THE JEWISH RECIPIENTS OF GALATIANS

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Introduction

You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the nations to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs.

James to Paul in Acts 21:20b–21

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul claims for himself the title “apostle to the nations” in the same way that Peter was the “apostle to the circumcised.” Paul claims that he and Barnabas were equal to James, Cephas and John, with each a different mission field (Gal 2:7–9). The author of Acts, on the other hand, claims that Paul’s mission was a dual mission, first to the Jews in a city and then to the non-Jews, who formed harmonious communities. According to Acts 15 and 16, the Diaspora churches and Paul accepted the leadership of the Jerusalem apostles and elders. James stands out as the most senior leader in 15:19–21 and 21:17–26, whereas Peter is the apostle whom God had chosen from the start to bring the gospel to the nations (15:7–9). According to Acts 16:1–3, Paul circumcised Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother, because his Greek father had not done it at the time. The conflict between Paul and Peter in Antioch is not described.

From a historical-critical point of view it seems that the description in Galatians should be preferred. It is a direct witness of the events by one of the participants himself. From a sociological point of view, however, the idea that the movement spread first to Jewish Diaspora communities and then to their non-Jewish neighbours is more plausible. Therefore,

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1 Translation: NRSV with “nations” for “gentiles.”
2 Sociologists like Rodney Stark (The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996]) have shown that today few people
neither source should be given absolute preference over the other, but each should be critically analyzed. Clearly, both texts are written in a very different context. Paul’s letter to the Galatians is written in the heat of an unfinished debate with James’ people and with Peter in Antioch. Paul wants to take away any sense of subordination to James and Peter. The author of Acts on the other hand tries to assure his audience that Paul, who had died some twenty years earlier, was not as extreme as some remembered him, and that Peter and James approved of Paul’s work among the nations. Acts presents the compromise formula in ch. 15 as the common ground between them. Most likely it was this compromise formula that the author of Acts saw as the key to integrate the various groups of Jesus’ followers in the churches of his own days, both Jewish and gentile. It seems that for most of the first century, gentiles were a minority in most churches.3

So how should we view the composition of the Galatian churches to which Paul addresses his letter? Did these groups consist of uncircumcised gentiles, or should we see them as mixed communities? Most commentators assume the first, because the Galatians seem to belong to the uncircumcised gentiles in Paul’s mission field (Gal 2:7–9), previ-

convert as a result of preachers on the streets. Many more people convert because they have a close relationship to people attached to the religion of conversion. Stark also claims that the most likely converts of Jewish followers of Jesus were fellow Jews with whom they closely associated in Diaspora communities. This has since been debated. Many disagree with Stark, and some of the criticism is certainly justified. But I have not seen any evidence against the basic statistical relationship that Stark demonstrated: Christianity arose earlier in cities with a synagogue than it did in cities without a synagogue. Bruce Malina and John Pilch (Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006]) go a step further than Stark (a step too far in my opinion), and argue that there was no mission to the gentiles at all. Like his contemporaries, Paul would have been an ethno-centrist who could only have cared for the Israelites living among them.

3 At the 2006 SBL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, I presented a demographical model of early Christianity in various scenarios, on the basis of research by others in the fields of conversion and ancient demographics (not yet published). In the early 50s CE, all scenarios show that it is likely that only between 10 and 20% of early Christians were gentiles. In the Diaspora, the percentage of non-Jews in the early 50s CE would have been higher, but even there it is a priori likely that most groups of Jesus followers had a significant Jewish presence. Fast growing religious groups do not only recruit new converts, but often also demonstrate a high birth surplus. If migrant Jews were the first to form such groups, then they would have contributed significantly to the “gene pool” of the community. Nevertheless, second- and third-century sources suggest that the majority of believers was of gentile descent. This suggests that the conversion of gentiles was or became more likely than conversion of Jews. In this way, the majority of the churches may have been of gentile descent around the end of the first century.