

משיח

# MASHIACH

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Today there is a lot of discussion in the Messianic Jewish community about demographics, specifically the challenge of synagogues with Jewish minorities and Gentile majorities. Where do we turn for guidance on this subject? I would like

to suggest that Paul's letter to the congregation in Rome provides us with a *davar davur al-ofnav* ("a word fitly spoken" [Prov 25:11]) and points us in the right direction.

Who planted the congregation in Rome? Luke tells us that "visitors

from Rome, both Jews and proselytes" witnessed the great outpouring of the *Ruach* (Spirit) on the day of *Shavuot*/Pentecost in 30 C.E. (Acts 2:10–11). It is likely that these Jewish pilgrims returned to Rome and established the first community of Yeshua-believers in the city.

Over time, the demographics of the Messianic Jewish community in Rome changed. In the beginning, the community was entirely composed of Jews and proselytes. Then Gentiles joined their ranks, probably "God-fearers" at first (i.e. non-Jews who worshiped the God of Israel in the synagogue and adopted various Jewish customs, but not as a matter of covenantal responsibility). And finally, Gentiles with little prior connection to Jews and Judaism became followers of Yeshua and members of the community.

In 49 C.E., the community underwent a demographic reshaping. The emperor Claudius "issued a decree expelling all the Jews from Rome" (Acts 18:2). Suddenly, the Messianic Jewish congregation in Rome had

no Jews! For five years, the community was led by Gentiles and composed entirely of Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> Then in 54 C.E., Claudius died and the Jews returned to Rome. Imagine how much had changed in their absence.

It is against this historical backdrop that Paul wrote his letter to the congregation in Rome two years later (56–57 C.E.). By this time, the community had a Gentile majority, a Jewish minority and no shortage of Jew-Gentile problems.

We can learn a great deal from the exhortations and advice that Paul offers in his letter. In future columns, I will share some of the ethical principles that he introduces to bring *shalom* to the congregation in Rome, and I will refer to these principles as "bilateral ethics." In the present column, I would like to leave you with a small comment on Paul's overall theological perspective in Romans.

Paul believed that the distinction between Jew and Gentile remained by God's design in the world. He viewed Jewish and Gentile identity as a matter of calling (Rom 11:11, 29; cf. 1 Cor 7:17-20). I refer to this perspective, and its communal implications, as "bilateral ecclesiology."

On the one hand, our community has to emphasize as Paul did the continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile in the family of God (bilateral ecclesiology). On the other hand, we have to treat one another as children of God in accordance with the teachings of God (bilateral ethics). Both need to be kept in view. If one is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, if one eclipses the other in importance, we destroy both—distinction and unity. Bilateral ecclesiology can only flourish in the life of a community and lead to mutual blessing if bilateral ethics are firmly in place.



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<sup>1</sup> For an alternative reading of Acts 18:2, see Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 376.