

# THE GENTILE QUESTION:

## Rethinking Paul's Missionary Journeys

### A Sample Chapter Preview

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#### Prologue: The Restorer's Task

In the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, a woman stood before what remained of a masterpiece.

*The Last Supper.* Leonardo da Vinci's vision of Messiah's final meal with His disciples. Except it wasn't Leonardo's anymore; well, not really. Over five centuries, well-meaning hands had 'restored' what time had taken. Where paint flaked, they filled. Where features faded, they repainted. Where Leonardo's Jewish figures had sat at a Jewish Passover meal, Roman faces now gazed back from the wall.

Peter's hand? Gone entirely. Judas's features? Reimagined by an eighteenth-century artist who had never seen the original. The palette Leonardo mixed with such painstaking care? Buried under layers of someone else's taste. The fine lines and subtle details that marked the master's hand? Now obscured behind clumsy, well-intentioned attempts to preserve what was slipping away.

'We're here to fix it', restorers had said, century after century. And they had fixed it, but according to their own imagination, their own aesthetic sensibilities, their own cultural assumptions about what such a scene should look like.

In 1978, Pinin Brambilla Barcilon was given a different task: remove every so-called 'improvement'. Strip away every helpful addition. Scrape back through five hundred years of accumulated good intentions to find whatever remained of Leonardo's original work.

It would not be quick. It would not be easy. It would require patience, precision, and the courage to remove what generations had added, even when those additions had become more familiar than the original itself.

Carefully. Methodically. The botched features were removed. Millimetre by millimetre. Layer by careful layer. One year. Five years. A decade. Two decades.

And beneath it all; faint, fragile, but unmistakably there, Leonardo's masterful hand emerged. It was not the painting people knew. Not the faces or colours they expected. But it was the original, nonetheless. Jewish faces at a Jewish meal. A hidden story that had been waiting there all along. Waiting to be uncovered. Waiting to be rediscovered.

When she finished in 1999, less than a quarter of Leonardo's original work remained visible. The rest was lost to time, to humidity, to the experimental technique Leonardo had used, to centuries of damage. But that twenty-five percent was *real*. It was *his*. And the scene it portrayed was a very different version from the one the world had come to know.

**The Gentile Question** proposes that the very same thing happened to our understanding of Paul's mission.

That centuries of theological reinterpretation have painted over the original masterpiece, so that what we now see and understand as the original intent has become distorted and obscured beneath layers of later additions.

It suggests that what we call the 'Gentile mission'; Paul's work among the non-Jewish peoples of the Roman world, is in fact a layer, or multiple layers, that were added later. Roman theological features applied to Jewish prophetic foundations. Greek philosophical categories painted over Hebrew covenantal thinking. A preservation of sorts, perhaps, but one that masked the first expression, altering it in ways both subtle and profound.

The truth we seek to uncover is not a reimagining or a speculative reconstruction. It is a return to the beginning. Not what we've been taught or assumed, but a rediscovery of something ancient. Something that has been there all along, waiting beneath the surface.

This book is an invitation to undertake the restorer's task. To peel away the layers with care. To look deep beneath the familiar surface. To find the Master's exquisite work still present, though disguised by centuries of well-meaning creativity.

It is a process that may not be comfortable. It will require patience. It will demand that we question assumptions we've inherited from generations of sincere believers. It will ask us to remove what has become familiar in order to see what was original.

But we believe it is essential. We believe it is wholly rewarding. We believe it may even be life changing.

Why?

Because the original truly displays the glory of its Creator. And because, like Leonardo's Jewish faces at that Jewish meal, the original story of Paul's mission reveals something profound about God's faithfulness to His ancient promises; something we've been looking at for centuries without truly seeing.

The restoration begins here.

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## **Introduction: The Perfect Deposit**

We've been taught to see the evolution of Christianity from its Jewish origins into something distinctly non-Jewish as the natural development, even the inevitable progress, of the movement Jesus started. The Church's gradual separation from Torah observance, its replacement of Jewish festivals with Christian ones, its transformation from a Jewish sect into a Greco-Roman institution; all of this has been framed as the Spirit's guidance, leading the Church into 'all truth' as Jesus had promised.

But what if this most fundamental assumption about the natural historical development of the Church is wrong?

What if there's a problem with this narrative, one so foundational that it calls into question much of what we've assumed about Christian history and identity. If we take seriously the claim that Jesus was God incarnate; speaking only what the Father gave Him to speak (John 12:49–50), doing only what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19), and living every moment under the Spirit's leading (Luke 4:1), then we must also take seriously the implications of these truths.

What did Jesus leave His disciples with? Was He offering preliminary thoughts that He knew would later be refined by wise church councils or through cultural adaptation and evolution? Was it a provisional, rough draft that needed to be revised and improved by Greco-Roman philosophy or the later ecclesiastical structures? Or, as God in the flesh, empowered by the Spirit and speaking only the Father's words, was He delivering a complete, perfect, and sufficient deposit of God's will for His people?

As a rabbi, Jesus called His disciples to not just absorb information but to embody His teaching. In Jewish culture, to be a *talmid* was to imitate the master's way of life, to receive his yoke of Torah, and then to transmit it faithfully to others. Jesus made this explicit in the Great Commission: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you' (Matthew 28:19-20). This was a mandate of fidelity, without the (often assumed) permission to reinterpret His message for different cultures: a call to reproduce in others the same character, lifestyle, and trust (defined as *halakah* or walk) that was reproduced in you.

This adds a critical new dimension to our understanding of Christian history. Any drift away from what Jesus actually taught and modelled cannot be dismissed as 'development' in the true sense, it must be recognised as distortion. Any claim that the Church's later trajectory, once detached from its Jewish roots, represents what Jesus really intended all along, amounts to a theological falsehood of the highest order!

The logical conclusion of this is even more radical; it challenges the definitive nature of God's self-revelation in Jesus. If the message and lifestyle Jesus modelled for His disciples required a fundamental correction or even abrogation through later theological developments, then it directly undermines the core claim of Christianity about who He was. Hebrews declares that 'in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Hebrews 1:2-3). The author is making the radical claim that Jesus is the **final and perfect** Word of God.

But if He was the *final* Word, then His teaching on how to live as God's people was both sufficient and complete. There is no place for a 'Version 2.0' coming from later church councils or theological refinements to fundamentally alter the lifestyle He modelled and commanded His disciples to reproduce in others. If a later system is needed to 'correct' or 'complete' the understanding His original Jewish disciples had about Torah, about Sabbath, about the feasts, then He was **not** the final Word; He was a preliminary word that awaited further reinterpretation.

This is by no means a minor theological debate. It strikes at the heart of our very Christian confession. We cannot confess that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God and simultaneously assert that the way of life He embodied and entrusted to His disciples was only temporary or needed to be fundamentally altered. To accept such a position is to call into question not just our interpretation of Scripture, but the authenticity and authority of the Messiah Himself, and with that, the very gospel message that forms the foundation of our faith.

But this deviation may not have been completely unexpected. The New Testament records explicit warnings about the very drift that would occur if the believers lowered their guard.

In Matthew 7, Jesus warned about 'false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves' (Matthew 7:15). Was He only speaking about individual deceivers or was He anticipating the systematic distortion of His message? When He declared that 'false christs and false prophets will arise, and they will show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the chosen ones' (Matthew 24:24), was He foreseeing the emergence of sophisticated deceptions that would be convincing enough to fool faithful sincere believers.

Paul also seemed to understand this trajectory with chilling clarity. He warned the Ephesian elders that 'after my departure, vicious wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will arise from among your own selves, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them' (Acts 20:29-30). The danger he warned of wouldn't result primarily from outside persecution but from the internal corruption of his message. Leaders within the community would twist what he had taught to create their own following, pulling disciples away from the truth that they had originally received.

To Timothy, Paul was even more explicit: 'For the time will come when they will not listen to the sound doctrine, but, having itching ears, will heap up for themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside to fables' (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The drift described here would not be driven by honest theological development but by the listener's desire to hear something that was more appealing to their flesh and based upon man-made myths.

John also warned his readers about the danger of deviating from the core message. 'Whoever transgresses and doesn't remain in the teaching of Christ, doesn't have God. He who remains in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son' (2John 1:9). This might seem a little dramatic but for John, remaining faithful to Christ's original teaching wasn't an option, it was the difference between having God and not having Him at all.

Jude was perhaps the most passionate about this threat, urging believers to 'contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 1:3). Note his language: the faith was delivered (an aorist participle, παραδοθειση - *paradotheise*, indicating a completed past action) 'once for all'; completely, finally, without need for later additions or modifications. The term used here is ἅπαξ (*hapax*), the same word used in Hebrews referring to the Messiah's offering; 'so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many' (Hebrews 9:28). Therefore, this speaks of its sufficiency, finality and unwarranted need for more. Jude then gives us the reason. Because there are already 'certain men who crept in secretly, even those who were long ago written about for this condemnation: ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into indecency' (Jude 1:4); unlike the faith, for which we are called to contend openly, these men have crept in unawares, perverting the message from within.

Even in Revelation, Jesus' messages to the seven churches reveal that the distortion was already underway. When speaking to the church in Ephesus, Jesus said you have 'left your first love' (Revelation 2:4). He criticised the Pergamum church for tolerating those who held 'the teaching of Balaam' and 'the teaching of the Nicolaitans' (Revelation 2:14-15). And the church in Thyatira was allowing 'that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess', to teach and seduce God's servants (Revelation 2:20).

We see the unmistakable pattern that Jesus and His apostles anticipated. That the community they were establishing would face internal pressure to abandon what they had received in favour of teachings that seemed more appealing, more culturally acceptable, more philosophically sophisticated. They warned that this drift would be led by respected teachers and would appear to be a legitimate development of their message, such that many would turn aside to follow it. But they were insistent that it would represent a fundamental betrayal of the original 'truth' they had deposited.

## The Drift Unfolds

History reveals how quickly this anticipated corruption took hold. The earliest communities of Jesus-followers were Jewish, rooted in synagogue life, reading Torah and Prophets, observing the feasts, and proclaiming Jesus as Israel's Messiah. But as the gospel spread into the Greek-speaking world, pressures mounted.

The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD was a catastrophic event that decentralised Jewish life and worship, scattering Jewish communities and making Jewish identity politically dangerous under Emperor Vespasian's rule.<sup>[1]</sup> Jewish society was forced to reorganise and the boundaries that existed between rabbinic Judaism and the Jewish Jesus movement hardened. This process, exemplified by rabbinic developments at Yavneh (Jamnia) after 70 AD, involved the consolidation of Jewish identity and practices that increasingly excluded those professing to be followers of Jesus.<sup>[2]</sup> By the mid-second century, Justin Martyr was explicitly arguing in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that the Church had become the 'true Israel' and that Jewish practices were obsolete; one of the earliest full articulations of replacement theology.<sup>[3]</sup>

When Constantine converted in the fourth century, the transformation accelerated dramatically. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, Constantine himself declared that Christian observances like Easter must not align with 'the detestable customs of the Jews'.<sup>[4]</sup> John Chrysostom thundered against Christians who still attended Jewish festivals, calling synagogues 'dens of demons', institutionalising Christian contempt and hardening the divide.<sup>[5]</sup> And it was into this 'boiling pot' that Jerome travelled, journeying to Israel to continue his translation work. There, throughout his Latin Vulgate, he rendered the Greek *ethnē* ('nations, peoples') as *gentilis* ('non-Jews').<sup>[6]</sup> A single translation choice that would reframe Paul's mission in the Western Christian imagination and immortalise centuries of misunderstanding.

Which brings us to a haunting question: What if the very trajectory that Christianity has celebrated for centuries; its evolution away from its very Jewish birth into something more universal and culturally adaptable, is precisely the drift that Jesus and His apostles warned against?

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War* 6.271-434, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> After the Temple's destruction, rabbinic authorities at Yavneh consolidated Jewish identity and practice. The Birkat ha-Minim (benediction against heretics), likely formulated in this period, is often understood as excluding Jewish Christians from synagogue participation. See Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 11, 119, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.18-20, trans. Averil Cameron and S. G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos*, Homily I.3-4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> For Jerome's translation methodology, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

What if the Church's gradual replacement of Torah-shaped wisdom with Greco-Roman categories, its substitution of an institutional hierarchy for Jewish discipleship models, its transformation from a movement within Judaism into a religion opposed to Judaism, is not representative of the Spirit's guidance but reflects the very corruption that Paul saw coming when he warned about 'savage wolves' arising from within?

What if recovering authentic Christianity is not about finding a new expression but requires the Church to return to what was 'once for all delivered to the saints', including its irreducibly Jewish context, its Torah-shaped understanding of holiness, and its identity as the restoration and expansion of Israel rather than its replacement?

This is where our story begins: not with a new interpretation of Paul's mission to the nations, but with the recognition that the interpretation we've inherited may represent exactly the kind of distortion that we were warned to expect and guard against. What follows is an attempt to recover what may have been buried beneath centuries of potentially well-meaning but fundamentally misguided theological development.

### **Jacob's Limp: A Forgotten Dependence**

There's a story we'll return to at the end of this journey, the account of Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok River (Genesis 32). Jacob prevailed in that midnight struggle, but he walked away with a limp, a permanent reminder of his dependence on the God who had renamed him Israel. That limp became part of his identity; he would never again stride in his own strength, never again forget that every blessing flowed from the One he surrendered to on that day; the unmerited favour of God rather than his own scheming efforts.

What if Jacob's story was a lesson that the Church was meant to learn and in forgetting its dependence it also forgot its name? History tells us that after only a century it sought to distance itself from its Jewish beginnings, striding out with imperial confidence and reshaping itself into the image of Rome rather than the pattern of Messiah. But what if it lost more than it could ever have imagined; the very mark of faithfulness that was meant to keep it humble, grateful, and connected to the root that sustained it?

These are the questions that haunt the pages ahead. Because if Jesus was who He said He was (and who we indeed believe Him to be), then what He left His disciples to teach and demonstrate was exactly what He wanted to be preserved, and not something that He expected would later evolve. The Jewish model of discipleship is all about faithful representation; from seed to tree to fruit, reproducing after its kind. And if that's true, then perhaps we need to carefully re-examine our understanding of Paul's mission, the identity of the early Church and our own place in God's story, from their very foundations.

This book asks: what if we could recover something that was lost? What if we could return to the story the apostles knew; the story of Israel and her Messiah, a message proclaimed by Paul among the nations? What if Paul saw his mission in the context of prophetic fulfilment; bringing to life the visions of the Nevi'im and the Good Shepherd who would go in search of His lost sheep? What if we set aside centuries of accumulated interpretation to hear again the words of Jesus and His emissaries in their original voice?

But perhaps there's a deeper question that we must ask ourselves. Do we have the courage to follow the evidence wherever it leads, even if it challenges assumptions we've inherited from centuries of Christian tradition? Even if it requires us to admit that something went profoundly wrong somewhere along the way. Even if it demands that we seek to rediscover what it means to be faithful to the Jewish Jesus in the way He actually intended, rather than the way we've always imagined.

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## PART ONE: The Game Changing Translation

### Chapter 1: The Scholar's Choice

In a monastery study in Bethlehem, as the fourth century drew to a close, one of history's most consequential translation decisions was about to be made. Jerome, the brilliant scholar who would produce the Latin Vulgate; the Bible that would define Western Christianity for over a millennium, sat surrounded by Greek manuscripts, wrestling with a deceptively simple word that would reshape how Christians understood their faith for the next fifteen hundred years.

The word was *ethnē* (ἔθνη), the Greek term typically rendered as 'nations' or 'peoples' throughout the Scriptures. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and their Greek translations (the Septuagint - LXX) *ethnē* served as a neutral, geographical designation for various people groups. It appears in Genesis when God promises to make Abraham 'a great nation' (גוי / ἔθνος - *goy/ethnos*). It surfaces in Isaiah when God calls Israel to be 'a light for the nations' (גויהם - *goyim/ethnē*).

And God specifically uses it to refer to Israel at Sinai: 'and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation' (גוי קדוש / ἔθνος ἅγιον - *goy qadosh / ethnos hagnion*) (Exodus 19:6); and on the eastern bank of the Jordan River Moses used the term repeatedly in reference to Israel; 'Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who shall hear all these statutes and say, "Surely this great nation (*goy / ethnos*) is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation (*goy / ethnos*) is there, that has a god so near to them, as Yahweh our God is whenever we call on him? What great nation (*goy / ethnos*) is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law, which I set before you today?' (Deuteronomy 4:6-8).

To explain this term more clearly, consider the following analogy. Imagine British families who had emigrated to Spain and Portugal centuries ago. After many years, their descendants still gather in British clubs, celebrate Guy Fawkes Night and support Manchester United. Others have intermarried and only retain fragments of their heritage but still keep some British customs. Still others have fully blended into the Spanish and Portuguese way of life, with little awareness or knowledge of their British roots.

Now suppose you were given the task of reaching 'the British among the nations'. Where would you go? Naturally, to Spain and Portugal; because that is where these scattered communities have lived for generations and typically, to the South and East Coast, where the overwhelming majority of expats are known to live. But here is the crucial detail: when you refer to 'the peoples of Spain and Portugal' (*ethnē*), you are not singling out 'non-British' residents. You are speaking of **all** the people who live there; the ethnic Spaniards and Portuguese, the assimilated descendants of the British, the culturally

mixed families, and even those expats who have held tightly to their traditions; who would still call themselves British.

If someone later mistranslated your commission as going to 'the non-British', the whole purpose of your mission would be lost. Readers would assume that you had randomly targeted foreigners, rather than intentionally journeying to the very lands and regions where scattered British communities had taken root. The evidence suggests that this is precisely what happened with Paul's calling to the *ethnē*. The word *doesn't mean* 'non-Jews', but 'the peoples' of the nations; territories where Israel had been scattered. Paul's journeys only make sense in this light. He wasn't abandoning Israel for foreigners, but seeking out Israelites among the nations, proclaiming to them and to all who lived among them that their Messiah had come.

So, Jerome faced what seemed like a straightforward translation choice. He could select *natio*, the more direct Latin equivalent, that would preserve the neutral, geographical sense of the Greek. This would maintain the biblical emphasis on territory and culture rather than religious or ethnic distinctions. The result would be a text that spoke of Paul's mission to the 'nations' and invited enquiries about which nations, and why those particular ones.

Alternatively, Jerome could choose *gentilis*, a term that had evolved from the Latin *gens* (meaning clan or people) into something far more loaded with meaning. In Roman usage, *gentilis* could mean either 'one of us' (a fellow Roman) or, more commonly by Jerome's era, 'not one of us' (a foreigner, outsider, or barbarian). The term carried a sharp us-versus-them connotation that the original Greek *ethnē* simply didn't possess. Needless to say, Jerome chose *gentilis*. And with that single decision, he embedded into the Latin Bible; and eventually into all the translations that would follow, a reading of Paul's mission that came to emphasise separation, replacement and discontinuity rather than inclusion, restoration and fulfilment.

But Jerome's choice wasn't made in a theological vacuum. By the early fifth century, the Christian church had spent nearly three centuries trying to steadily distance itself from its Jewish origins. What had begun as a Jewish sect proclaiming a Jewish Messiah had increasingly become a movement largely composed of Greeks and Romans; of those that viewed themselves not just as distinct from Israel, but as its replacement.

The historical trajectory was unmistakable. The Council of Antioch in 341 AD had mandated that Christian celebrations of Passover must never coincide with Jewish observances, ensuring a maximum separation between the two communities.<sup>[7]</sup> The Council of Laodicea in 364 AD had prohibited Christians from keeping the Sabbath, declaring that they must work on Saturday and rest on Sunday instead.<sup>[8]</sup> John Chrysostom's inflammatory homilies 'Against the Jews' had popularised the notion that synagogues were dwelling places of demons, and that any Christian who participated in Jewish festivals was committing spiritual adultery.

Jerome himself seems to have been deeply influenced by these currents. His biblical commentaries reflect the conviction that Judaism was a relic of the past, superseded by Christianity in God's redemptive plan. In his Commentary on Ezekiel 16:59-63, Jerome wrote with startling explicitness: 'He [God] has deserted his former covenant, so that the latter one might be ratified by Christ... And because it was foretold that it would be eternal, and after many generations, and for an everlasting

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<sup>7</sup> Canon of the Council of Antioch (341 AD), in Henry R. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, NPNF 2nd series, vol. 14 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Canon 29 of the Council of Laodicea (c. 363-364 AD): 'Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday, but shall work on that day'.

covenant, it is to be understood as made, not with the Jews, who up to this day are resisting it, but with us, who are of the faith of Christ'.<sup>[9]</sup>

His Commentary on Isaiah 49:5-6 was equally direct: 'At that time the Jews had been rejected; and we, who had been brought in from the Gentiles, were called in their place. For that reason the words are addressed to the Church: "It is a light thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to convert the dregs of Israel. I have given you to be a light of the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth"<sup>[10]</sup> In his Commentary on Amos, he interpreted the prophet's words about God calling 'those who were not my people' to be 'my people' as referring explicitly to Gentile Christians replacing the Jews who had rejected Christ; 'The Jews, who are called 'My people' by the Lord, have become 'not my people', and we, who were 'not his people', are now called 'sons of the living God'. This is what the Apostle Paul also says... (Romans 9:25-26). Therefore, the Jews, who at one time were the people of God, have been rejected on account of their unbelief; and we, who are gathered from the Gentiles, have been adopted in their place' Jerome, Commentary on Amos, Book 5.<sup>[11]</sup>

What am I proposing? That this wasn't simply a matter of scholarly opinion, it appears to have been a theological agenda. Jerome's translation choices reflected and reinforced the church's commitment to replacement theology, the belief that Christianity had superseded Judaism in God's plan, that the church had replaced Israel as God's chosen people, and that the promises once made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob now belonged exclusively to those who believed in Christ; particularly those who weren't ethnically Jewish.

When Jerome chose *gentilis* over *natio*, he wasn't making a neutral linguistic decision. He was embedding centuries of theological development and anti-Jewish sentiment into the very words Christians would read. The English word 'Gentiles' is itself a direct borrowing from Jerome's Latin *gentiles* (the plural form of *gentilis*), carrying forward all the theological baggage that have accumulated over fifteen centuries of Christian interpretation.

But what if Jerome's translation obscured rather than revealed the true nature of Paul's mission? What if beneath this layer of Latin interpretation lies a completely different story; one that challenges our most basic assumptions about early Christianity, Paul's calling, and the relationship between Israel and the nations in God's redemptive plan?

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## Chapter 2: The Roman Passport Mystery

To understand what might have been lost in Jerome's translation, we need to step back into the world of the first century and consider the remarkable opportunities available to a man named Saul of Tarsus, who would become the apostle Paul. Paul possessed something that opened doors throughout the ancient world: Roman citizenship, the empire's most coveted legal status.

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome, *Commentarii in Ezechielem* 5 (on Ezek. 16:59-63), in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 75, ed. F. Glorie (Turnhout: Brepols, 1964).

<sup>10</sup> Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaiam* (on Isa. 49:5-6), in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 73, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Commentarii in Amos* 5, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 76, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969).

Three centuries earlier, Alexander the Great had conquered eastward from Greece to India, creating the largest empire the world had ever seen and spreading Greek language and culture across vast territories.<sup>[12]</sup> His vision was to unite East and West, and though his empire fragmented at his death, the cultural synthesis he created; known as Hellenism, continued to flourish.

Rome had then conquered westward, systematically absorbing Alexander's fragmented kingdoms while pushing into territories Alexander had never dreamed of reaching. The result was something unique in human history: a unified political and cultural system that stretched from Britain to Egypt, from Spain to Syria, from the Rhine to the Sahara. Roman roads connected distant provinces, Roman law provided a legal framework, Roman administration created the necessary stability, and the Greek language served as the common tongue (amongst the educated) throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

For a Roman citizen like Paul, this meant unprecedented mobility and access. He could travel from Britain's misty shores to Egypt's sun-baked sands, from Spain's Atlantic coast to Syria's ancient cities, all under the protection of Roman law. The famous saying 'all roads lead to Rome' wasn't a hollow boast, it reflected a transportation and communication network that connected the most diverse corners of the ancient world faster and more safely than at any previous time in human history.

Paul's Roman citizenship granted him specific legal privileges that most people could only dream of: the right to trial by Roman courts, protection from arbitrary punishment by local magistrates, the ability to appeal decisions up the imperial hierarchy, and safe passage on Roman roads and ships. His citizenship was, quite literally, a passport to the known world.<sup>[13]</sup>

Consider what was accessible to Paul in the middle of the first century. Britain's southern regions had been conquered in 43 AD and were being rapidly Romanised, with new cities, roads, and trading networks.<sup>[14]</sup> Gaul; modern France, Belgium, and parts of Switzerland and Germany, had been thoroughly integrated into the Roman system, with thriving urban centres like Lugdunum (Lyon) becoming major administrative and commercial hubs. The North African provinces stretched from Morocco to Libya, encompassing wealthy cities like Carthage, Leptis Magna, and Cyrene, all connected by Roman roads and maritime trade routes. The Danubian territories; modern Romania, Serbia, Croatia, and parts of Hungary, were being developed as Rome's newest frontier provinces, offering opportunities to reach populations that had never heard the gospel message. The eastern provinces extended toward Mesopotamia, with Roman influence reaching toward Parthia and the trade routes that connected the Mediterranean to India and beyond.

All of this was within reach of a determined Roman citizen with Paul's legal status and connections. If his mission was truly to reach 'all non-Jews everywhere', as traditional interpretation suggests, we would expect Paul to have taken advantage of these extraordinary opportunities. We would expect to see him pushing the boundaries of the empire, venturing into territories where the gospel had never been heard, establishing churches among populations with no connection to Judaism or Israel's story.

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<sup>12</sup> For Alexander's conquests from Greece to India and the spread of Greek language and culture (Hellenism), see the ancient accounts in Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* 5.26–29; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 62–66; and Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 17.93–94. For modern treatment, see Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 B.C.: A Historical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 375–428.

<sup>13</sup> For Roman citizenship rights, see A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 57–70.

<sup>14</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 17; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 60.19–23.

But that's not what happened. And the discrepancy between Paul's opportunities and his actual travel patterns should make us pause and reconsider everything we think we know about his mission.

## The Narrow Corridor

In modern English, the term *Gentiles* is narrowly defined as 'non-Jews'. Consequently, as a result of Jerome's framework, this definition has become embedded in Christian thought, so that readers of the New Testament are naturally predisposed to understand Paul's mission as one directed toward 'all non-Jews everywhere'. But when we plot Paul's actual missionary journeys on a map of the Roman Empire, a striking pattern emerges; one that contradicts almost everything we would expect from such a missional interpretation. Despite holding a Roman citizenship that granted free movement throughout the whole empire, Paul's travels followed a remarkably narrow geographical band.

His missionary work concentrated almost exclusively on the Greek-speaking cities of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Macedonia, and Greece, with forays into Syria and eventual goals of reaching Rome and perhaps Spain. But look at what's missing from Paul's itinerary: Egypt, with its massive city of Alexandria; the intellectual capital of the ancient world. North Africa, with its wealthy Romanised cities and diverse populations. Gaul, with its expanding Roman settlements and strategic importance. Britain, newly conquered and ripe for the gospel. The Danubian provinces, representing Rome's dynamic frontier regions. The eastern territories, with their connections to vast trade networks reaching toward India.

These weren't unknown or inaccessible regions. They were integral parts of the Roman world, connected by well-maintained roads, protected by Roman legions, and governed by Roman administrators. Yet Paul made no recorded attempt to reach any of them. For someone supposedly called to evangelise all those (people groups) without a Jewish connection, this geographical selectivity is puzzling, to say the least.

But Paul's choices become even more intriguing when we examine not just where he went, but how he consistently operated once he arrived in a new city. The book of Acts records his methodology with almost monotonous regularity, using phrases that suggest a systematic behaviour.

At Salamis, on the island of Cyprus: 'When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them' (Acts 13:5). Note that Paul's first action upon arriving in a new territory was to seek out Jewish synagogues; places where he was most likely to encounter people already connected to Israel's God and Israel's story.

At Antioch in Pisidia: 'But they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it" (Acts 13:14-15). Again, Paul's strategy was to begin with the Jewish community, participating in their Sabbath worship and using their invitation to speak, as his evangelistic opportunity.

At Iconium: 'Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed' (Acts 14:1). The pattern continues, synagogue first, with the result being belief among both Jews and Greeks who were already connected to the synagogue community.

At Thessalonica: 'Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ"' (Acts 17:1-3).

Here we encounter that crucial phrase: 'as was his custom' (κατὰ δὲ τὸ εἰωθὸς - *kata de to eiōthos*). This wasn't occasional or even him adapting to local circumstances, it was Paul's established practice. Luke is telling us that whenever Paul entered a new city, if it had a synagogue, he began there. It was his standard operating procedure, his missionary *modus operandi*.

The pattern continues through Berea: 'The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue' (Acts 17:10). At Athens: 'So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there' (Acts 17:17). At Corinth: 'After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth... And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks' (Acts 18:1, 4). At Ephesus: 'And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews' (Acts 18:19).

This creates a profound theological tension that traditional interpretations have struggled to resolve. If Paul's mission was truly to reach people who had no connection to Israel, Judaism, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, why did he consistently begin his evangelistic work in the one place in each city where people were most connected to Israel's story? Why not head directly to the marketplaces, the temples of local gods, the governmental centres, or the philosophical schools where truly heathen populations gathered?

The synagogues of the first century weren't just Jewish religious centres; they were complex institutions that attracted diverse populations. In addition to ethnic Jews who had maintained their connection to Jerusalem and the temple, synagogues typically included significant numbers of 'God-fearers' (φοβούμενοι (*phoboumenoi*) and 'worshippers', σεβόμενοι (*sebomenoi*)); those who had been attracted to Jewish monotheism, ethics, and worship but hadn't undergone full conversion to Judaism. These God-fearers participated in synagogue worship, observed certain Jewish practices, and were familiar with Hebrew Scriptures, but they hadn't committed to circumcision or complete adherence to the Mosaic Law.

But there's something else that becomes apparent when we look at Paul's destination cities more carefully. Every single location Paul targeted, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, shared one crucial characteristic: they all contained established Jewish communities with synagogues. Paul wasn't selecting cities randomly or choosing them for their distance from Jewish influence. Quite the opposite: he was systematically targeting places where Jewish communities existed, where Israel's story was already known, where synagogue worship had already attracted both Jews and sympathetic God-fearers from the nations.

This suggests that Paul's mission strategy wasn't about getting as far away from Israel as possible, but about going to the places where Israel had been scattered, where Jewish communities had taken root, where the God of Abraham was already worshipped and the Hebrew Scriptures were already read and discussed. His journey to the 'nations' (*ethnē*) was a journey to find Israel among the nations; not to replace Israel with something else, but to announce to Israel's scattered children, wherever they might be found, that their Messiah had come and their time of restoration was beginning.

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### About the Author - *Julian Kinkaid*

In 1987, Bono sang '*I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*' and the Christian world panicked. Had he lost his faith? But for Julian, that song captured something true about what genuine faith actually feels like; not an arrival, but a pursuit.

He left an architecture degree to answer a calling he couldn't shake. UK Bible College and Australia. The early Hillsong team. A church plant in Devon. Deep immersions in Andrew Wommack, Joseph Prince, Curry Blake, each formative but each one eventually expended. Every answer producing three more questions.

A quiet whisper about the Sabbath changed everything. Through Rob Skiba, Jim Staley, L. Grant Luton at Beth Tikun, and Rabbi David Fohrman of Aleph Beta, Julian began reading Scripture the way its authors wrote it; from inside a Hebrew world.

The Apostle Paul said it better than anyone: "*I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on*".

These books are not the conclusions of one who has arrived. They are dispatches from someone still pressing on; written for everyone who suspects that there is more than they've been shown.

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