

106 “APOSTLE TO GENTILES”— A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING

Scripture states repeatedly that Paul was an apostle to the gentiles. These statements, understandably, give the impression that Paul's primary mission was to set up and teach in gentile assemblies. We will seek to show this was not the case. The many Jewish synagogues scattered through-out the Roman Empire were the fertile ground for the spread of the gospel to Jews and gentiles alike. Non-Jews were already taking part in synagogue life. Apparently what was meant by “apostle to the gentiles” was that Paul would take the gospel to synagogues in gentile regions of the Roman Empire where many non-Jewish synagogue attendees were already interested in or devoted to the God of the Tanakh.

The Tanakh, from which Paul taught, did not exist in a packable book as we know it today. Tanakh scrolls were cumbersome and impossible to transport in quantity. Paul likely relied on the well-kept Scriptures available in the synagogues for teaching and studying. The synagogue was not a place of worship, but a place where communities gathered to hear the scriptures read, explained and discussed. The further from Jerusalem the synagogue was located, the more welcome were non-Jews in these establishments. It was, in fact, normal to have sizable non-Abrahamic people frequenting synagogues. These congregants were attracted to the transcendent monotheism, the high moral values and the sacred scriptures taught in the synagogues.

Although there were often large groups of non-Israelites attending synagogue, they primarily formed an outer circle and did not become full initiates. To become a Jew, one had to be circumcised, baptized in the mikveh and participate in the observance of Torah laws. Although gentiles were generous in giving to the temple, most believed circumcision to be barbaric and the ritual and dietary laws oppressive and isolating. In Acts these believers were referred to as “those who feared God” and similar epithets that distinguished them from the pagan population. We will notice that scripture reveals the God-fearers participated fully in synagogue life.

1. EXAMPLES OF GOD FEARERS:

A. A Capernaum Roman centurion had warm relations with the Jews, had built their synagogue and expressed great faith. He was, undoubtedly, a God-fearer. See entire passage: Lk 7:1-10

“When he [centurion] heard about Jesus, he sent to him [Jesus] elders of the Jews, asking him to come and save his servant. When they came to Jesus, they begged him earnestly, saying, ‘He is worthy for you to do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built our synagogue for us.’” Lk 7:3-5

“[Jesus] turned and said to the multitude who followed him, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith, no, not in Israel.’” Lk 7:9

B. Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea, was a God-fearer.

“Now there was a certain man in Caesarea, Cornelius by name, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man, and one who feared God with all his house, who gave gifts for the needy generously to the people, and always prayed to God.” Acts 10:1-2

2. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN ANTIOCH

A. Paul addressed men of Israel and those who feared God (gentiles) in the synagogue.

They [Paul and Silas] went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, speak.” Paul stood up, and gesturing with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.” Acts 13:14-16

B. Paul addressed those “of the stock of Abraham” and those who fear God (gentiles) in the synagogue.

“Brothers, children of the stock of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, the word of this salvation is sent out to you.” Acts 13:26

C. Paul was preaching to Jews and devout peoples (gentiles) in the synagogue.

“So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the synagogue broke up, many of the Jews and of the devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas; who, speaking to them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.” Acts 13:42-43

D. Paul's teaching, the next Sabbath, attracted great numbers of gentiles, but many Jews objected.

“The next Sabbath, almost the whole city was gathered together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted the things which were spoken by Paul, and blasphemed. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, and said, ‘It was necessary that God's word should be spoken to you [Jews] first. Since indeed you thrust it from yourselves, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.’” Acts 13:44-46

3. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN ICONIUM

Paul and Barnabas converted both Jews and God-fearing Greeks (gentiles) alike in the synagogue.

“In Iconium, they [Paul and Barnabas] entered together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks believed.” Acts 14:1

4. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN THESSALONICA

It was Paul's custom to go into the synagogue when he arrived in a town. Here he would find Jews and “devout Greeks.”

“They [Paul and Silas] came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. Paul, as was his custom, went in to them; and for three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas: of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and not a few of the chief women.” Acts 17:1-4

5. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN BEROEA

Paul converted Jews and Greeks alike in the synagogue.

"The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Beroea. When they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed; also of the prominent Greek women, and not a few men." Acts 17:10-12

6. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN ATHENS

Paul reasoned with Jews and devout persons in the synagogue.

"So he [Paul] reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who met him." Acts 17:17

7. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN CORINTH

Paul persuaded both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue.

"He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and persuaded Jews and Greeks." Acts 18:4

8. PAUL AT THE SYNAGOGUE IN EPHESUS

Paul taught both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue. Because he met opposition, he migrated his ministry from the synagogue to a Greek school.

"He entered into the synagogue and spoke boldly for a period of three months, reasoning and persuading about the things concerning God's Kingdom. But when some were hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and separated the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all those who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." Acts 19:8-10

9. PAUL REVIEWED HIS RECORD OF TEACHING IN THE SYNAGOGUES OF ASIA MINOR TO THE ELDERS.

Paul had testified to Jews and Greeks in the synagogues.

"He [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to himself the elders of the assembly. When they had come to him, he said to them.... 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you all the time, teaching you publicly [in the synagogue] and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus.'" Acts 20:17-21

10. THE GOSPEL WAS FOR THE JEW FIRST. PAUL WAS FAITHFUL TO THIS PRINCIPLE IN ALL HIS TRAVELS AND TEACHING.

The Jews were the custodians of the holy scriptures (Rom 1:2) and gentiles benefited beyond measure.

"For I am not ashamed of the Good News of Christ, because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek." Rom 1:16

CLOSING THOUGHTS: Contrary to the idea that Paul had to start from scratch in converting gentiles from pagan beliefs, devout Greeks were found in the many synagogues scattered throughout Asia Minor and Europe. They were already meeting together weekly, forming powerful communities around prayer, Torah reading, discussion and scripture memorization. Paul found gentile congregants, along with the Jews, who already possessed a Messianic expectation.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: Although there were many upheavals and severe persecutions of Christians, the separation of Christians from Jews, seemingly, was not fully actualized until the Roman and Jewish conflict starting in AD 66. Even in AD 62, God-fearing Jews in Jerusalem defended the Christian ministry of James, Jesus' half brother. When the newly installed High Priest ordered the death of James, there was a great out-cry by Jews to both King Agrippa II and the newly commissioned governor of Judea. Because of this out-cry, the High Priest, who had served only 3 months, was abruptly removed from his office by King Agrippa. (Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1)

In this study:

Gentiles = God fearers = those who fear God = devout Greeks = devout proselytes = Greeks = devout persons

Additional reading

God fearers: <https://bibliva.kimnet.media/encyclopedia/people-groups/god-fearers>

Paul: <https://bibliva.kimnet.media/encyclopedia/characters/paul>

Synagogues in the first century: <https://uasvbible.org/2026/03/11/synagogues-in-the-first-century-c-e/>