

Who were “the Jews” and “the Gentiles” of Scripture?

Generalizations Lead to Polarization

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Part 2

First century Judaism was composed of many different sects, and with Yeshua’s ministry, death and resurrection, the newest was that of the “Nazarenes,” commonly called “The Way.” There were thousands of Jewish people who followed Him including many priests. (Acts 6: 7) There is one example that specifically differentiates between those who accepted Messiah Yeshua and those who did not (“But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious...” Acts 17: 5 NKJV) More often there is no qualifying statement like this. The existence of so many Jewish followers gets lost with the generalization that “the Jews” were responsible for His death.

Though I believe Paul warned us NOT to go in this direction, sadly, there are many sub-groups under the heading “Christian.” (1 Cor. 1: 10-13) Just as it is not possible today to identify someone as a “Christian” and from that label alone, predict everything about their belief, neither is it possible to use this blanket term “the Jews” with accuracy about the first century or today.

The Greek phrase, *hoi Ioudaioi*, is most commonly translated into English as “the Jews” with nearly 180 uses in the New Testament, mostly in the books of John and Acts. It is used **both** of those who believed Yeshua to be Messiah **and** those who rejected Him as Messiah.

More and more, scholars acknowledge that this locution, especially as used in John and Acts, carries a bias that was born of the increasingly heated struggle for credibility between two strains of first century Judaism, the smaller of which accepted Jesus as Messiah and the larger of which did not. In spite of the fact that Jesus, his disciples, and almost all the central characters involved with Jesus or in the early NT Jesus movement are Jews (as is clear in such passages as John 4: 9, 18: 15), their opponents are systematically, broadly, and negatively cast as “the Jews.”¹

To paraphrase, Burke goes on to note that the effect of these passages, is to create a polarity, implying that one group of people are wearing the white hats while the other group wears black, despite the truth that then, as now, “the Jews” were not one fully united group acting with one mind and heart.

¹ “Translating Hoi Ioudaioi in the New Testament”, Burke, David G. TIC Talk 24, 1993, Newsletter of the United Bible Societies Translation Information Clearinghouse. Found online 9/23/09.

To get a broad understanding of the terms “Jews” and “Gentiles” it is important to consider other terms that are used as generalizations or in an idiomatic way. The other terms are: nations, sojourn or dwell, circumcision and uncircumcision. The need to identify those who knew what is clean and unclean led to efforts to label people groups in various ways.