of Paul, Talbert claims that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to address a conflict caused by differences between the returning Jews exiled by Claudius and Gentiles in the city of Rome regarding their contrasting outlooks on Mosaic Law in the Jesus Movement. Talbert claims that Paul wrote the Romans to call for unity by addressing the conflict caused by the difference in attitudes towards Mosaic Law by the Gentile-Christians and Jewish-Christians in Rome.[1] In line with Talbert's suggestion, Adeyemo contends that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans to 'address problems in the church in Rome, including reconciling Jewish and Gentile believers and exhorting them to unity' (Adeyemo 2005:1347). Although Dunn, Talbert and Adeyemo aptly observe the religious function of Paul's letters, they seem not to have noticed Paul's concerns for the Roman Empire. A noticeable shift in Pauline studies is related to Paul's concerns regarding the Roman Empire, rather than only in terms of Gentile–Jewish–Christian relations in Rome. This shift is represented by Horsley

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1. These Jews returning from exile at the time of Nero had been expelled in 49 CE by Emperor Claudius for causing disturbances in the public order in Rome. According to Talbert, while the returning Jewish Christians preferred to keep some aspects of the Mosaic Law as part of their Christian faith, the Gentile Christians in Rome had developed some antipathy towards the Mosaic Law, seeing it as unnecessary for their Christian identity (Talbert 2002:6–8).

(1997, 2002, 2016) and Porter (2011:192–193). Their outlook contributes to the modern trend of connecting Paul with the Roman Empire. Grounding his argument on Paul's letter to the Romans and First and Second Corinthians, Porter argues that Paul replaces the reign of Caesar with that of Jesus. In First and Second Corinthians, Paul replaces the Roman hierarchy of obedience based on privilege with structures inaugurated by the instigation of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God.[2] Although the shift noted here by Porter has the advantage of collectively presenting Paul's concern for amicable relations between Gentile and Jewish Christians and his concern for the place of Rome, the separation of Paul's interest in Judaism has the disadvantage of evading the multivalent function of the Pauline corpus and the trajectories of relationships that Paul was addressing in his letters.

So, the avoidance noted here prompts the question: how can we envision the function of Paul's letters, particularly as represented in his letters to the Galatians 3:1–10, in constructing a multivalent identity for his community? The limit of the choice to Galatians 3:1–10 is based on the fact that this section of Paul's letter contains elements that are instrumental in identity formation of the pagan, Jewish and Christian beliefs and also offers a glimpse into Paul's response to the Roman Empire. Thus, in this article, I argue that Paul employs his letters to construct a superordinate identity for his community which embraces not only political perspectives but also has a religious and economic trajectory. With regard to methodology, the study employs mainly a qualitative research method whereby document analysis research design is employed to analyse selected documents of the 1st century CE ethnographic data reflected in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Tacitus's *Annals* and *Agricola*. Additionally, discourse analysis and a social scientific criticism in the name of 'social identity theory' is used to read the text of Galatians 3:1–10. Consequently, the point of departure for this article compels an outline of the social identity theory, semantic analysis of Galatians 3:1–10, and critical observation of identity construction before a conclusion is drawn.

Social identity political theory

Identity as the main concept for this study refers to the question of who we are, as informed by norms, values and traditions that motivate the way we live and express how we understand ourselves, our relationship to God, our community, and others (Kok 2011:1; Nicklas & Herbert Schlögel 2012:2; Van der Watt 2006:vi–vii).

In this article identity construction is explored through a Social Identity Political Theory (SIPT) derived from the work of Ann Faulkner, Aaron Kuecker, Philip Esler and Coleman

A. Baker. Although these scholars employ concepts such as superordinate identity, recategorisation, comparison, and identification, I limit my usage to comparison, identification and superordinate identity,[3] which I supplement with the concept of assimilation. The precondition for identification is the existence of two or more individuals who conceive themselves as members of a group (Faulkner 2005:3–4). Belonging to a group is driven by two factors, namely a desire: (1) to maintain self-esteem and (2) to have their life guided by group norms. In some cases, identification, such as in ethnic groupings, presents rigid boundaries of identity, unlike that belonging to, for example, a football club (Faulkner 2005:2–3; Kuecker 2016:70–71).

'Comparison' and superordinate identity are like two sides of a coin. On the one hand, 'comparison' refers to the maintenance of one's awareness of who one is through a process of observing similarities and differences, by means of which groups favourably differentiate themselves. Because comparison is applied positively as a mode of expression of in-group self-love rather than out-group hatred, comparison generally aims to maintain the positive social identity of a group. For example, economic status, purity codes or language may be used to refer to one group in comparison to a higher status group in order to boost the in-group's identity against an out-group (Kuecker 2016:71–72). On the other hand, to address the negative effects of vilification and stereotyping that tend to perpetuate intergroup hostility and antagonism, recategorisation into a superordinate category is necessary. A superordinate category refers to the redrawing of group boundaries in order to bring into one group members of an in-group and an out-group, without collapsing their distinctiveness, but in a manner that acknowledges their commonality (Baker 2011:108–108). To envision how comparison, identification and superordinate identity elucidate the multivalent function of Paul's Letter to the Galatians in identity construction, a semantic analysis of Galatians 3:1–10 is crucial before employing Paul's rhetoric embedded in this letter to explore the identity construction he envisions for his community in the light of power and identity formation in the Roman Empire.

Semantic analysis of Galatians: 3:1–10
Galatians 3:1: Public crucifixion of Jesus

The passage opens in verse 1 with a rebuttal expressed in a form of a question: 'Oh, ignorant Galileans ἐβάσκανεν ὑμᾶς (who bewitched you)?' Paul's rebuttal is grounded in the

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significance of the crucifixion of Jesus, denoted by the question οἷς κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος [before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly crucified?]. This seems to have some significance in Paul's rebuttal because this section of verse 1 stands as a coordinating clause. Note that in this verse the KJV Bible translates προεγράφη as 'evidently set forth' thereby de-emphasizing the 'public' emphasis of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In this opening section, ἐσταυρωμένος, as a perfect participle passive denoting a complete action that has continuing results (Mounce 1993:274), has the force of a predicate and is used to underscore the significance of the public crucifixion of Jesus as Paul's main reason for the rebuttal of the Galatians. Thus, it is important to find out why Paul sees the crucifixion of Jesus as being so important to the life of the Galatians.

If verse 1 marks the opening of Paul's argument in this passage by emphasising the importance of the public crucifixion of Jesus as the grounds for his rebuttal on the Galileans, verses 2 to 9 mark a two-fold middle of his argument that can thematically be broken into two: (1) the tripartite nature of Law, Faith and Spirit (verses 2–5), and (2) the example of Abraham (verses 6–9).

Galatians 3:2–5: Law, Faith and Spirit

Paul introduces the first middle part of his argument that brings Law, Faith and Spirit together by a rhetorical question in verse 2: 'This one thing I wish to know from you; did you receive the Spirit from works of the Law or from hearing by (from) Faith?' Here, πίστεως is a genitive of source, stressing cause or the origin (Wallace 2000:56) of ἀκοῆς [hearing], to underscore the importance of receiving the Spirit by 'hearing from Faith' as opposed to receiving the spirit by 'the works of the Law'. In spite of having stated this position, I do not think at this point that Paul expects the Galatians to respond to him. Rather, he seems to use this dialectical question approach to prepare the Galatians to receive his exposition on the place of the Law, Faith and Spirit in his community (the Galatians). In other words, Paul probably wants to use this dialectical question approach as a preparatory stage for his discussion that follows in verses 3 to 5.

Having pointed out the importance of ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως [hearing from Faith] as a most appropriate means of receiving the Spirit, in the same manner as the dialectical question approach, Paul refers again to the ignorance of the Galatians (verse 3a) in order to emphasise the current status of the Galatians, which also points out the problem he is addressing. In this case, ἐστε, a verb in the indicative present active second person plural, derived from εἰμί, denoting *be*, that is, relating to what exists (Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*), points to the current status of the Galatians. What is this status? The status is embodied in verse 3b: ἐπιτελεῖσθε νῦν σαρκὶ ['now you are finishing in the flesh ...']. In this case, ἐπιτελεῖσθε (a verb in the indicative present middle or passive second person plural, derived from ἐπιτελέω, meaning end, finish) and ἐναρξάμενοι (a verb participle aorist middle nominative masculine plural, derived from ἐνάρχομαι, meaning begin, commence, make

a beginning), correspondingly coupled with σαρκι [in flesh] and πνεύματι [in spirit], presents the present and the previous status of the Galatians, respectively. Thus, νῦν (an adverb meaning time, now) coupled with σαρκι collectively modifies ἐπιτελεῖσθε to reveal the current, the now status of the Galatians, namely, living a life guided by the desires of the flesh and in opposition to the promptings of the Spirit. Consequently, σαρκὶ, a dative of sphere (Wallace 2000:72), refers to a life lived in the realm of the earthly sphere of existence: human or mortal nature, earthly descent, blood relation (Rom 4:1), ethnic group, or race (Rom 11:14). Paul contrasts this type of life with life in the Spirit (Gal 5:16–17).

In verse 4, compared to the previous verses, Paul seems to soften his tone. After outlining the current status of the Galatians as a life lived in flesh rather than in the spirit, in verse 4 Τοσαῦτα (pronoun demonstrative accusative neuter plural, meaning so great, so much) is coupled with two adverbs εἰκῆ [without cause, in vain, for nothing] and καὶ (even, also) to collectively modify ἐπάθετε [verb indicative aorist active second person plural from πάσχω, endure, suffer] in order to compliment the Galatians for accepting suffering in the previous life which ἐναρξάμενοι πνεύματι [they had begun to live in the Spirit]. In verse 5, οὖν (a conjunction coordinating functioning inferentially, meaning therefore, so, consequentially) introduces a logical result or inference from the compliments stated in verse 4. Consequently, in a dialectical-rhetorical question, Paul cautions the Galatians to consider how God supplies the Spirit and works miracles among them ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως ('by hearing from/faith) not ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ['from the works of Law']. Note again, as in verse 2, in this case πίστεως, a genitive of source (Wallace 2000:56) which modifies ἀκοῆς, meaning to indicate a hearing whose source is Faith (hearing of/by Faith) instead of the works of the Law, as that embodies the reason why God supplies the Spirit to them and works miracles among them.

Given the above brief observations, we can postulate that in Galatians 3:1–5, Paul rebukes the Galatians who, after witnessing the public crucifixion of Jesus and having received the spirit by hearing of Faith and the reason for which God supplied the Spirit and works miracles in their midst, nonetheless reverted to their former life lived in the promptings of the flesh rather than the Spirit. In these first five verses of Galatians 3, Paul points out the failure of the Galatian believers in Jesus Christ. In what follows, Paul implores the Galatians to follow the example of Abraham.

Galatians 3:6–9: The example of Abraham

The example of Abraham is signalled in verse 5 by καθὼς, a conjunction subordinating, representing a comparative and often translated 'just as', for instance, in Luke 11:30 to cite Jonah as a sign to Nineveh representing an example of Jesus Christ, Son of Man. How does Abraham rhetorically function in Galatians 3:6–9 in providing an example to the Galatians? In this section of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, Abraham embodies a prototype of a faithful and unwavering obedient person to God in three ways:

- First, as an example of ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ [Belief/Faith in God], the reason for which Abraham ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην [was reckoned/declared to be righteous]. Note that ἐλογίσθη is a verb indicative aorist passive third person singular from λογίζομαι [reckon, declare]. The passive nature of this aorist tense stresses the agency of God on Abraham's bestowal (declaration or reckoning) of righteous status. Abraham as an example of a righteous man as reckoned by God on account of having Faith/ Belief in God is amplified in verse 7 by the declaration: '[t]hen know that those who live according to Faith are sons of Abram'. Consequently, Abraham's faith in God results in a two-fold benefit: (1) an immediate benefit in terms of his being reckoned by God as a righteous person and (2) an extended benefit to others by a further declaration that those who have Faith (like that of Abraham) εἰσιν υἱοί Ἀβραάμ [are sons of Abraham].
- Second, Abraham represents the reason for the justification of the Gentiles in reference to the notion that ἡ γραφὴ προϊδοῦσα ὅτι ὁ θεός δικαιοῖ τὰ ἔθνη ἐκ πίστεως [the Scripture/ Old Testament saw beforehand that God justifies the Gentiles through/by Faith]. Thus, προϊδοῦσα as a verbal participle aorist (active nominative feminine singular, meaning 'seeing beforehand'), denoting antecedent time to that of the controlling verb (Wallace 2000:267), which modifies ἡ γραφὴ [Old Testament, Scripture] to present the justification of the Gentiles as happening contemporaneously with the time of the Old Testament. Thus Paul, explaining the reason for this justification, says ἡ γραφὴ ... προευηγγελίσατο τῷ Ἀβραὰμ ὅτι η πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοὶ [the Scripture ... evangelised to Abraham in advance [saying] that 'all the Gentiles/nations will be blessed in you'].
- Third, in verse 9, Ὥστε, conjunction subordinating (from ὥστε, introducing inferential independent clauses, meaning therefore, for this reason, so then) introduces a conclusion to the rhetorical function of the example of Abraham that indicates how Abraham caused blessings to flow to all who have faith like his by stating '[s]o then, those who have Faith are blessed by Abraham's faithfulness'. To this end, the phrase οἱ ἐκ πίστεως [those who are of Faith] describes the object of εὐλογοῦνται (verb indicative present passive third person plural, from εὐλογέω, a reference to calling down God's gracious power on persons to bless, invoke a blessing on).

Galatians 3:10: The Law is subordinated to Faith

If the opening (verse 1) and middle (verses 2 to 9) espouse Paul's rhetorical use of dialectical questions to espouse the function of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Law, Faith, Spirit and the example of Abraham, the closing of this passage (verse 10) presents Paul's view regarding the subordination of the Law to Faith. When Paul's declaration that Ὅσοι εἰσίν ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσίν ὑπὸ κατάραν [As many of the works of the Law are under a curse] is viewed in the context of γὰρ, a conjunction coordinating (that basically introduces an explanation giving grounds for a conclusion, meaning

therefore), stands as a conclusion of his previous discussion that introduces his view of the subordination of the Law to Faith. Consequently, his usage of a second conjunction coordinating γὰρ (that basically introduces an explanation expressing cause or reason for, meaning because) explains a two-fold cause that makes it difficult for the Law to justify or render one righteous, namely, a requirement for one to: (1) obey τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πᾶσιν ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου [all written in book of the Law] and (2) τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά πᾶσιν [to do/ perform them all]. Given that it is 'hearing by Faith' that allows one to receive the Spirit, to be justified and to receive the status of being a son of Abraham, these two difficult positions associated with the Law explicitly, in effect, present a position of the Mosaic Law, which is subordinate to Faith; Faith assumes a superior position to the Mosaic Law.

This shows that Paul here employs his rhetoric to contrast the Jesus Movement (the early Christianity) with diaspora Judaism, where Mosaic Law played a primary role in maintaining the Judean identity.

The above semantic analysis has shown that in his rebuttal to the Galatians, Paul looks at the crucifixion as an important reason for the Galatians to refrain from life lived in the flesh in order to return to their former position of life lived in the Spirit. It is because he is defending this position that Paul employs the example of Abraham and subordinates the Law to Faith. Consequently, Paul probably regards the crucifixion of Jesus, Faith, and the example of Abraham as important aspects that mark the Christian identity for a community that is reverting from paganism to Christianity. But how does Paul intend to engage the crucifixion of Jesus, Faith and the example of Abraham to construct the Christian identity of these Galatians?

Identity construction

To answer the question of how Paul employs Galatians 3:1– 10 to construct the identity of the Galatian Christian, it is crucial briefly to explore further the problem of the Galatians and issues of power relations in the Roman Empire. The importance of considering the Roman Empire lies in the notion that the audience of Paul's Letter to the Galatians was located in Galatia, which was a province of the Roman Empire. Thus, socioeconomic and political activities in the Roman Empire influenced the way in which the Galatians related to these policies as they struggled to develop new norms and values on which to base their Christian identity. Wanamaker, following Wilson, contends that in pursuit of constructing a social identity, one socially constructed and maintained world is rejected in favour of another (Wanamaker 1987:4). From Wanamaker's position, it is evident that the process of acquiring an identity involves a defensive approach in the context of an insider *vis-à-vis* the outsider group (M'bwangi 2019:184).

After outlining the problem of Galatians and the Roman Empire, we shall see how Paul employs Galatians 3:1–10 to construct the identity of the Galatians *vis-à-vis* power and identity construction in the Roman Empire during the emergence of Christianity in the 1st century CE.

The problem of the Galatians

Paul's Letter to the Galatians indicates that his audience lived in Galatia, because he addresses them saying 'O foolish Galatians' (Gl 3:1). However, scholars have debated whether the audience is located in South Galatia (that is, south of Pisidia and Lycoanea) or North (proper) Galatia (Breytenbach 1996:99–112, 2014:2; Tolmie 2012:118). Since in 1st century CE the term 'Galatians' designated people of Celtic descent who had spread all over the Roman Empire (Breytenbach 2014:2), Paul's letter addressed 'to the churches in Galatia' (Gal 1:2) focused on reaching the Galatians who would be found either in the North or South of Galatia or anywhere in the Roman Empire. The most important thing is that they were of Celtic identity.

Hurd aptly observes that Paul's opponents addressed in his Letter to the Galatians are those found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 (Hurd 2005:125–148). Furthermore, the problem that Paul is addressing in the churches in Galatia is hinted at by his statement that '.... you are now finishing in flesh having begun in Spirit' (Gal:3.3). What does 'finishing in flesh' mean? Because Paul says the Galatians had 'begun in Spirit' (Gal 3:3b), it means these are Galatians who had initially converted to Christianity when Paul and Barnabas had visited Galatia during their second missionary journey (Acts 16.6). The contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit' as used by Paul to describe the Galatians (Gal 3:3) indicates that during the time of writing of this letter, these Galatian Christians had backslidden in their Christian faith. In other words, formerly having had their life guided by the Spirit (Gal 3:3 b; 5.16), they had reverted to a lifestyle guided by the flesh (Gal 3:3; 5:19–21). It is also likely that Paul is addressing a problem similar to the one he had found in Antioch. In Antioch some Jews attempted to compel Gentiles to observe some aspects of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision (Gal 2:16; 3:3; 5:2–4, 11; 6:13) as a condition of inclusion to the Jesus Movement. Hansen aptly noted that 'the Galatian believers were essentially guilty of the same offence as Peter; thus Paul formulates his questions that shows the contradiction between the Galatians' interest in the works of the Law (verses 2, 5) and the flesh (verse 3)' (Hansen 1989:109). Thus, internal evidence shows that probably Paul wrote this letter to persuade the Galatians to embrace Christianity by refraining from appealing to former Celtic cultural values and norms as a basis of their identity, on the one hand and, on the other hand, he is encouraging these Galatians to reject the imposition of the Mosaic Law on them as a requirement for inclusion in the Jesus Movement. To explore briefly the other types of socioeconomic and political problems that the Galatians confronted in the Empire which are not clearly stated in Paul's Letter to Galatians, we shall briefly examine power and identity formation in the Roman Empire.

Power and identity formation in the Roman Empire

Virgil, the El Djem Floor Mosaic and literary works of Tacitus are a reliable source that reveal Rome's use of the elites to introduce and sustain asymmetrical power relations in the 1st century Mediterranean world, that is, during the emergence of Christianity.

Although Virgil (Circa 70–19 BCE) lived much earlier than 1st century classical writers such as Josephus or Suetonius, his poetry, particularly the *Aeneid,* is a profound source of socioeconomic and political narrative of the early Roman Empire. In his *Aeneid* (6:852) Virgil, in celebrating the power relations embedded in Rome's relations with the rest of the Empire and beyond, declared: 'You, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud' (*Loeb Digital Classical Library* 63:592–593). Virgil employs this poem not only to celebrate Rome's incontestable superiority but also to reveal the excessive power over and unsympathetic attitude towards its enemies which Rome had established. Thus, to survive in the Roman Empire, it was crucial to identify with rather than to contest Rome. Consequently, Huskinson attempts to explain the multivalent nature of the power relations between Rome and the provinces in the rest of the Empire. In her monograph, *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power* (2009), Huskinson analyses the El Djem Floor Mosaic which depicts the goddess Roma in the centre of the tiles, surrounded by six figures of deities which represent the provinces of the Roman Empire. Confirming the asymmetrical nature of these power relations, as well as their effect in maintaining a distinctive Roman culture and political power in the Empire, Huskinson remarks that the foreigners of the individual provinces were kept separated and were thus peripheral to Rome. This was not only to allow Rome to exercise control from the centre, but also to curtail any threats of cultural contamination (Huskinson 2009:17–18). Thus, although Rome depended on the provinces for its survival, in the context of controlling its own influences in the Empire, it clearly occupied a more honourable and powerful place than the provinces depicted in the El-Djem floor mosaic.

However, this demonstration of the supremacy of Rome did not mean imposition of total subjugation on local religious practices. On the contrary; some emperors, on account of their beneficence, were known to have been quite friendly to their subjects, including slaves. Tacitus noted the cordial economic relations that existed between Emperor Tiberius and the common people, saying:

> The city populace indeed suffered much from high prices, but this was no fault of the emperor, who actually endeavoured to counteract barren soils and stormy seas with every resource of wealth and foresight. And he was also careful not to distress the provinces by new burdens, and to see that in bearing the old they were safe from any rapacity or oppression on the part of governors. Corporal punishments and confiscations of property were unknown. (Tacitus, *Annals* 4:6)

Tacitus shows how, in pursuit of his beneficent interests, the philanthropic concerns of Tiberius revealed his attempt to lessen the economic burden of the common people, for example, by compensating for their agricultural failures 'with every resource of wealth' at his disposal. Perkins

(2009:196) claims that 'this good practice by Tiberius is cited by Tacitus to establish his good conduct as an emperor using his imperial power for the economic benefit of citizens', which in effect demonstrates that the economic benefactors of Roman emperors were in many cases their subjects. Not only did the Provinces need to identify with Rome for their survival, but Tacitus's citation of Tiberius shows how the elites, as well, needed to identify with Rome as conduits of the Emperor's beneficence to the masses for their survival and security of their power.

The identification between social power and the political interest found in elite culture is evident in the way the Roman elites facilitated Rome's assimilation in the Empire. Furthermore, as a result of this kind of identification with the Roman emperor, not only did the elite manage to elevate their social status, but they were also able to demonstrate their political position and identity in the Empire as mediators of the emperor's political interests, a crucial feature of sustaining elite cultural identity. This process of spreading elite culture through assimilation is confirmed by Tacitus when he narrates how his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, performed a Roman imperial assignment in Britain. In this regard, Tacitus noted that while in Britain, Agricola, a member of the Roman elite:

> He likewise provided a liberal education for the sons of the chiefs [*of Britain*], and showed such a preference for the natural powers of the Britons over the industry of the Gauls that they who lately disdained the tongue of Rome now coveted its eloquence. Hence, too, a liking sprang up for our style of dress, and the 'toga' became fashionable. Step by step they were led to things which dispose to vice, the lounge, the bath, the elegant banquet. All this in their ignorance, they called civilization, when it was but a part of their servitude. (Tacitus, *Agricola* 21)

Thus, Tacitus notes that Agricola's conduct as a member of the Roman elite encouraged the Briton elites to assimilate to Roman culture. Agricola imparted social, economic, and cultural values through liberal education for the sons of those chiefs he conquered, embracing Rome's culture, including elegant banquets and adopting the toga dressing code. Thus, Huskinson (2009:97) aptly observed that the example of Agricola by Tacitus 'introduces themes of culture and status ... within a Roman elite identity, and how elite culture (of varying kinds) operated within the empire'.

Briefly viewed here is the socioeconomic and political context in which Paul writes his letters, including his Letter to the Galatians. This context provides the reference point for interpreting the Pauline corpus, as briefly demonstrated by Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which in turn reflects Paul's rhetoric for identity construction.

Political identity

Political identity in this case refers to taking a point of departure from political activities in the Roman Empire as a point of reference to outlining Christian normative values in reference to Galatians 3:1–10. In his article, 'Mission and Ethics in Galatians', Kok regards Paul's Letter to the Galatians as promoting a 'missionary dimension' that involves 'the transformation of identity (the understanding of self, God and others) that leads to the creation of ethical values that are particularised in different socioreligious and cultural contexts in the development of the early church' (Kok 2011:1). Kok's observation of missionary concerns for Paul helps us to understand Paul's concern for rebuking the Galatians saying Ὦ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν (Gal 3:1: Oh Ignorant/ foolish Galatians who bewitched you). If, as noted by Eliott, verb aorist indicative ἐβάσκανεν in Galatians 3:1 refers to the accusation of Paul by the Celtic Galatians for casting an evil spell on the Galatians (Elliott 2011:8), then Paul saw himself as one invested with a missionary responsibility not only to defend his credibility but also to expose the trickery of the Celtic Galatians to win back the Galatian Christians by using propaganda against Paul, causing these Galatian Christians to backslide (Gl 4:17), that is, to revert back to former life lived in the flesh (Gal 3:3); a life guided solely by Celtic ethnic attributes of identity in contrast to Christian ethos. This means that Paul employs Galatians 3:1b rhetorically to construct a Christian identity for his community in Galatia in terms of refuting the Celtic Galatians' propaganda in order to persuade them to focus on the significance of the Crucifixion of Jesus in constituting them into a Christian community. This aspect of Christian identity embraces aspects of political identity because in writing his letter to the Galatians not only was Paul responding to aspects of Celtic cultural identity, but he was also providing norms and values for his community to respond to the political climate in the Roman Empire.

When Virgil in his *Aeneid* (6:852) celebrates Rome's asymmetrical power saying 'you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud' (*Loeb Digital Classical Library* 63:592–593), not only does he imply that Rome demanded unquestionable submission from its citizens and subjects, but also he reveals the Roman imperial attempt to subordinate the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the cradle of Christian identity, to that of a Roman Emperor.

Consequently, Paul's use of a rhetorical question 'before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly crucified?' (Gal 3:1b) served not only as mere rebuttal to the Galatians, but it was also meant to remind them to identify with the Lordship of crucified Jesus. For Paul the crucifixion of Jesus is intertwined with his resurrection (Phil 2: 5–11).

The crucifixion of Jesus in Galatians 3:1 reveals that Paul probably outlines a political response for the Galatian Christians by which in effect he persuades the Galatian Christians to contest Rome's claims of political supremacy.

Consequently, offering further norms for political identity for his community, Paul takes on himself the title of 'slave of Christ' (Rom 1:1) to call for 'obedience' (Rom 13:1) to a government which is from God. But Paul rhetorically suggests that Christian obedience to earthly political

authority is conditional on the fact that such an authority must be acceptable to God.[4]

By focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus in Galatians 3:1, Paul outlines the beliefs, norms, and values concerning the political obligations of the followers of Jesus to the Roman Empire. Mitternacht aptly observes that Galatians 3:1–5 is reflective of the situation of the audience which:

> [t]ogether with recurring affirmations of Christ and Paul as embodiments of faithfulness and commitment in suffering, imprint on the aural memory of the first listeners a concern for an imitatio Christi crucifixi. (Mitternacht 2007:53)

The aural intention means the letter had a political performative function achieved by provoking the memories of the Galatians concerning the Lordship of the once crucified Jesus Christ in order to subordinate the Supremacy of the cult of Roman emperor and the mediatory culture of the elites to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

By persuading the Galatians to identify with the Lordship of Jesus Christ, Paul was engaging in a political rhetoric to resist the authority of the emperor cult on behalf of Christians in Galatia. These norms, beliefs, and values and the attendant non-violent political resistance were important in constructing and maintaining a political identity for the Galatian Christian as part of the Jesus Movement in the first century. Not only did Paul envision a political identity for his Christian community in Galatia, but he also had in mind a religious identity, because in antiquity, religion was multivalent and so it was intertwined with economics and political dynamics.

Religious identity

Religious identity refers to a type of identity envisioned by Paul for the Galatians in reference to the emergence of the Jesus Movement and the Diaspora Judaism. To this end, Law, Faith and Spirit in Galatians 3:2–5 are the three key elements that provide the recipe for Paul's rhetorical instructions to his audience in Galatians. In his monograph, *Galatians Through the Centuries* (2013), John Riches approaches the analysis of Galatians 3:2–5 with the question: 'How, first and foremost, is the particular experience of the Spirit, *pneuma*, to which he (Paul) appeals to be defined – a crucial question touching the very essence of Christian experience? ... Much turns on how interpreters read the contrasting terms which Paul uses: works of the Law; hearing of Faith; beginning in the Spirit/finishing in the flesh. That Paul refers to 'works of power' (miracles of some sort?) which they had experienced, cannot be denied' (Riches 2013:145). Following Dunn, Riches, in answering his own question, says that Galatians received the Spirit as 'a second experience, [a] subsequent conversion'

which for Paul was 'essentially the beginning of Christian discipleship', which shows a refusal of the traditional practices which distinguished Israel from the nations (Riches 2013:156). By implication, Riches, in answer to his own question, points out Paul's rhetorical use of the concepts of 'Spirit' and 'Faith' to reconstruct a religious identity for the Galatians, as I will shortly elaborate.

Paul contrasts the 'hearing by Faith' and 'works of the Law' in the context of receiving the Spirit and work miracles in verse 5:

οὖν
  ὁ ἐπιχορηγῶν τὸ πνεῦμα
ὑμῖν
καὶ
ἐνεργῶν δυνάμεις
ἐν ὑμῖν
ἐξ ἔργων
νόμου
    ἢ
      ἐξ ἀκοῆς
      πίστεως.

This contrast of ἐξ ἔργων νόμου (works of the Law) with ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως (hearing from/faith) as a means of receiving the Spirit marks the beginning of Christian discipline in the context of rejecting the traditional practice of the Mosaic Law that distinguished Israel from other nations. By implication, Paul rhetorically employs Galatians 3:2–5 to reconstruct a religious identity for his community that does not totally reject but rather subordinates the function of Mosaic Law in a similar way to the Celtic Galatian Christians, where the attributes of their former cultural identity are subordinated to Faith as a primary mark of Christian religious identity, on the one hand. On the other hand, by granting Faith a superior place to Mosaic Law, Paul was in effect identifying the Galatians Christians with the larger Jesus Movement, where Faith was not only a means to access God, but also the basis of living with and relating to one another (Mk 2:5; Mt 17: 20; Lk 17:6; Rom 1:17; Acts 14:27; 2 Cor 1:24; Heb 10:22; Jas 2:22; 5:15). Identification of the Galatian communities with the Jesus Movement was a crucial step in identity reconstruction and sustenance in antiquity. Malina and Neyrey have observed that in antiquity, narratives of collective identity, rather than an individual's choice, were guided by belonging to a fictive family, a city dwelling, or political factions or coalitions, which played a significant role in the formation of an individual's social identity (Malina & Neyrey 1996: 154–164). In other words, in antiquity, identity formation happened on account of one's relations to other people, places and things (M'bwangi 2019:107). The identification of the Galatian Christians with the Jesus Movement was important because having reverted to grounding their identity in Celtic cultural attributes, signalled in Galatians 3:3 by Paul's rebuke νῦν σαρκὶ ἐπιτελεῖσθε (now you are finishing in flesh), identification with the Jesus Movement would help to reclaim their self-esteem, a crucial aspect of social identity that boosted honour in the 1st century Mediterranean world, where identity was grounded in a dyadic perspective.

4.Porter's claim, that in Romans 13:1–13 Paul calls for qualitative obedience, rather than positional authority, where qualitative authority refers to political authorities that are just in their conduct of business on earth (Porter 2011:188–189), is useful for elaborating on the political nature of Paul's rhetoric in Romans 13 According to Paul, this justice should be determined by Jesus' teaching. Thus, Paul's or his disciples' (Tertius in Rm 16:22) description of Jesus as 'the Son who is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15) not only demonstrates the superiority of Jesus over and above the Roman emperors, but also his emphasis on the reliability of Jesus' teaching concerning justice as desired by God.

Additionally, identifying with the Jesus Movement was crucial for the survival of churches, particularly during famine. A good example is that given by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:8–13.

It is noteworthy that Paul views the churches in Macedonia as endowed with God's grace, even though he claimed that they were living in 'extreme poverty'. He still recommended that they contribute financially to support the Jerusalem church, and acknowledged that they 'gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability' (2 Cor 8:8–13). Here the role of a superordinate identity within the Jesus Movement is apparently contributing to the social integration between a mostly Gentile Christian congregation of Macedonia, and a mostly Judean Apostolic church in Jerusalem. In terms of ethnic composition, these two Christian congregations were different, as well as being separated by a significant distance. From a religious perspective, particularly in reference to their Christian identity, they were symbolically united by their gift of thanks for the financial support from the Macedonian churches. The same support was probably received by Judean Christian communities in Jerusalem. Thus, this act of giving performed the religious role of reinforcing social cooperation between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the Jesus Movement. This financial support underpinned a normative framework for social support among its members. This in turn became an important way of maintaining a common Christian cultural identity in antiquity, despite the distance that separated the early Christian communities. Apart from a religious and a political identity, Paul envisioned an economic identity for the Galatians.

Economic identity

Hansen, following Hay who followed Gaston, argues that Galatians 3:6–9 πιστεύω (verse 6) confirms that Paul is referring to a response of Faith whereby the comparative conjunction καθὼς sets up a correspondence between the Faith response of the Galatians and Abraham's Faith response. The primary point of the comparison must be God's working in both cases, rather than the Faith of Abraham and the Galatians, and this must be interpreted in the light of Genesis 15:6 (Hansen 1989:111). Consequently, Hansen helps us to see how Paul's rhetoric comparatively connects the Galatians with the covenant that God promised to Abraham, namely, to grant him as many descendants as the stars in heaven (Gal 16:5). The use of comparison to connect Galatians with Abraham's God and in effect to the covenantal promise of descendants performs a crucial aspect of social identity. According to Kuecker, comparison performs a crucial task in the construction of identity by facilitating the maintenance of one's awareness of who one is through a process of observing similarities and differences by means of which groups favourably differentiate themselves (Kuecker 2016:71–72). Thus, in view of connecting the Galatians with Abraham, Paul's rhetoric attempts to persuade the Galatians to become aware of how their faith in Jesus grants them covenantal identity as a realisation of God's promise to Abraham of numerous descendants, on the one hand. On the other hand,

by employing the figure of Abraham, Paul intends to help the Galatians to understand how their Christian religious identity differentiates them from their fellow Celtic pagans, that is, those who have no faith in Jesus but whose lives are guided solely by Celtic cultural norms and values.

This kind of comparison with Abraham has an economic beneficence. Not only was Abraham promised offspring, but he was also promised that God would honour his promise to Abraham's descendants and grant them land (Gen 17:7). Land is a primary requirement for any economic undertaking. In view of the fact that Roman emperors employed some acts of beneficence to sustain their asymmetrical power relations through the elites, as noted by Tacitus's speaking of the '... emperor, who actually endeavoured to counteract barren soils and stormy seas with every resource of wealth and foresight ...' (Tacitus, *Annals* 4:6), probably Paul's rhetoric here was intended to contest Roman imperial beneficence as a means of grounding the economic identity of the Galatians in the figure of Abraham.

Similarly, aspects of economic beneficence as a basis of Christian identity among Pauline communities can be found in 2 Corinthians 8. In this context, Perkins's definition of economy is useful. He defines economy 'as a range of activities to do with the production and supply of material needs and the careful management of the resources required to satisfy those needs' (Perkins 2009:184). Based on this definition, it is possible to see Paul's interest in involving the church in Corinth with contributing financially to alleviate poverty among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8) as an economic activity grounded in his conviction of Christian social values. Paul received financial contributions from the Christians in Macedonia, although they were a poor community (2 Cor 2:1–5). He then appeals to the Macedonian Christians by using the example of Christ sacrificing himself for the world (2 Cor 8:9). Like the Macedonians, Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians to give financial support to the Jerusalem Church. This he did by saying to the Corinthians: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Arguing that Jesus was wealthy, 'yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor 8:9), Paul attempted to encourage the Corinthians to identify with Christians in Jerusalem by becoming interested in their economic situation.

Two economic principles can be derived from Paul's concern for giving. First, by citing the Macedonian example, Paul wanted to lay down a belief system for the early church, emphasising that for their economic survival, church members had to identify with each other in order to support one another. This identification is meant to uphold a common social status among members of the Jesus Movement on account of Jesus' Lordship and in effect reinforce the self-esteem of the famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem. Second, by referring to Jesus, Paul suggests the beneficence of Jesus to his church. So, just as in Galatians 3:6–9, there is some economic narrative in 2 Corinthians 8 which is connected to the beneficence of Jesus Christ as the Jewish

Messiah. Porter observes that there is a clear 'hierarchy of beneficence' in 2 Corinthians 8:9, 'one that begins with the Lord Jesus Christ and passes through Paul to the believers in Corinth and then to the believers in Jerusalem' (Porter 2011:192).

The norms and values that Paul designed for constructing and sustaining the identity of his community in Corinthians could still be applied to the Christians in Galatians, and vice versa, not only because they belonged to Pauline communities but more so because they were part of the larger Jesus Movement.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to answer the question: how can we envision the function of Paul's letters, particularly as represented in his Letter to the Galatians 3:1–10, constructing a multivalent identity for his community? To this end, social identity and political theory have played a significant role of defending the argument that Paul employs his letters to construct a superordinate identity for his community which not only embraces political perspectives but also has religious and economic trajectories that subordinate all other cultural norms and values to Christian norms and values. Consequently, by laying down a semantic analysis of Galatians 3:1–10 in reference to other writings of Paul such as 2 Corinthians 8 and Roman 13, and using social identity political theory, the study has contributed to the body of knowledge by providing trajectories of reading Pauline texts that go beyond the religious perspective to embrace a multivalent approach, on the on hand. On the other hand, the approach has shown the impact of social sciences in supplementing literary criticism on reading Biblical texts in a manner that has helped to reflect group relations in terms of the Roman Empire and Pauline communities. Consequently, Pauline identity reconstruction has been elaborated by a critical reading of group norms and values from Galatians 3:1–10 which are identified with norms and values from the Jesus Movement or contrasted with those of diaspora Judaism and the Roman Empire to emphasise the role of identification and comparison in superordinate identity construction, that is, an identity that upholds the superiority of Christian norms and values in the context of subordinating all other cultural norms and values, particularly emerging from the Celtic ethnic group, diaspora Judaism and the Roman Empire. The finding generally establishes that although becoming a Christian requires one to elevate Christocentric values above all other cultural norms, it does not necessarily imply total rejection of former attributes of identity. Consequently, embracing Christianity means embracing multiple identities that are subordinated to norms and values derived from the meaning and significance of Jesus.

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