

Proselytes, Hellenists, and Hebrews

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Proselytes A proselyte was any non-Jew who lived among the Jews.

The word “proselyte” is from the Greek **prosh-luto~**, a “stranger” or “foreigner”, a person who has come from his own people to live in a new country, with people of another culture.

Among the people who lives among the Jews, all of those who were not descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, were known as “strangers,” or “proselytes.” The Jews recognizes two types of proselytes, the “proselytes of the gate” and the “proselytes of the covenant.”

The “proselytes of the gate” were people who wanted to live among the Jews but who would not submit to circumcision. However, they usually acknowledged Jehovah as the true God, avoided idolatry; but they were not obliged to observe any of the Mosaic institutions. They were not allowed to eat the passover or partake of any of the sacred festivals.

The “proselytes of the covenant” adopted the Jewish religion completely, even agreeing to follow the rite of circumcision, observe all the ceremonies of the Law. In fact, they were no different from the Jews in their culture and practice, except that they had once been “heathen,” or gentile. They had the same rights, spiritual and secular, as the Jews themselves.

“Grecians” The word “Greece” is from the Latin *Graeci*, the name given to them by the Romans, who applied t the whole people the name of the first tribe the Romans came across, the *Graioi*, a Boeotian tribe that took part in the colonization of Cyeme in Italy.

The various Greek communities referred to themselves by the name Hellenes; they called their country Hellas, and their language the Hellenic language [**h‘ellhniki glossa**]. Even today, the Greeks use these names, and the official name for Greece is “The Hellenic Republic” [**HELLINIKI DIMOKRATIA**]. A Greek person, then, is a Hellene.

(NAS: Hellenists) from **‘Ellenisto** The Revised Version says “Grecian Jews,” because “Grecians,” in English, might be thought to mean Gentile Greeks. In the NAS, “Hellenists” means Jews.

The word **Hellenist** refers to a Jew, not a Greek, who comes from outside Palestine, from such areas of Greek influence like Alexandria or Cyrenia (coast of Libya). The contact of Jews with Greeks first began when Alexander forcibly settled 8,000 Jews in Egypt, in the Nile delta, where they formed a large part of his new city, Alexandria. From Egypt the Jews gradually spread along the whole North African coast. Jews were also removed by Seleucus Nicantor, from Babylonia to Antioch and Seleucia, and under various persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes and other Greek rulers, scattered themselves through Asia Minor, Greece, Macedonia, and the Greek islands of the Aegean.

The majority adopted the Greek language, and many forgot the Aramaic dialect which had been the Jews’ language since their captivity.

“Hebrews” Any man was a **Jew** [**ioujdiao~**] who could trace his descent from Jacob. The word “Jew” is a racial identity.

A **Hebrew** was a Jew who spoke Hebrew and retained Hebrew customs, following the ancient religion closely.

The Hebrews whose families had come from Aram

were called **Arameans**. This word refers to Aram, or Padan-Aram, the district of Mesopotamia surrounding the city of Haran, and the territory included the city of Damascus. Aram was the 5th son of Shem, Noah's oldest son; Haran was the elder son of Terah and Abraham's brother; he was the father of Lot. The Jews from these areas spoke Aramaic (Assyrian), as did the Palestinian Jews of the time of Christ. Parts of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic, and Jesus spoke Aramaic.

Note: King Ahab fought against Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, whose capital was Damascus.

The distinction between a Hebrew and a Hellenists

was a distinction within the Jewish nation, not between the Jews and other nations. Paul calls himself a "Hebrew of Hebrews," that is, a Hebrew and of Hebrew parents, speaking Hebrew and following Hebrew customs.

In this verse, both Hebrews and Hellenists are Christian believers, but there is still the line of cleavage between the two groups, which had the potential for conflict.

A **Hellenizer** was a Jew who followed Greek philosophy and culture instead of the Jewish religion and practices.