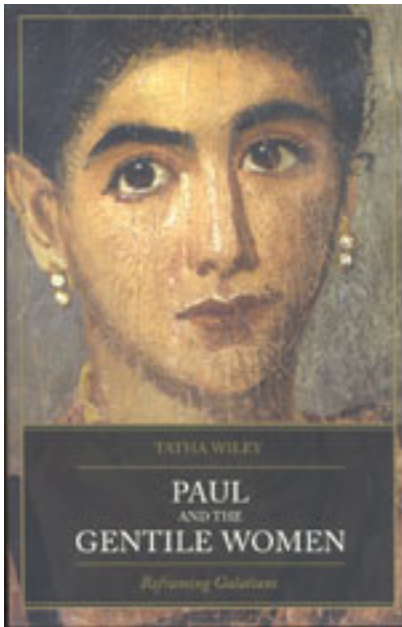


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Wiley, Tatha

Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians

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Since the publication of her appraised and insightful *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist, 2002) Tatha Wiley, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, is known for her thought-provoking ideas and perspectives. In *Paul and the Gentile Women* Wiley again chooses a specific, even unusual angle to look at a certain subject, here Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Especially Galatians has been a matter of controversy ever since it was written: What is its main topic, and, thus, what was the motivation to write the letter at all? Who are those addressed, and how did they live? How are Paul's reflections on law and circumcision best to be understood? These are only a few major points disputed among scholars and even early Christians. Wiley leaves the beaten track and takes her readers in by using a simple as well as effective trick: Why not slip into the Gentile women of Paul's days? The positive effect of such a shift of perspective is described as follows (10): "To bring the Gentile women into the center of this perspective further reframes our reading of Galatians and prompts a new flood of questions. What did circumcision signify for men? For women? What obligations did it impose? What effect on the assembly would its acceptance bring? What changes for the member?"

Of course, questions such as these may lead scholars astray and too far away from the focus of their research. Consequently, Wiley limits herself to a clear-cut hypothesis (11): “In this work I will argue that the dispute between evangelists over the necessity of circumcision was, in its immediate communal context as well as direct consequence, a dispute over whether the membership of Gentile believers in the Galatian assemblies would be differentiated by gender.” Having circumscribed her concept in the preface (9–11), she turns to five chapters, each with an individual focus, though they are linked with each other by the goal Wiley is longing to reach.

In chapter 1, “Galatian Disputes” (13–33), Wiley lays the foundation for her following objective by giving a concise overview of the scholarly discussion of Galatians to this point. She is correct that Galatians was interpreted in the *adversus Judaeos* tradition too often and too willingly (21), what prompted some scholars to point out “a superior Christianity (faith) over against an inferior Judaism (law)” (23). No doubt Paul employed a sharply polemical language here and there. Nevertheless, there is no need to read this “as revelation that the validity of the law ended with the advent of Christ (3:19–20)” (24), as patristic theologians may do. Roughly speaking, today’s scholars often follow the paths set by E. P. Sanders and others who (31) “reject the idea that a theology of works-righteousness can be found at all in Second Temple Judaism. It is a polemical caricature of Judaism, not historical reality.” Moreover, Paul emphasizes “the equality of Jews and Gentiles in their faith to Christ” (3:26).

Chapter 2, “Paul’s Context” (34–53), profoundly adds to the picture: again Wiley focuses on the Gentiles being accepted by God, what is proclaimed by Paul throughout Galatians. Of course, Paul’s own conversion matters here, too, something that consequently implies an absolute religious reorientation for him. But that was only that easily possible against the background of a diverse Jewish pluralism in those days (38–40). Principally, Wiley reports on sociohistorical issues in this chapter before coming to the specific significance of those reported issues for women, above all as far as the influence of purity and/or impurity was like. Finally, she asserts that (53) purity was not deciding on holiness and that “there is no basis for exemptions—which translate into exclusions—for women.”

There must have been fellow evangelists opposing Paul’s proclamation and, thus, “Challenges and Challengers in Galatia” (54–77), as the third chapter is titled. Here Wiley has to circumscribe what degrees of attraction to Judaism existed and that a fear of circumcision “was not the only factor that kept adult Gentile men at the status of ‘almost fully converted’, or God-fearers” (61). That was a decisive factor for the dispute between Paul and his challengers, as the latter referred to the command given to Abraham and proclaimed a Jewish life without any ifs and buts.

As a matter of consequence, Wiley then concentrates on the “Women in the Galatian Assemblies” (78–102), especially what they thought about Paul’s preaching that focused on circumcision. Here she can put her finger on the sore point (78): “What is curious is not the questions but its absence in the interpretive tradition.” It is really astounding that male interpreters have not adequately taken into consideration “the subject of women to be of interest or relevance.” In this chapter Wiley can shape her thesis in a concise way: How did women live in general? What was their role as destined by religion? What distinguished Jewish women from the common Greco-Roman ones? What about Jewish women in the Diaspora? These are only a few of the questions guiding Wiley to paint a picture of the everyday lives of women in those days before returning to Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (91–102). Women proselytes, women’s participation and leadership, and the consequences for them “if circumcision were appropriated as the condition for membership” (99) are the key topics addressed on these pages. One may doubt whether her final sentence of this chapter is appropriate and not too daring (“To be precise, then, Paul’s defense was of the equality of Gentile women *qua* Gentile women in the Galatian assemblies”), although this central part of her book is very appealing and definitely a long-needed shift of perspective.

The fifth and closing chapter, “Recovering Paul—and the Gospel” (103–21), applies the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters, above all chapter 4, to a reconstruction of Paul’s attitude toward women and the setting of the Letter to the Galatians. Again Wiley is correct when she points out that interpreters have to be more aware of their own gender and the matter of gender in Galatians (108–9). To some degree Paul’s rejection of physical circumcision might mean a rejection of male privilege (120). However, I wonder whether this is not overdoing the context and what a reader can find in the text and whether this is more or less a matter of subconscious behavior. Significant is that “[w]ithout the Torah, differences between women and men are removed” and that “[w]omen, like men, entered into the assemblies as persons, turning to the God of Israel by way of their own decision.”

The book ends with a set of commenting notes (123–61) and an index of names and subjects (163–68).

Tatha Wiley’s objective is an essential contribution to the modern-day discussion of the Letter to the Galatians, developed from a perspective neglected for too long. Her style is vivid and concise, which turns the book into an easy read, even if what she has to say is of heavy weight and significance. Not only did I enjoy reading this book very much, but I will reconsider my own view of Paul’s attitude toward women and the possible perspectives to interpret Galatians anew.