

SHORT STUDIES

## Does the ‘We’ in Gal 2.15–17 Include Paul’s Opponents?

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### Introduction

Generally speaking, J. Louis Martyn is rather dubious regarding recent attempts to interpret Paul’s Galatian letter in terms of ancient rhetorical canons.<sup>1</sup> He does, however, express considerable interest in the rhetorical strategies employed in Galatians. Of particular concern in the present study is Martyn’s understanding of Paul’s rhetorical use of ‘we’ (ἡμεῖς) in Gal 2.15–17.

Because it immediately follows Paul’s reported rebuke of Cephas in v. 14b, Gal 2.15–21 appears, at least initially, to be simply a continuation of what Paul said. If so, the ‘we’ in vv. 15–17 may well refer solely to Paul and Cephas. According to Martyn, however, it is clear by the end of chapter 2 that Paul is addressing a larger audience than just Cephas.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that vv. 15–17 are not a continuation of Paul’s statement to Cephas.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is still possible that the ‘we’ of these verses refers specifically to Paul and Cephas – representing simply Paul’s acknowledgement or reminder to his Galatians readers that he and Cephas share both a common Jewish heritage (v. 15) and a common Christian faith (vv. 16–17).

It is also possible, however, that the ‘we’ is more inclusive. Thus, it might also include Barnabas and ‘the other Jews’ mentioned in v. 13. More broadly, it might

1 J. L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 20–3. For attempts at such an interpretation, see, e.g., H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary 42; Dallas: Word, 1990); and B. Witherington, III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

2 Martyn, *Galatians*, 229.

3 Note that both the RSV and the NRSV end Paul’s statement to Cephas with v. 14, and, indeed, the latter ends the paragraph at this point.

refer to all Jews who, like Peter and Paul, have become Christians.<sup>4</sup> Martyn asserts, however, that vv. 15–21 are in fact 'a speech' addressed to Paul's opponents in Galatia and that the 'we' of vv. 15–17 is specifically intended to include these opponents.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he sees the entire phrase, ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί, as 'a rhetorical convention, the *captatio benevolentiae*, in which the speaker captures his audience by means of a friendly reference to something he shares with them' – in this case, a common Jewish heritage.<sup>6</sup> Thus, presumably, Paul hopes to establish a common bond with his opponents in the hope of winning them over to his own position.

The purpose of the present study is to argue that Martyn's interpretation of the 'we' in Gal 2.15–17 is incorrect – that it does not, in fact, include Paul's opponents. The argument will be based upon five considerations: (1) Paul's use of the first person plural elsewhere in Galatians; (2) the significance of the first two words in Gal 2.15; (3) the possibility that Paul's opponents in Galatia were not Christians; (4) Paul's use of the third person when referring to his opponents elsewhere in Galatians; and (5) the tenor of Paul's actual statements regarding his opponents.

#### (1) *Paul's use of the first person plural elsewhere in Galatians*

Elsewhere in Galatians, Paul employs the first person plural<sup>7</sup> in three different ways: (1) in a clearly *inclusive* sense, referring simply to all Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile;<sup>8</sup> (2) in an *implicitly inclusive* sense, referring specifically to Jewish Christians but with language immediately following that draws Paul's Gentile readers in Galatia into the picture;<sup>9</sup> and (3) in a clearly *exclusive* sense, referring to Paul himself (and one or more of his associates?) in such a way as to distinguish him (them?) from certain other people.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the first and second usages are not applicable to Gal 2.15–17, because the phrase 'Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners' (φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί) makes it clear that the 'we' of these verses refers to Jews but not to Gentiles. The third

4 E.g. F. J. Matera, *Galatians* (SP9; Glazier; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) 92; and Betz, *Galatians*, 115.

5 Martyn, *Galatians*, 230, 248. Martyn (pp. 117–26) prefers the more neutral label 'teachers' rather than 'opponents', though he acknowledges (p. 117) that Paul views them as opponents.

6 Martyn, *Galatians*, 246. For a similar interpretation, see, e.g., A. A. Das, 'Another Look at ἐὰν μὴ in Galatians 2:16', *JBL* 119 (2000) 536–9.

7 Included under 'first person plural' are both the first person plural of the personal pronoun ('we' or 'us') and the first person plural form of verbs.

8 Gal 1.3, 4; 4.26, 31; 5.1, 5, 25; 6.14, 18.

9 Gal 3.13–14, 23–5; 4.3–6. Specific reference to Jewish Christians is indicated by mention of the Law, but see 'the Gentiles' in 3.14, 'you' in 3.26, and 'you' in 4.6–7.

10 Gal 1.8–9; 2.4–5; 2.9–10.

usage, which I have termed the ‘exclusionary’ usage, may, however, provide something of a precedent for the ‘we’ of 2.15–17.<sup>11</sup>

The exclusionary use of the first person plural suggests a dichotomy between the ‘we’ and a ‘they’. Moreover, it implies some degree of tension or even conflict between the two. Finally, in each of the three passages employing this usage, the ‘they’ apparently refers to Paul’s fellow Jews; and, in at least two of the three, it refers to fellow Jewish Christians. Thus, the first person plural in Gal 1.8–9 distinguishes Paul (and his associates?) from his opponents in Galatia, who almost certainly are Jews but who may or may not be Jewish Christians.<sup>12</sup> In Gal 2.4–5, it distinguishes Paul (and one or more associates?) from the ‘false brothers’ (ψευδάδελφοί), who almost certainly are Jewish Christians<sup>13</sup> and whom Paul clearly regards as opponents. In Gal 2.9–10, the first person plural distinguishes Paul and Barnabas from James, Cephas, and John, who, of course, are Jewish Christians. In this passage, although no actual controversy is indicated, there is a clear differentiation between Paul’s mission and that of the Jerusalem apostles, and at least the intimation of some degree of tension.

If the ‘we’ of Gal 2.15–17 is interpreted in light of these passages – that is to say in the ‘exclusionary’ sense – then it must be seen as suggesting a dichotomy between Paul (and any others included in the ‘we’) and an implied ‘they’. The dichotomy cannot be simply between Jews and Gentiles, however, as might be implied by the opening phrase of v. 15 (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνῶν ἀμαρτωλοί), because Paul immediately makes it clear (v. 16) that the ‘we’ refers not to *all* Jews but only to Jews who ‘know that a person is not justified by works of law’ and ‘have trusted in Christ Jesus’. This suggests that the ‘they’ would be people, almost certainly Jews, who do not know this and/or have not trusted in Christ – most likely, Paul’s opponents in Galatia. Thus, the ‘we’ in Gal 2.15–17 by no means includes Paul’s opponents; rather, it suggests a sharp dichotomy between Paul and them.

## (2) *The significance of the first two words in Gal 2.15*

The very presence and the placement of the first two words of Gal 2.15 – ἡμεῖς φύσει – suggest that both are singled out for special emphasis. In the first place, each could have been omitted without significantly altering the denotative meaning of vv. 15–16. If these two verses form a single sentence, as appears

11 Note that all three of the passages employing the third usage occur prior to 2.15–17.

12 Most scholars assume that they are Jewish Christians, but M. D. Nanos has recently argued rather convincingly that they were non-Christian Jews (*The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002]).

13 The label ψευδάδελφοί suggests that they are – or at least claim to be – Christians (cf. 2 Cor 11.26), and the nature of their dispute with Paul probably indicates that they are Jewish Christians.

likely,<sup>14</sup> then the ἡμεῖς of 16b could have served as the subject of the entire sentence, thus making the ἡμεῖς of 15 unnecessary. Similarly, if Paul's intention was simply to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles, there would have been no need for φύσει; it would simply have been understood. In the second place, the positioning of ἡμεῖς at the very beginning of the sentence and that of φύσει before rather than after Ἰουδαῖοι indicate that both words are in some way being emphasized.

The emphasis on ἡμεῖς suggests a dichotomy between the 'we' and an implied 'they'.<sup>15</sup> The meaning could be either (a) 'we are Jews but they are not' or (b) 'they are Jews but so are we'. Because the implied 'they' would almost certainly be Paul's opponents and because these opponents were almost certainly Jews (whether Christian or not), it is my own judgement that the latter meaning is the correct one: Paul tacitly acknowledges the Jewish credentials of his opponents but, at the same time, asserts that his own Jewish credentials (and those of Peter and possibly others) are in no way inferior.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the 'we' distinguishes Paul (and anyone else included in the 'we') from the opponents even as it acknowledges their common Jewish heritage.

The emphasis on φύσει could mean either (a) 'we are Jews *by birth* but they are not' or (b) 'they are Jews by birth, but so are we'. As regards the former alternative, Mark D. Nanos suggests that Paul's opponents<sup>17</sup> may very well, in fact, have been proselytes<sup>18</sup> – a suggestion that I regard as worthy of serious consideration. If this is correct, then the emphasis on φύσει becomes quite striking: 'We (unlike the opponents) are Jews by birth, not by conversion; thus, our Jewish credentials are even stronger than theirs.' Even if this is not the case, however, the wording strongly reinforces the claim that Paul's Jewish credentials are in no way inferior to those of his opponents: 'We (like our opponents) are in every sense *real Jews*.'

In short, it appears that the 'we' of Gal 2.15 is comparative ('we like they') and that the 'by birth' is either comparative or contrastive (either 'we like they' or 'we unlike they'). In both cases, the other member of either the comparison or the contrast is most likely Paul's opponents in Galatia. In short, it is difficult to see how these opponents could be included in the 'we' of vv. 15–17.

14 See, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) 137.

15 To be sure, the dichotomy could be between the 'we' and a 'you', but this would suggest that the distinction is between Paul (and others) and his Galatian readers, which appears most unlikely.

16 Cf. 2 Cor 11.22, where the situation faced by Paul is remarkably similar to that in Galatians; cf. also Phil 3.4b–5.

17 Nanos prefers the term 'influencers'.

18 Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians*, 6, 14–15, 239–42, and esp. 277–81.

(3) *Paul's opponents in Galatia as non-Christians*

Nanos has recently mounted a strong argument that, contrary to the assumption of most scholars, Paul's opponents in Galatia were not Jewish Christians – indeed, that they were not Christians at all; rather, they were 'members of the larger Jewish communities of Galatia entrusted with the responsibility of conducting Gentiles wishing more than guest status within the communities through the ritual process of proselyte conversion by which this is accomplished'.<sup>19</sup> In my judgement, Nanos may very well be correct at this point. If so, then the 'we' of Gal 2.15–17 cannot include Paul's opponents, for Paul declares (v. 16) that 'we have trusted in Christ Jesus'.

(4) *Paul's use of the third person with reference to his opponents*

As already noted, nowhere else in Galatians does Paul include his opponents when employing the first person plural. Moreover, he never speaks *to* these opponents in the second person. Consistently, when he has his opponents in mind, he speaks *about* them, using the third person.<sup>20</sup> I see no reason to view Gal 2.15–17 as an exception. Thus, it is my judgement that the 'we' of these verses excludes rather than includes Paul's opponents.

(5) *The tenor of Paul's statements regarding his opponents*

A final consideration in the argument against inclusion of Paul's opponents in the 'we' of Gal 2.15–17 is the absolutely scathing tenor of what Paul actually says about these opponents. They are 'confusing' (ταράσσειν) the Galatian Christians (1.7; 5.10), 'bewitching' (βασκάνειν) them (3.1), and 'prevent[ing] them from obeying the truth' (5.7); further, their motives in so doing are dishonorable (4.17; 6.12–13). Apparently, in Paul's view, these opponents have no redeeming features at all. Indeed, he wishes that they would castrate themselves (5.12), warns that they will face judgment (5.10), and, in fact, pronounces a curse upon them (1.9). With the possible exception of 2.15–17, this is absolutely consistent in the Galatian letter. Thus, I see no reason to suppose that, in this one passage, Paul would, 'in a friendly manner',<sup>21</sup> include these opponents in his invocation of a shared confessional statement – even as a rhetorical device.

### Conclusion

By way of summary: (1) An examination of Paul's use of the first person plural elsewhere in Galatians suggests that the 'we' of Gal 2.15–17 is employed in

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (quotation p. 6).

<sup>20</sup> Gal 1.7, 9; 2.4–5, 12; 3.1; 4.17; 5.7, 10, 12; 6.12–13.

<sup>21</sup> Martyn, *Galatians*, 248.

an exclusionary rather than an inclusionary sense – that is, to express a sharp dichotomy between the 'we' and an implied 'they'; it suggests, further, that Paul's opponents in Galatia are the 'they'; (2) the presence and placement of the first two words in 2.15 – ἡμεῖς and φύσει – suggest the same thing; (3) it may be that Paul's opponents in Galatia were not Christians at all, in which case they could not be included in the 'we' of 2.15–17; (4) elsewhere in Galatians, Paul consistently employs the *third* person, not the first, when he has his opponents in mind; and (5) the scathing tenor of Paul's comments regarding his opponents makes it highly unlikely that he would include them in the 'we' of 2.15–17.

In light of these considerations, it is my own judgement that the 'we' (ἡμεῖς) of Gal 2.15–17 refers in the first instance to Paul and Cephas, with possibly a secondary reference to Barnabas and 'the other Jews' in the Galatian churches. It does not, however, include Paul's opponents. In these verses, Paul is in no way suggesting that he and his opponents are in agreement – regarding anything; quite to the contrary! Rather, his use of the 'we' is intended to associate Cephas with himself – despite Cephas's temporary lapse (Gal 2.11–14) – precisely in the struggle against the opponents.

In 2.1–10, Paul has claimed the support of the 'pillar' apostles (James, Cephas, and John) for his mission to the Gentiles. Now, in 2.15–17, he claims the support of Cephas in his struggle against his opponents in Galatia. As in 2.1–10, to be sure, Paul makes these claims with a certain degree of ambivalence. In 2.6–9, he refers rather snidely to the 'reputation' of James, Cephas, and John as 'pillars' but insists that this made no difference to him (or to God). By the same token, in 2.11–14 he sharply rebukes Cephas for his 'hypocrisy.' Nevertheless, in 2.7–9 he insists that James, Cephas, and John approved his mission to the Gentiles. Similarly, in his use of 'we' in 2.15–17 he claims Cephas's support in his struggle against the opponents. In short, he places himself and Cephas (and possibly Barnabas and 'the other Jews') on one side of the conflict and the opponents on the other. His 'we' is by no means intended to include the latter but rather precisely to separate them from both himself and Cephas.