

Paul and Earlier Disciples of Jesus

Key Passages

Galatians 1:11-2:17

Galatians 5:1-15

Acts 6:1-15; 8:1-17; 9:1-9

In Galatians 5:11 Paul denies that he is 'still preaching circumcision'. This could suggest that, prior to conversion, Paul had been active in a Jewish mission to the Gentiles.

So it appears that Paul's concern for Gentiles and their status before God precedes his vision on the Damascus road. The issue concerning the place of Gentiles emerged partly because of tension between two of Israel's convictions, election (i.e. that Israel had been chosen as a special covenant people) and monotheism (i.e. that YHWH is the one God over all the nations of the earth).

Views about the origin of Paul's Gentile mission can be listed in four main categories:

(1) Later Development

Most scholars see the Gentile mission as a basic conviction of Paul which is present almost from the beginning of his post-conversion life, but a few regard this mission as a later development. This is often based on Romans 11, where the way that Paul speaks about Gentile mission suggests that it originated from and was directly related to the lack of positive response in the mission of the Jews. In this view Paul was formerly a missionary to Jews, but lack of success and reflection on this led him to turn to the Gentiles instead. So Paul became a missionary to the Gentiles because he was in fact 'a failed missionary to the Jews' (Francis Watson).

(2) Hellenistic Jewish-Christian Mission to the Gentiles

Some scholars hold that the church that Paul persecuted had already begun a mission to the Gentiles, that Paul just accepted this mission upon his conversion, and that he only later began to work out its theological implications for himself. Heikki Räisänen has argued that the Hellenists (Acts 6:1-2) were already spontaneously admitting Gentiles without circumcision in response to the charismatic gifts of the Spirit in these Gentile believers. The gifts were seen as God's confirmation of their acceptance, and this view was accepted by Paul initially and it was only later that he developed a specific theology to support this innovation.

(3) Conversion and Call

As already noted, most scholars see Paul's concern for Gentiles as a fundamental conviction present from the commencement of his new faith. Some even see the Damascus experience itself as the source of this conviction. Some see Paul's experience as a prophetic call similar to that of Jeremiah, but they do not say precisely how Paul came to know this. More common is the view that this realization came as a direct corollary of Paul's changed attitude to Torah. In his conversion experience Paul abandoned his former conviction that Torah observance was necessary to salvation; but now salvation comes through Christ and not through Torah. The logic would read like this: if salvation is not through the Torah, then the Torah-based distinction between Jew and Gentile is irrelevant, and salvation is available to all on equal terms. But this means that the salvation of Gentiles is predicated upon the obsolescence of Judaism.

(4) Pre-Christian Attitudes

Some scholars see Paul's concern for Gentiles as a basic conviction, held even prior to his conversion, which deepened but did not change this concern. The basis for this conviction was in the Jewish traditions concerning the 'pilgrimage of the nations', i.e. that at the time of the final eschatological deliverance of God, the Gentiles would come to share in the blessings alongside the Jews. So upon his realization that the Messiah was Jesus, Paul came naturally to the conclusion that it was time to invite the Gentiles to share in the blessings.