



THE EARLIEST Converts

BY RUDY D. GONZALEZ

CHRISTIANITY IS A faith with adherents from every ethnicity and nationality, but at its inception the earliest converts were Jewish.¹

On the two earliest occasions when Peter spoke publicly, he addressed his audience as “brethren” (Acts 2:29; 3:17),² and identified them specifically as “men of Israel” (2:22; 3:12). Tertullus, an attorney and associate of Ananias the high priest, called these earliest believers “the sect of the Nazarenes” (24:5, HCSB), while Saul of Tarsus, who would have eagerly disowned them, also believed them to be a sect within Judaism (v. 14).³ For their part, these converts thought of themselves as followers of “the Way” (9:2; 19:9,23), “saints” and, of course, “the church.”⁴ All of these early names set them apart as a new religious development.⁵ The earliest converts saw themselves, as one writer put it, “as a fulfillment of Judaism, built on, rather than rejecting, its past.”⁶

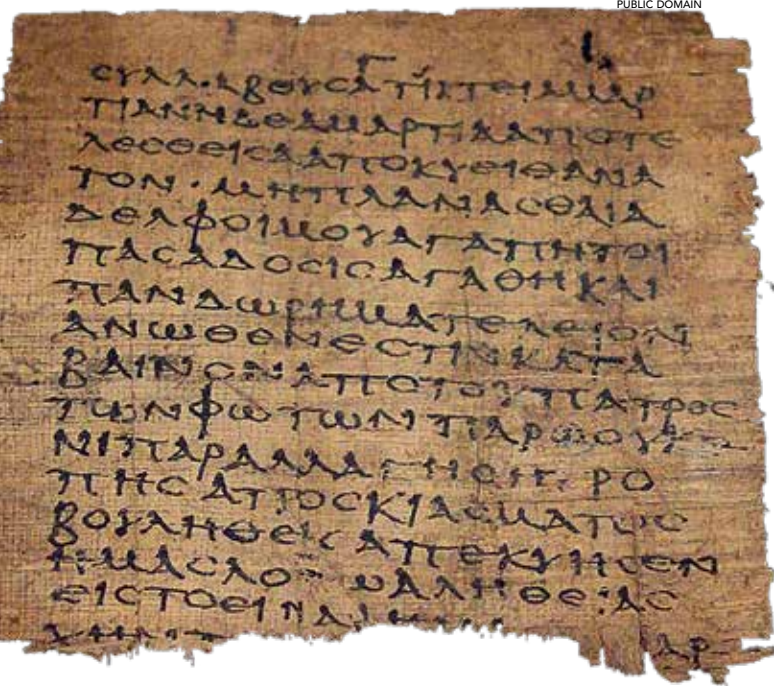
The earliest believers hailed from the various strata of Jewish social



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ JERUSALEM (4/12/11)



PUBLIC DOMAIN



Left: Fragment of the Book of James dated to the 3rd cent.

Above left: Denarius of Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) known today as the Tribute Penny. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was asked whether paying tax to the Roman emperor was lawful. On asking to see the “tribute money,” He was shown a denarius, bearing the image of Caesar. He replied, “Render to Caesar the things that are

life. Some converts were from the lower classes, people who would have made their livelihood in any number of commercial trades and crafts such as: butchers, carpenters, tanners, bakers, cobblers, barbers, fishermen, and the like.⁷ Many would have been peasant day laborers. In contrast, priests (not necessarily Sadducees) and some Pharisees also embraced the faith (6:7; 15:5). While the Epistle of James, which some hold to be the earliest canonical book, mentions

wealthy people attending believers’ gatherings (Jas. 1:10-11; 2:2-6; 5:1), it does so to condemn their ill-treatment of the poor in the congregation. And in this vein, Carsten Colpe, the German theologian, identified severe economic stress as leading to the original self-designation of the first congregation in Jerusalem.⁸ If we take seriously their benevolent self-sacrificing actions (Acts 4), or Paul’s sustained drive to raise a collection (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:13-14; 9:12), or the burdensome taxation under Roman and

Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, KJV). Roman taxes were paid mostly in silver denari or later, gold coins.

Above: A 2nd or 3rd cent. A.D. Christian graffiti-like drawing of a ship with a Latin inscription which reads, “We have arrived.” The drawing was discovered beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem.

Right: Ruins at Pella, which was one of the

Decapolis cities. Excavations conducted on the hills have unearthed Canaanite ruins dating to the 15th cent. B.C. During the first Jewish revolt before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 66/67, when the Roman army threatened the city, a significant portion of the Christians of the Jerusalem church sought refuge in Pella. Ruins of Byzantine buildings dominate the site, including the church at the top of the stairs.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/27/43)



Left: The Greek Orthodox Church of St. Stephen dominates the north end of Jerusalem's Kidron Valley and commemorates the traditional site of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (3/27/12)

Herodian rule,⁹ then poverty must have been a brutal fact of life for many. History records that many in the early church eventually fled to Pella, east of the Jordan River. Known as the Ebionites, derived from the Hebrew, *ebionim*, they self-identified their group as “the poor ones.”¹⁰

With respect to their socialization, maintaining good relations in the broader community had to be a challenge. After all, they saw themselves as the *ekklesia*, a community called out from among their neighbors to reflect true Israel! They practiced two rites, baptism and the memorial meal, which challenged Jewish ritual bathing and more directly, the Passover. Additionally, they went

beyond attending temple and synagogue services, meeting in homes regularly to pray and to share in the breaking of bread, thus boldly setting their fellowship apart (Acts 2:42-47).

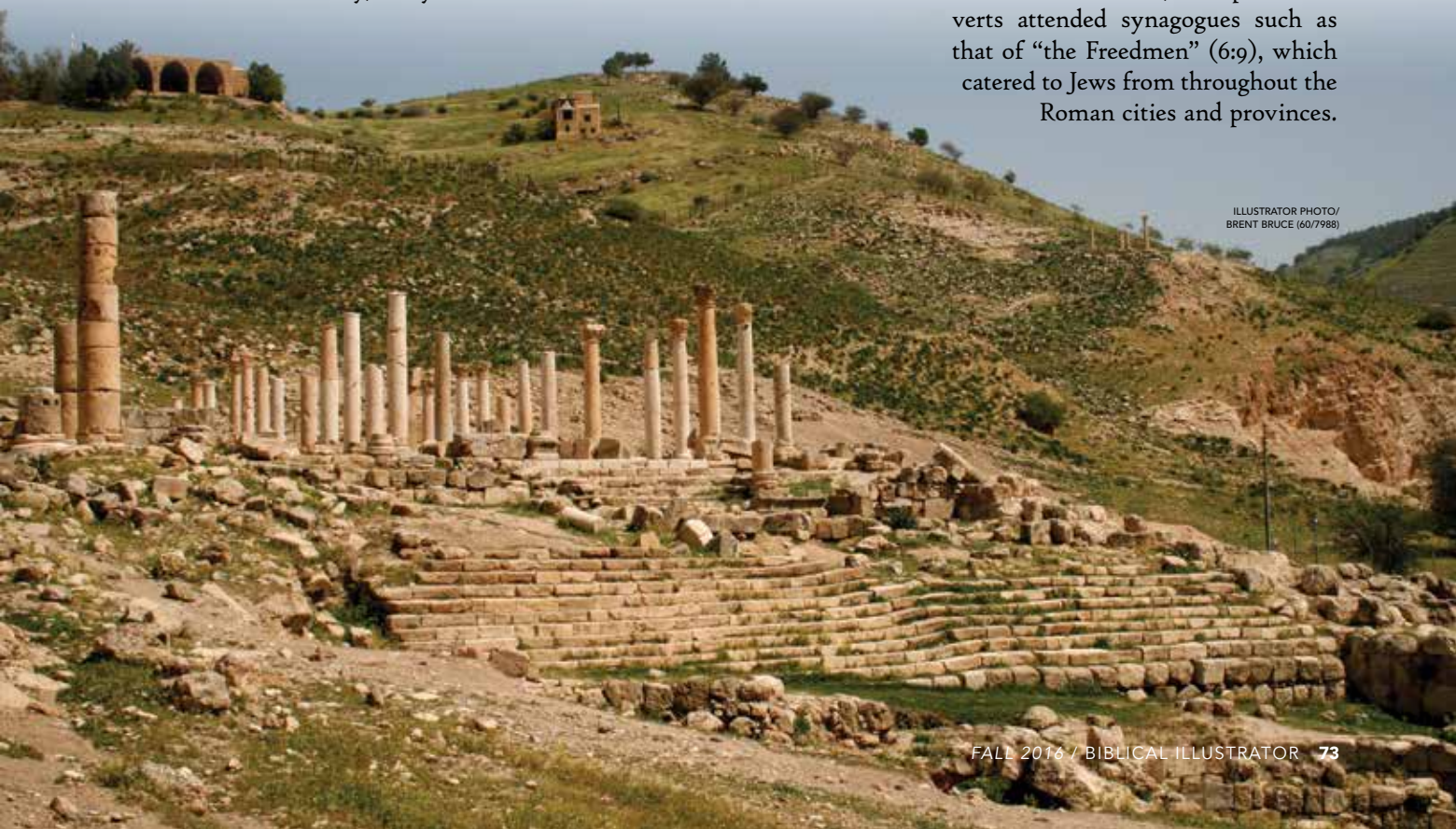
Scripture reveals an intriguing split between the way the population in general received Jewish converts and how official authorities, namely the Sadducees and the Council—the Sanhedrin—treated these new believers. Overall, the Jews received the initial converts with favor (2:47; 5:13). This was probably because early converts continued upholding the religious traditions of Judaism (e.g. 2:46; 3:1). But along with that, early believers also ministered to their fellow citizens

(e.g. 5:12-16), which ingratiated them to the body politic.

The rulers of Israel saw things differently. Almost immediately, they began mistreating and incarcerating believers (e.g. 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 6:12). This hostility serves as a backdrop that helps us appreciate Gamaliel's call for tolerance of the Jesus sect (5:34-42). Acts 8:1-2 shows that when persecution began in Jerusalem, Gamaliel's counsel seems to have been applied selectively, bypassing the apostles and presumably the local church—only to focus on another segment of the believing community.

Thus, while early converts held to faith in Christ as a unifying factor, they nevertheless manifested two strikingly different visions of the church's relationship to Hebrew worship. As mentioned above, Jewish converts continued to worship at the temple and adhered to the dietary and ceremonial dictates of the Law. They were, we might say, at ease in Zion. The same, however, was not true of Hellenized Jewish believers.

In all likelihood, Diaspora converts attended synagogues such as that of “the Freedmen” (6:9), which catered to Jews from throughout the Roman cities and provinces.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/
BRENT BRUCE (60/7988)



Left: Part of the Roman theater at Alexandria, Egypt; the translating work for the Septuagint was done primarily at Alexandria.

Below: The Septuagint, translated in mid-

3rd cent. B.C. was the Greek translation of the Old Testament and became the accepted text for synagogues for Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. The 4th cent. A.D. papyrus fragment shown is from Ex. 20:22-25.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (17/19/3)

Synagogue attendees would have used the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Scriptures or perhaps Aramaic targums. Evidently, in such centers of prayer and Torah study, the Hellenistic converts, more open than their Jewish counterparts, delivered the “theological-missiological message” that, in time, would reverberate throughout Israel.

Thus Luke introduced Stephen, a pivotal figure who raised the ire of the orthodox because of his views regarding the temple and the Law (vv. 8-15). Brought before the Council, this Hellenist convert revealed his clear departure from his pro-temple Jewish brethren. In stark contrast, Stephen argued that the temple was nothing more than a human contrivance (7:44-51). Rejecting Jewish exclusivity of access, Stephen appealed to a more cosmic vision of God as one who could not be confined to physical structures (vv. 48-50). He also reminded the Council of the ambulatory tabernacle, which God had ordained (vv. 44-45). By so doing, Stephen voiced the theological justification for a world mission that would disengage the Gospel from any necessary linkage to Israel’s provincial insistence of land and temple; it cost him his life. Stephen’s subsequent stoning became a catalyst for

the general persecution of Hellenist converts (8:1-5).

Was this conceptual divide, however, simply an anomaly in an otherwise peaceful coexistence between Jewish and Hellenized converts? The Book of Acts is honest enough to reveal the presence of internal tension in the form of Hellenistic widows being overlooked in the church’s food distribution (6:1-7). Clearly, since the text emphasizes that the complaint arose “from the Hellenists against the Hebrews” (v. 1), cultural biases were undoubtedly in play. The Twelve moved quickly to address the grievance, but they did it in a way that did not resolve the underlying issue—how to fix the real strain the cultural clash had caused! Alas, in just a few years, by A.D. 70 to be sure, Orthodox Judaism would become hyper-insular, the Hellenistic church would become increasingly Gentile, and, ironically, the Ebionites, with no more access to the temple, would,

as church historian Justo Gonzalez explains, “fade out of history in the fifth century.”¹¹ 🔥

1. This is not to rule out the possibility that some Gentiles might have embraced the gospel early on, for Pentecost resulted in numerous converts (Acts 2:10). But if any Gentiles came to faith in Christ, Luke does not acknowledge them, perhaps for theological reasons. For Luke the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10) served as the formal induction of Gentiles into the Christian faith, a development that

both Peter and Paul saw as groundbreaking and that the Jerusalem Council also acknowledged (Acts 15).

2. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are the writer’s translation.

3. Luke also applied the term “sect” (Greek, *haireisis*) to Pharisees and to Sadducees (Acts 5:17; 15:5).

4. Carsten Colpe, “The Oldest Jewish-Christian Community” in *Christian Beginnings: Word and Community from Jesus to Post-Apostolic Times*, ed. Jürgen Becker, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder and Reinhard Krauss (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 91-92.

5. The name “Christian” was first used in Syrian Antioch, arguably 13-15 years later. Significantly, “Christian” (from *Christos*) is a Greek, Hellenic designation, again underscoring the church’s later impact in a decidedly Hellenistic culture and context.

6. Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 13.

7. John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 117-118.

8. Colpe, “Oldest Jewish-Christian Community,” 91.

9. T.E. Schmidt, “Taxation, Jewish” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C.A. Evans and S.E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1164.

10. Colpe, “Oldest Jewish-Christian Community,” 91-92.

11. Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 22.

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