VIOLENCE IN THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of violence hardly ever receives attention when New Testament scholars investigate Paul's Letter to the Galatians (hereafter, “Galatians”). Issues that are normally considered include the law, soteriology, pneumatology, ethics and the rhetoric of the letter. In the few cases in which violence in Galatians is considered, it usually forms part of a broader investigation of violence in the Pauline literature or in the New Testament as a whole. In contrast to such approaches, the focus of this investigation is rather modest. The issue that receives attention pertains exclusively to Galatians, and a simple question is posed: does violence play a role in Galatians, and, if so, to what extent, and why? The question is approached from various angles, and probably the easiest way to begin such an investigation would be to explore all the explicit references to violence in the letter.

2. EXPLICIT REFERENCES TO VIOLENCE IN GALATIANS

One does not find many explicit references to violence in the letter. The first instance is found in Galatians 1, where Paul describes his earlier life as follows: ὅτι καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν (Gal. 1:13; see also 1:23). He uses two words to describe his behaviour before he was called by God, namely διώκω and πορθέω. Of these two words, the latter indicates a higher level of violence, since it was generally used to refer to attacking someone or something with the intent of...
destroying it—an action that included physical violence. This, according to Paul, is what he tried to do to the church before God revealed his Son to him. As can be seen from the following verse, at that stage in his life he still regarded such behaviour as being praiseworthy, but later, viewed retrospectively, he understood that his acts were aimed against God, since they were an attempt to destroy God's church. Thus, the first form of violence mentioned explicitly in Galatians is evaluated negatively, since it was directed against God.

The next reference to violence is found in Galatians 2:1–10, where Paul refers to an attempt during his second visit to Jerusalem by the “false brothers” who “slipped in” to “force” (ἀναγκάζω) Titus to be circumcised. The force referred to does not seem to have been of a physical nature, but rather verbal or emotional. Since the envisaged circumcision was against Paul’s (and presumably Titus’) wishes, and since the attempted action was the result of a “spying out” of the liberty in Christ and was meant to “enslave”, it is clear that this form of violence is also viewed by Paul as being negative.

The same kind of violence is referred to in the other two instances where the same word (ἀναγκάζω) is used in Galatians, but different people are involved. In the case of Galatians 2:14, it was Peter and the other Jewish Christians in Antioch who attempted to “judaise” non-Jewish Christians, while, according to Galatians 6:12, Paul’s opponents were the ones responsible for trying to force Galatians to be circumcised.

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2 In W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 853, πορθέω is explained as follows: “…to attack and cause complete destruction, pillage, make havoc of, destroy, annihilate” (their emphasis), while in J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida (eds.), Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (Introduction and Domains; vol. 1; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), §20.37, 233, it is defined as: “to attack with the intent or result of destroying”.

3 The imperfect is usually interpreted as conative. See M. Silva, Explorations in Exegetical Method. Galatians as a Test Case (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 70–72, for a good discussion in this regard.

4 Although there is an anacoluthon in verse 4ff., it is clear that it was the “false brothers” who attempted to force Titus to be circumcised. To make sense of verse 4ff., the following options are possible: a verb such as ἡγεράσῃ could be added, as done by R.D. Anderson, Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul (CBET 18; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 152; or, possibly a phrase such as “Now this happened…”, as done by R.N. Longenecker, Galatians (WBC 41; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990), 50, or “The question of circumcising Gentile converts was first raised…”, as done by F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to Galatians. A Commentary on the Greek Text (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1982), 116.