

Race and Religion: The Jew/Gentile Racial Setting of the New Testament

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Introduction

To the Jews, God divided the world between themselves—His chosen people—and everyone else. The Jews believed their staunch separation as a unique people to be part and parcel to remaining holy before God. (In this regard, race and religion are inextricably intertwined.) This separation was marked by circumcision, which identified them as part of the Abrahamic covenant and recipients of God’s Law and Promised Land.

To the Gentiles (Greeks or Hellenists), one either embraced Hellenism (Greek language, religion, culture, and philosophy) or else one was ostracized as a barbarian.¹ In large part, the Greek and Roman Gentiles believed it their duty to force Hellenism on conquered peoples.

These diametrically opposing viewpoints resulted in a “dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14) that was exacerbated by the rule of first Greeks, then (Hellenistic) Romans in Palestine. Consequently, Jews and Gentiles mingled and clashed in significant ways in the First Century Mediterranean world.²

Into this volatile mix came a man from Galilee—a remote part of the Greco-Roman world—with a message that included racial reconciliation. From the start, Jesus broke down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles (Mk. 7:14-15, 19).³ And although He ministered first to Jews (Mt. 10:5-6; 15:21-28), He later commissioned His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, Mt. 28:19) and to be witnesses in “Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. Mt. 21:13; Jn. 10:16).⁴ To fulfill His “Great Commission” meant that racial issues had to be met head on.

How could these races be reconciled? How did the Jew/Gentile relationship affect Christians? Would Gentile Christians have to first become Jews? The purpose of this paper is to answer these questions by giving an overview of the Jew/Gentile racial setting of the First Century Mediterranean world and by giving an overview of the related Jew/Gentile racial issues addressed in the New Testament. The first part defines Judaism and Hellenism, gives an

¹ Although numerous other cultures vied for dominance in the First Century Mediterranean world, Hellenism was by far the greatest and, therefore, the focus of this paper. “Gentiles” refers loosely to “Hellenists” in this paper. “Barbarian” (Acts 28:2) is an onomatopoeic word given by the Greeks for other “uncivilized” languages that sound so much like “bar-bar-bar.” See Robert Picirilli, *Paul the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 14. Interestingly, both Jews and Greeks called each other atheists.

² That this distinction between Jews and Gentiles was based not only on social and religious differences, but also on differences of race, can be clearly demonstrated in the writings of Paul (e.g., Ro. 9:3-8; 11:1; Col. 3:11).

³ See J. Andrew Kirk, “Race, Class, Caste and the Bible,” *Themelios* 10, (Jan. 1985): 12.

⁴ On the ethnic significance of Acts 1:8, see “‘To the End of the Earth’: The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (September 1997): 389-399. The commission to include the Gentiles can also be seen in Christ’s prediction of Matthew 10:18 and 24:9 (cf. Mt. 22:8-10; 21:40-46). The Gospel of Matthew, though written primarily to Jews, also included many positive accounts toward Gentiles (Matt. 2:1-12; 8:5-13; 12:14-21; 15:21-28).

overview of various Jewish groups and how they interacted, and examines evidence of racial segregation, prejudice, and strife. The second part looks briefly at the Jew/Gentile relationship in the books of Acts, Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, giving special emphasis to the impact of the Judaizers on this relationship.

An Overview of the Jew/Gentile Racial Setting in the First Century

This section broadly defines Judaism and Hellenism, examines the history of strife between their adherents, and examines the racial segregation and prejudice that underpins much of that relationship.

Jews/Judaism

Although one must not characterize Judaism as monolithic,⁵ three things in common constitute Judaism: social laws, religious beliefs (including circumcision, the Sabbath, the festivals and dietary laws), and ancestry/race. These three aspects of Judaism largely determined the boundaries that separated Jews from Gentiles. The term “Jew,” then, ostensibly distinguished this race from all other ethnic and religious groups.

Living in the Holy Land and governing the nation was also integral to Jewish identity. Nevertheless, after the Diaspora the Jews derived their identity largely from synagogue life, which centered on the study of the Law (Acts 15:21). This remained important even during the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, and in fact, allowed Judaism to continue after its destruction in A.D. 70. This corporate “nomistic” identity preserved and fostered a sense of separateness from Gentiles⁶ and was promoted by the scribes and rabbis who became the custodians of the Law.

Despite this common identity, however, a general difference existed between Diaspora Jews, who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and Palestinian Jews. The Diaspora Jews, though living largely in separate communities from Gentiles, would have been far more influenced by Hellenism than Palestinian Jews. And in terms of comparative growth, they outnumbered the Palestinian Jews by two to one.

In contrast, most Palestinian Jews⁷ “tended to be more provincial than those reared in the Dispersion, and were less likely to speak Greek.”⁸ Among the stricter sects of the Jews (e.g.,

⁵ Despite how Paul characterized the relationship between Jews and Gentiles *in general* as hostile (τὴν ἔχθραν; Ephesians 2:11-22), the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman world were complex. See Bruce W. Fong, “Addressing the Issue of Racial Reconciliation According to the Principles of Ephesians 2:11-22,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (December 1995): 565-580. Fong cites W. Rader, *The Church and Racial Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11-22* (Tubingen: J.C. B. Mohr). See also the discussion in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, D. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 335f and John G. Gager, “Judaism as Seen by Outsiders,” Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg, editors, *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 99-116. Also see James Dunn, *New Perspectives on Paul and the Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 302-306.

⁶ Longenecker, 31.

⁷ Palestine of the Jews consisted of Galilee and Judea proper, but did not include Galilee of the Gentiles (Mt. 4:15). Bethsaida and Caesarea Philippi were largely Gentile cities.

⁸ Picirilli, 13.

Zealots, Pharisees, and Essenes) there was “considerable resistance to Hellenization.”⁹ Philo, who was deeply influenced by Greek philosophies, is often cited as an example of a Hellenistic Jew of the Diaspora. In contrast, the Apostle Peter was reared in Palestine and had less contact with Greek culture, language, and philosophy. Even after his conversion he found it difficult at times to socialize with Gentiles (cf. Acts 10; Gal. 2:11-14). Nevertheless, it remained possible for a Diaspora Jew to be thoroughly Hebraic, and a Palestinian Jew to be greatly influenced by Hellenism, though both would be the general exception.¹⁰

Other Jewish groups influencing the Jew/Gentile relationships included the Sadducees, a class consisting of the rich aristocracy, and whose power derived from the temple cult and political maneuverings.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Sadducees largely disappeared from the scene.

Another group consisted of the Pharisees, whom Paul called “the strictest sect” of Judaism (Acts 26:5; the name means “separated ones”).¹² “They deplored the inroads of Hellenistic ways into Jewish life under the Ptolomies and Seleucids.”¹³ During the persecutions under Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.), their zeal to keep their Hebrew way of life led to a revolt that eventually won temporary independence.¹⁴ In general, this group emphasized the letter of the Law and created many rabbinic rules that defined how one was to keep it. These rules were rejected by the Sadducees, who were also often at odds with them politically. According to Josephus, the Pharisees numbered about 6,000 during the time of Christ and were very influential.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were also involved with the early persecution of Christians (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; cf. 12:1-19) as they formed the majority of members in the ruling Jewish court (or Sanhedrin) that was the instrumental institution in affecting it. Though often at odds themselves, the Pharisees and Sadducees were united in their hatred of Christians and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ At times certain mistrust appeared between the Diaspora Jews and the Palestinian Jews. This is illustrated in the flare-up over the support of widows in Acts 6.

As a Diaspora Jew and Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-29), Paul was thoroughly acquainted with the prevailing customs of the Greco-Roman world. (See Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 46.) Evidently he studied the Greek philosophers since the NT records that he quoted Gentile sayings four times (Acts 17:28 (twice); 1 Cor. 15:33; and Titus 1:12). This may also illustrate a general acceptance on the part of the Diaspora Jews regarding what may be aligned with Hebrew ethics or thought. “The Hebraic opposition to enforced Hellenization does not mean an absolute antagonism to every Greek term, idea, or form of expression.” (Longenecker, 57) On the other hand, Paul could claim to be a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5; cf. Acts 23:6). He was knowledgeable in the rich legacy of his people through his Pharisaic training under the famous Jewish rabban Gamaliel.

¹¹ See Mt. 3:7; 16:1-12; 22:23, Acts 5:17; 23:6 and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.171–173, 293–298; 18.11, 16–17; 20.199.

¹² Picirilli, 22.

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 45. The pious Pharisees were known earlier as the Hasidim, those who keep the covenant love or hesed. See F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 69-70.

¹⁴ Antiochus gained their animosity by setting up Zeus worship in the temple and by forbidding Jews from practicing their religion. The liberating of the temple is commemorated in the Festival of Dedication (Hanukkah, or Feast of Lights).

foreigners.¹⁵

The Essenes were another Jewish religious group that emphasized a celibate and communal way of life. They strictly observed the Law, the Sabbath, and purification rites, and required a three-year initiation period before allowing a Jew to join the community. Josephus mentions about 4,000 men who lived this way around the time of Christ.¹⁶

When Christianity began to spread throughout the Mediterranean world, another significant group, known as the Judaizers, played a negative role in the relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This paper takes up the problem of the Judaizers shortly.

Hellenists and Hellenization

Hellenization refers to the active spread of Greek language and culture, which began under Alexander the Great (circa 320 B.C.), but continued long after his death, especially among the nations controlled by the Romans. The Romans (and others) were therefore called “Hellenists,” who were “people of non-Greek origin who adopt and promote Greek customs.”¹⁷

The Hellenic way of life included Greek art, architectural designs, and buildings such as the agora, theaters, baths, gymnasiums, and temples. The latter three were probably an affront to Hebrew practice, especially the temples, and were certainly avoided by pious Jews. Hellenism also included schools of philosophy and the learning and promotion of (koine) Greek, which became the language of commerce.

Strife and Persecution

Josephus notes that the Jews had a great deal of autonomy under Roman rule¹⁸ as long as they cooperated—and many did. However, a large, vocal group of pious Jews and Zealots resisted any compromise with rule by Rome or its Hellenization. In fact, Josephus mentions the hatred between the Jews and the Romans numerous times in *The Wars of the Jews*,¹⁹ especially during the violent and bloody conquest of the Jews in Palestine by the Roman generals Vespasian and Titus (A.D. 67-71). Philo, a Hellenistic Jew, likewise mentioned the animosity.²⁰ Open conflict lasted between A.D. 66 and 73, with the final battle occurring at Masada.²¹

Unfortunately, this national/religious zeal (cf. Jn. 11:50-51) spilled over against the Christians as well.²² They persecuted Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine (Acts 7:57; 9:1-2; 12:2; 1 Cor. 15:9) and elsewhere (Acts 13:50).

The Roman Emperor Nero also persecuted the Christians from A.D. 64 to 68, blaming them for a fire that damaged or destroyed much of Rome. Tradition says that Paul died under

¹⁵ Edersheim, 30.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.1.2.

¹⁷ Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background : A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) Libronix e-book. The term “Hellenism” occurs in 2 Macc. 4:10, 13; 6:9; 11:24.

¹⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6.4.2.

¹⁹ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, (1.1, 2.3; 2.18.8, 9; 3.7.1; 4.3.3; 5.6.1; 6.3.5; 6.4.7; and 7.3.3. William Whiston, Trans., *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), Libronix e-book.

²⁰ Philo, *Flaccus*, 1.

²¹ Josephus *Jewish Wars*, 6.8.6.

²² Christ warned of persecutions for His disciples (Mt. 24:9; Mk. 13:9-13).

this persecution. The Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) instituted emperor worship, proclaiming himself to be “God the Lord.” When the Jews and Christians resisted, persecution resulted.

Segregation

Segregation because of religious and social practice characterized the relationship between Jews and Gentiles recorded in the New Testament. This was demonstrated in the lack of associations between Jews and Samaritans (Lk. 9:53-56; Jn. 4:9; cf. Ecclesiasticus 1:25-26)²³ and in the ceremonial separation between Jews and Gentiles (Jn. 18:28; Acts 10:28; 11:3; 22:21-23; Gal. 2:11-13). For a Jew, crossing the racial line meant to “defile” oneself—to violate one’s religious beliefs (cf. Jn. 18:28; Acts 11:3; 21:17f). In fact, Barclay noted that if a Jew married a Gentile, the Jewish family would actually hold a funeral for the young man or woman.²⁴ The religious nature of the division between Jews and all other races created a nearly impenetrable barrier (though not all Jews followed this with prejudice).

Gentile writers, in turn, reacted to this with derision:

“...many educated Romans despised Jews because of their strange customs, proselytizing and exclusiveness (“haters of the human race”) and because they showed no respect to Roman gods (Tacitus *Hist.* 5.8; Quintilian *Inst. Orat.* 3.7.21; Suetonius *Claudius* 25.4; Juvenal *Sat.* 14.96–104).”²⁵

Even though the inclusion of the Gentiles as proselytes²⁶ existed in Judaism, the Jews often rejected the idea. This seems especially evident when the Gentiles were given preferential treatment over them (Lk. 4:25-29) or when the temple or rituals came into question (Acts 22:21-23; Gal. 2:11-13). A whole host of stipulations grew up during the intertestamental period to define and preserve distinct lines of separation between Jews and Gentiles beyond God’s intent.²⁷

²³ The Jews incurred their animosity for having destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim in 128 B.C.

²⁴ Barclay, William. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Edinburgh: (The Saint Andrews Press, 1972), 125. Jews would not, therefore, serve in the military as this would prevent Sabbath keeping and possibly result in eating meat offered to idols. See Stambaugh, 51.

²⁵ Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000) Libronix e-book.

²⁶ One may consider God’s election and separation of Israel from other nations as racist, but, in fact, His purpose was to preserve a holy people to Himself. This separation was temporary and never excluded those who sincerely wanted to convert. The Old Testament provided for the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant promises under certain circumstances. See Julius Scott, Jr., “Gentiles and the Ministry of Jesus: Further Observations on Matt 10:5-6; 15:21-28,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (June 1990): 165.

See also Arthur Lewis’ handling of the laws for treating sojourners, intermarriage, and other nations in “Jehovah’s International Love,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15, (Spring 1972): 87-92. See also Walter Kaiser, “The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (June 1977): 97-111.

In addition, God intended that Israel be a model society from which He could reveal His nature and purposes to all nations (Is. 11:10; 49:6; 56:7; Mk. 11:17; Acts 13:46-48; Ro. 15:12), in order to provoke the inclusion of the Gentiles through the revelation of God’s glory in the theocracy. (In fact, Paul mentions this very effect in reverse. The belief of the Gentiles should now provoke the Jews to jealousy and salvation (Ro. 11:11).)

²⁷ See Edersheim, *Sketches*, 31-32. Edersheim wrote: “So terrible was the intolerance, that a Jewess was actually forbidden to give help to her heathen neighbor, when about to become a mother (*Avod. S.* 2.1!)”

In summary, separation from Gentiles came from the Jewish religious ideas of purity and holiness—imposed primarily to stay separate from idolatry. This was most seen in the rules separating Gentiles from the temple (with stringent warnings of death to trespassers) as well as the prohibitions against social interchange and intermarriage.

Prejudice

Prejudice appeared in the animosity between Jews and Samaritans (Lk. 9:53-56; Jn. 4:9), between Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews (Acts 6:1) and between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 19:32-34; Titus 1:10-12). In Paul's epistle to the Romans, both Jews and Gentiles showed prejudice in their boasting and judgmental attitude (Ro. 2:1, 12, 17; 3:9; 11:13, 17-18).

However, despite impressions from the writings of several contemporary Latin authors who “poke fun at circumcision, abstinence from pork, and Sabbath observance,” prejudice between Jews and Gentiles was not necessarily widespread. John Gager noted that the Roman authors’ “jokes must be seen as part of their literary calling, which required them to resist the invasion of foreign cults and customs.”²⁸ Flare-ups of racial prejudice were more often the result of specific outbreaks against oppressive overlords. As a whole, the Jews enjoyed a great deal of popularity among the various peoples with whom they settled, including the Romans. This is most evident by the existence of numerous God-fearers found in the ancient world and by the success of some Jews in proselytizing Gentiles.²⁹ Paradoxically, the Romans expelled the Jews from Rome no less than three times during the first century for various alleged infractions!³⁰

It may suffice to recognize that in any society of such ethnic diversity, there exists (along social, religious, and racial lines) segregation and prejudice as well as toleration and acceptance.

An Overview of Jew/Gentile Racial Tensions Addressed in the New Testament

Jew/Gentile racial issues are frequently addressed in the New Testament³¹ and this paper has already examined several. However, one of the most significant groups that caused racial tension between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles was the Judaizers. This paper now turns to this group and the problems they caused.

The Judaizer Problem

A group, comprised largely of Jewish Christians, and known derogatively to Paul as the

²⁸ John G. Gager, “Judaism as Seen by Outsiders,” ed. Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 110.

²⁹ See Scott, Jr., “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of Its Jewish Setting,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (December 1991): 476-477. See Acts 2. Certainly Jewish culture also influenced the Greeks. Josephus mentions several accounts of conversion in *Antiquities* 18.81-84 and 20.17-48. For God-fearers see Acts 13:16.

³⁰ In AD 41, Claudius banned Jewish meetings (Dio Cassius *Roman History* 60.6.6). The Jews were also expelled under Tiberius (AD 19) because of a scandal involving the misappropriation of funds for the Jerusalem temple (Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius* 36).

³¹ A sampling of both direct and indirect verses includes: Lk. 4:25-29; 9:53-56; 19:7; Jn. 4:9; 18:28; Acts 6:1; 10:1-11:18; 11:3; 19:32-34; 22:21-23; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 2:11-21; 3:28; 5:6-12; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6, 8-9; 4:1-6; Col. 3:11-15; Titus 1:10-13; 1 Pt. 2:9-10.

Judaizers,³² taught the necessity of keeping the Law of Moses and Jewish customs before becoming a Christian. The hallmarks of their heresy consisted of requiring circumcision (Gal. 5:2, 11; 6:12-15), separation from Gentiles (Gal. 2:14-21), observance of the Mosaic Law (Gal. 3:2; 5:4) and certain festivals (Gal. 4:10), and apparent interest in being ‘sons of Abraham’ (3:6-29; 4:21-31).³³ In Jerusalem, the Judaizers consisted of a small, but vocal minority of Pharisees (Acts 15:5), who were known for their strict adherence to the law.³⁴

Theologically, the heresy was a threat to the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14-16) because justification comes by faith alone (Gal. 2:15-21). In practical terms, it instilled a sectarian spirit by separating Christian Jews from Christian Gentiles and by pressuring Gentile Christians to conform to the customs of Judaism. It thus worked against the reconciling nature of the gospel.

A controversy erupted in A.D. 49 when the Judaizers came to Antioch and taught that a person must first become a Jew before becoming a follower of Christ (Acts 15:1-2). At stake was not only how the gospel was to be presented to the Gentiles—would they have to jump through all the hoops of Judaism?—but the very gospel itself, which is not dependent on works (Eph. 2:8-10). The disagreement between Paul and the Judaizers resulted in the meeting at Jerusalem with the apostles and elders (Acts 15). The conclusion of the council sought to respect both Jews and Gentiles, thus preventing any hindrance for members of either group to come to Christ (Acts 15:19-21). The spread of the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles was taken into account and balanced, especially with respect to the sensibilities of the Jews.³⁵

Galatians and the Judaizers

Paul’s letter to the Galatians expressed astonishment that the Galatians had deserted the teachings of the gospel to follow the ritual law of the Judaizers (Gal. 1:6-10). Paul soundly rebuked the Galatians for abandoning the truth of the gospel—the truth that “a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16).

As part of his argument, Paul recited an incident in which he had rebuked³⁶ Peter for compromising the gospel in a similar way. While at Antioch, Peter had eaten with Gentiles, but when a group of Judaizers came from Jerusalem (seemingly with authority from James), Peter separated himself from the Gentiles. Other Jews, including Barnabas, joined Peter’s hypocrisy.

³² The name “Judaizers” is taken from Gal. 2:14 (ioudaizo). Paul had harsh words for the Judaizers (cf. Phil 3:2-4; Gal. 5:12). See the discussion in J. Becker, *The Faithfulness of God and the Priority of Israel in Paul’s Letter to the Romans* in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl Donfried, *The Romans Debate Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, Massachusetts: 1991), 328.

³³ Walt Russell, “Who Were Paul’s Opponents in Galatia?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (July 1990): 331.

³⁴ F. F. Bruce captured the argument of the Judaizers (see Bruce, 180-181). See also an excellent assessment in Paul Minear, *The Obedience of Faith* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1971), 73-74.

³⁵ The other commitment made by Paul at the Jerusalem council was to “remember the poor” (Gal. 2:20). Out of this request came Paul’s passion to gather an offering from the Gentiles to the Jewish poor in Jerusalem. See Acts 24:17; Ro. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:3-4; and 2 Cor. 8-9.

A decade or so after the Jerusalem council’s decision, Paul had harsh words for the Judaizers who had evidently influenced the Philippians by their heresy (Phil 3:2-4; cf. Gal. 5:12). Paul derided the Judaizers as the “concision”—mutilators of the flesh (Phil. 3:2).

³⁶ Paul’s words of rebuke to Peter includes the harsh terms *anthistemi* (set against) and *kategnosmenos* (know against; blame based on the act itself) in Gal. 2:11.

Paul not only addressed this as a threat to the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14-16), but he also expressed his concern over the resultant separation between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians (Gal. 2:12). Often buried in the theological discussion of this passage is the segregation that took place. Further, the separation of the Jewish Christians from the Gentile Christians must have had a negative impact on the self-esteem of the Gentile Christians. Consequently, the Judaizers posed a real threat to the reconciliation of the races.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the Judaizers

The Judaizer problem may very well have been on Paul's mind as he wrote to the Romans. He wrote shortly after the Emperor Claudius had expelled the large Jewish community (numbering perhaps 40,000 to 60,000) from Rome, "since they were continually making disturbances fomented by Chrestus" (a possible reference to Christ).³⁷ J. Dunn commented that this community:

"...was both influential in Rome and deeply despised, not to say hated, by the most influential voices of Roman intelligentsia. This was partly because of its sheer size, partly because of the preferential treatment they had received from Julius Caesar and Augustus, and, probably more importantly, because of the numbers of Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism."³⁸

The Roman authorities made a *racial response* to the disturbances by expelling the entire Jewish community (especially when only a portion was probably involved in the unrest). However justified the Roman authorities were for maintaining civil order, they targeted an entire ethnic group at Rome.³⁹

In constructing his epistle to the Romans, Paul may have recognized a very real threat to the gospel in the circumstances surrounding the recent banishment of the Jews from Rome. There would naturally be a heightened sense of racial division and residual animosity as the Jews returned, since they would find the leadership of the Church in Gentile hands. This could make the Jewish Christians more zealous for Jewish customs and segregation and therefore more sympathetic to the message of the Judaizers. If the "gospel" of the Judaizers had not preceded Paul to Rome, it would eventually get there (cf. Ro. 16:17-18).⁴⁰

³⁷ Estimates of Jews at Rome range from 10,000 to 60,000. See Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4, n. 10. See Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.300-301 and *Jewish Wars* 2.80-81. Seutonius *Claudius* 25.4.

³⁸ Hawthorne, 839.

³⁹ Nero succeeded Claudius as the Roman emperor in AD 54. At this change in emperorship the edict would no longer be in force and these Jews could return to Rome without hindrance. Thus, the Bible records in Acts 18:2 that the Jewish Christian, Aquila, was expelled from Rome. Later we find him back in Rome (Ro. 16:3) when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

⁴⁰ Perhaps the Jewish Christians returning to Rome several years after the expulsion of Claudius may have brought it with them. Thomas Schreiner wrote: "He knew that doubts and questions had surfaced in the Roman congregations about his gospel, but he did not yet face full-fledged opponents. These apprehensions about Paul's teaching in Rome could be alleviated if his gospel were thoroughly explained, particularly on issues relating to Jews and Gentiles." See Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998) 21. All Rome would know that Paul was "not ashamed" of the gospel!

Paul mentioned those who slandered him (Ro. 3:8) and those who “cause divisions and put obstacles in your way” (Ro. 16:17)—earmarks of the Judaizers.⁴¹ But most importantly, Paul’s letter to the Romans seeks to level the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in Christ and reconcile the two factions—thus *preventing* a hostile environment ripe for the heresy of the Judaizers. The merging of dissimilar cultures and backgrounds would naturally cause friction and inevitably raise “questions as to Jewish and Christian identity.”⁴² This could be fuel for the Judaizer’s match, and Paul sought to avoid disunity through the reconciliatory message of the gospel. Thus, at least part of Paul’s goal in writing his epistle was to avoid the past problems and reconcile the races.⁴³

The Judaizers and Racial Problems in Acts

The Book of Acts followed the steady movement of the gospel message not only out from Jerusalem, but also away from Judaism and Jewish culture (cf. Acts 21:19-20). First was the promise that God “will pour out his Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Then, confirmation of the Spirit came on a) the Samaritans (who had one foot in Judaism and one foot through intermarriage in the Gentile world; Acts 8:4-25); b) the Godfearers of Cornelius’ household (who were Gentiles following many Jewish practices; Acts 10:1-11:18); and finally, c) on the Gentiles of Antioch (who practiced neither circumcision nor Jewish customs; Acts 11:19-30; 15:1-35). The Jerusalem Council convened to address directly the dispute between the Judaizers and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:1-2). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, coupled with Paul and Barnabas’ report of the “miraculous signs and wonders” among the Gentiles, provided overwhelming proof that Gentiles did not have to first become Jewish proselytes before becoming Christians. They concluded that grace and faith—not circumcision—determined salvation (Acts 15:11). Thus, ceremonial law was rendered an unnecessary “yoke” (Acts 15:10). The decision of the Jerusalem council did not end the controversies, however, but it did lay the

⁴¹ Another earmark of the Judaizers was their boasting about “your flesh”—the number of Gentiles they could get circumcised. Paul responded that he did not boast “except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:13-14). The Greek word for “boasting” and its cognates appeared in contexts where Paul dealt with the prejudice of the Judaizers or spoke regarding racial reconciliation, especially in Romans and Corinthians (Ro. 2:17f; 3:27-31; 11:18; 15:17; 1 Cor. 1:22-31; 2 Cor. 11:12-30; cf. Jer. 9:24 LXX.), and also in the critical passage in Eph. 2:8-22. Boasting about one’s race is an obvious characteristic of racial prejudice.

⁴² J. Dunn, *Letter to the Romans*, ed. G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, D. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 839. He states, “This alone is sufficient to explain some of the characteristic elements and the message of the letter [to the Romans]: for example, ‘who/what is a Jew?’ (Rom 2:25-29); who are ‘the elect of God?’ (Rom 1:7; 8:33; 9:6-13; 11:5-7, 28-32); and the climactic position of Romans 9-11 and Romans 15:8-12.”

⁴³ In this case, it is not necessary for us to identify factionalism at Rome, only that it *could* occur. This purpose could also explain such major chapters as Ro. 2:17-3:31 (equal basis of Jews and Gentiles in Christ); Ro. 14 (where the “weak and the strong”—Jews and Gentiles respectively—are not to impose their consciences on each other). Chapter 16 shows the house churches divided among Jews and Gentiles. Further, Paul couches all his theological discussion in terms of the Jew/Gentile situation. And his diatribe is designed to unite Jews and Gentiles. See D. F. Watson, *Diatribe*, ed. G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, and D. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 213-214. See also Michael Goulder, *The Pauline Epistles* in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 497. T. W. Manson, *St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, in *The Romans Debate*, 4, wrote: “Romans is the calm and collected summing-up of Paul’s position as it had been hammered out in the heat of controversy during the previous months.”

groundwork from which the gospel would spread in a more balanced way for both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, in his methodical manner, Luke showed us that salvation was extended to all—both Jew and Gentile. One by one the barriers of racial separation were torn down.

A further point to all this discussion is that the Judaizers were not only a significant movement in First Century Christianity, but also an indication of the resistance of Judaism against Hellenization. The Judaizer problem has largely been ignored as evidence of the opposite poles of Judaism and Hellenism. The resistance of the Judaizers was a “hold over” of the same resistance that existed in the Jewish community against the pressure of Hellenization. As misinformed as they were, the Judaizers sincerely intended to keep a separate, holy people in honor of God (albeit according to the old rules).

Ephesians and Racial Reconciliation

Perhaps a final word on racial reconciliation is in order and the keynote passage regarding this is Ephesians 2:11-22. Here Paul states that the “dividing wall of hostility” that was mutually erected by Jews and Greeks was destroyed in Christ. In His death the racial enmity of this age also died, for we died with Him. The resulting new man exists as part of the future humanity of the new creation age, where ethnicity remains, but racial animosity has ended.

Summary and Conclusion

Comprehending the multi-faceted conditions of the Jew/Gentile relationship contributes greatly to the background and understanding of the First Century situation and of the New Testament. It informs us of several important groups and many events—locally in Palestine and empire-wide. It plays an important role in understanding the growth of the fledgling Church and many early problems and challenges it faced. But perhaps most importantly, it shows how the Jewish and Gentile Christians struggled to overcome the racial walls of separation long entrenched in the Mediterranean world.

At Caesarea and Antioch, the eschatological Spirit had marked the Gentiles as members of the new community without requiring them to first keep Jewish rituals and customs. Further, where the Law had separated Jews and Gentiles, and where Gentiles had once been “aliens and strangers” from the covenants and patriarchs, now, through Christ, they were united together into “one new man” (what Dodd called a “supra-national society”). Christianity provided a solution through the formation of a third group—yes, born out of Judaism, but ultimately neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28)—that offered an alternative to the existing racial divisions.⁴⁴ Here lies the Christian basis for racial reconciliation: our identity no longer lies in racial status, but in our identity in Christ.

Despite how the Judaizers tried to rebuild the wall that Christ had torn down, the gospel of unity persisted. “There is no difference” (Ro. 3:22-23; 10:12-13) Paul would proclaim. No matter what race one hails from, all are united in Christ the same way.

⁴⁴ See Ro. 2:28-29; 9:6; Eph. 2:15; 1 Pt. 2:9.

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