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Ancient Jewish Proselytism in Theory and in Practice

The way in which proselytism by Jews was viewed and practiced in ancient times has occupied various scholars over the years. In the following pages, I propose to discuss the theory that has prevailed during the last century. Its proponents thought that the attitude of the Sages towards proselytes was reflected in their *midrashic* (*aggadic*) sayings. I suggest that any delineation of the Sages' attitude should be grounded in the Sages' *halakhic* rulings and their actions, as found in the sources.

We will begin by weighing the ideas and interpretations of two recent proponents of the prevailing theory, Martin Goodman and Louis Feldman, and with a «Quellen Kritik» of the Talmudic, pagan, and Christian sources that buttress Goodman's theory of Jewish proselytism. We will also deal with his innovative chronology of Jewish missionary initiatives.

Thereafter, I will present the evidence from all these sources that justifies my theory, rather than that of Goodman.

I. On «Religious» and «Ethnic» Jews in Antiquity

Martin Goodman has enriched us recently with several studies.¹ Goodman also wrote a book about proselytizing, *Mission and Conversion*, on whose manuscript version Louis Feldman commented in his recent book.² In summarizing his own article in the *JRS*, Goodman asserts (*JJS*, p. 184) that the collection of the

two-drachma tax originally imposed...after A.D. 70...was reformed under Nerva in A.D. 96, apparently in such a way as to exclude those born as Jews who had forsaken Jewish customs (hence *calumnia sublata*) but at the same time recognising, probably for the first time, the existence of proselytes whose religious affiliation alone was sufficient to make them liable to the tax.

It is in this way that Goodman interprets the inscription on Nerva's coin, in contrast with the policy of Domitian, who demanded the payment of the Je-

¹ M. Goodman, Nerva, the Fiscus Judaicus and Jewish Identity, *JRS* 79 (1989) 40-4 (hereafter: *JRS*); *idem*, Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism, *JJS* 40 (1989) 175-85 (hereafter: *JJS*); *idem*, Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century, in J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, London and New York, 1992, 53-78 (hereafter: *The Jews*).

² L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, Princeton, 1993 (hereafter: *Jew and Gentile*). Goodman's *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1994, has now appeared.

wish tax by «non-religious ethnic Jews» (*JRS*, p. 41). Goodman declares that his «reasonable hypothesis» is substantiated by Cassius Dio:

It is certain that such individuals no longer paid by the early third century, for, according to Cassius Dio (66.7.2), who characteristically back-dated his definition to A.D. 70, the tax was levied (presumably in his day) from the Jews who *still* observed their ancestral customs (so presumably not from those who had ceased such observances). [My emphasis. D. R.]

«*Still*» is Goodman's contribution. However, it does not follow from Cassius Dio's remark that Nerva abolished the examination of physical evidence of circumcision – which had been performed in the time of Domitian in order to determine whether one was Jewish – since circumcision was one of the Jewish ancestral customs. The «reform» of Nerva, I suggest, was merely the abolishment of the former *public*, degrading examination of the fact of circumcision.³ Elsewhere (37:16, 5-17, 1-2), Cassius Dio noted that the name Jews (*Ioudaioi*) applied also to other people who, even if they were born into a foreign people (*alloethneis*), embraced Jewish practices (*nomima*) eagerly. This assertion is followed immediately by enumeration of some things which separate the Jewish people (*genos*) from the rest of mankind: their whole way of life (*diaita*); their sturdy monotheism; and their refraining from erecting any statue of their god. From this one may conclude that Cassius Dio made no distinction between accepting the Jewish religion and entering the Jewish nation.⁴

II. The Chronology of Ancient Jewish Proselytism

Summarizing the proposition presented in Goodman's two other articles,⁵ John North writes approvingly⁶ that, in first century A.D.,

³ Suetonius tells us (*Domitian*, 12:2) that he himself was present when an old man of ninety was forced to strip in an overcrowded courtroom to show whether he was circumcised.

⁴ Shaye Cohen, «Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,» *HTR* 82:1 (1989) 20-1, cites the paragraph given above (37: 17,1) as evidence of pagans' «practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews,» adding: «Dio is not necessarily talking about 'converts' – he does not even mention circumcision. For Dio anyone devoted to Jewish ways is called a Jew.» But both the expulsion of Tiberius and the executions of Domitian are explained by Dio (57: 18,5a; 67: 14,1-3) as measures designed to thwart Jewish proselytism, and the proselytes are described generally as those converting to or drifting into Jewish ways (ἐθνη; ἥθη); circumcision is not mentioned.

⁵ In the *JJS* and in *The Jews*. See above, n. 1.

⁶ J. North, The Development of Religious Pluralism, in: *The Jews* (above, n. 1), 191.

the Jews showed no interest...in any kind of mission to convert Gentiles to their cause....⁷ Only in the course of the second and third centuries did...some Palestinian Rabbis [assume] that an active mission to the Gentiles should after all be approved.

In his later article,⁸ Goodman said: «At some time in the second or third century some Jews seem to have begun looking for converts,» and referred the reader to the detailed discussion in his earlier article in *JJS* (above, n. 1). However, the latter endeavored to prove that this transformation occurred only in the *third* century (*JJS*, p. 185):

There was no reason in the second century for Jews to encourage this process by looking for more such proselytes, and there is no firm evidence that they did so. It is only in the third century that we can be certain that some rabbis began assuming the desirability of a mission to proselytise.

Feldman rejected Goodman's arguments about the Hellenistic and early Roman period, but accepted and even relied on Goodman for the period from the third century CE onwards.⁹ I think that Feldman, not Goodman, is right about the first and second centuries (primarily about the first half of the second century), but disagree with both Goodman and Feldman about the third century.

III. The Expulsions of the Jews from Rome

Before I delineate my general approach to the various sources, let us examine the interpretations on which Goodman— and, here and there, Feldman too — bases his thesis. Let us begin with the expulsion of the Jews from Rome.

⁷ J. North drew the following conclusion from this: «At the same period, the Jews do not seem to have become the victims of the same type of persecution as the Christians. It would be consistent to say that they were quietist, sought no converts and were therefore left relatively alone.» However, the Christians were persecuted neither because of their missionary activity nor because of their religious beliefs in general, but because they were classified as «a subversive group, politically dangerous to the State and an enemy of the emperor and the empire»; see my «The Church Fathers and the Jews in Writings Designed for Internal and External Use,» in S. Almog (ed.), *Antisemitism Through the Ages*, Oxford, etc., 1988, 44-5. This article includes a summary of J. Molthagen's dissertation, *Der römische Staat und die Christen im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1970). Molthagen's work is pertinent to the comparison between Jews and Christians offered by Goodman (*JRS* [above, n. 1], 44 and n. 27), who relied on G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *Why were the early Christians persecuted?* in: M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Society*, London and Boston, 1974, 210-49, 256-62.

⁸ See *The Jews* (above, n. 1), 74.

⁹ See *Jew and Gentile* (above, n. 2), 298 ff.; 408 ff.

Goodman gives various reasons for nullifying the evidence of Jewish missionary activity as the cause of the expulsions. Feldman countered his arguments.¹⁰ Goodman, in discussing the expulsion of 139 BCE about which Valerius Maximus informed us, expatiated on the erection of private altars by Jews in Rome, stressing that such activity is contrary to Jewish law. Goodman is aware of the building of Honias's temple in Egypt at about the same time, which engendered neither a contemporary nor a subsequent (by the Sages) scandal. Generally speaking, one cannot expect an early pagan source to reveal knowledge of the laws of the Temple and the sacrifices recorded in the Torah and the Oral Law. One fact, however, is clear from Valerius: there was Jewish missionary activity then. This also emerges from the fact that the edict of expulsion joined the Jews with the Chaldaeans, who were accused of instilling their astrological religion into Rome.

I welcome Feldman's suggestion that: «Valerius is presumably referring to the building of places of worship, which he would identify as altars» (p. 301). But Feldman's alternative explanation (p. 559, n. 48) is unacceptable: he indicates that, in speaking of altars, Valerius meant something like the tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (hereafter: BT) *Berakhoth* 19a and *Pesahim* 53a,

that a certain Roman Jew named Thaddeus accustomed the Roman Jews to eat kids roasted whole on the eve of Passover, even though, as Simeon ben Shetah in the first century B.C.E. reminded him, it was prohibited to do so outside the Temple of Jerusalem.

Dikdukei Soferim,¹¹ in the note on BT *Berakhoth* 19a, shows that manuscripts and ancient editions have the reading: «the Sages [not Simeon ben Shetah] sent unto him [reminded him].» The mistake apparently derives from BT's earlier mention of Honi the Circle-Maker, whom Simeon ben Shetah asked to pray for rain. The Mishnah, tractate *Eduyyoth* (3:11)=*Besa* (2:7), states that R. Gamaliel the Patriarch (late first century CE) allowed the preparation on the eve of Passover of kids roasted whole, and even practiced this himself (cf. *Pesahim* 7:2), whereas the Sages prohibited this. Thus, Thaddeus [=Theudas], the rich Roman philanthropist,¹² apparently lived in the Yavneh (Jamnia) period, that is, more than two hundred years after the expulsion of 139 BCE. His action, therefore, cannot serve as an alternative explanation of the private altars mentioned by Valerius Maximus.

¹⁰ Goodman, *The Jews*, pp. 69-70; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 300-304.

¹¹ R. Rabbinovicz, *Variae Lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum*, Munich 1868 (Hebrew).

¹² The Jerusalem Talmud (hereafter: JT), *Pesahim*, chap. 7, 34a, notes that Theudas used to send contributions for the support of the Sages.

Goodman¹³ also questions Cassius Dio's assertion (57:18, 5a) that the expulsion of Tiberius in 19 CE was caused by successful, Jewish, proselytic activity. But, as Feldman indicates, Josephus lends support to Cassius Dio. Goodman totally ignored the existence of an expulsion by Claudius in the forties of the first century CE, and its possible connection with Jewish missionary activity. Feldman (pp. 303-304) discusses the problems related to our sources, but finds it difficult to decide the issue. Slingerland¹⁴ was right in declaring that Cassius Dio's statement (60:6, 6) that the Jews in Rome «were multiplying *again*» refers to Cassius's own comments about the increased number of Jews in Rome on the eve of the expulsion by Tiberius.¹⁵ In his table (p. 316), Slingerland pointed out the similarities between the tradition in Cassius Dio and Suetonius. Nonetheless, he argued (pp. 321-22) that Cassius Dio and Suetonius referred to two different matters: the restrictions Claudius imposed, as noted by Cassius Dio, shortly after he came into power (41 CE); and the expulsion decree, promulgated later, as Suetonius indicated.

A careful analysis of the various sources leads one to conclude that Claudius did in fact order an expulsion. Cassius Dio probably had a different tradition before him, and, in attempting to explain it, fell into a logical contradiction. It is clear that Claudius, like Tiberius before him, was troubled by the existing situation. According to Cassius Dio, Tiberius employed the drastic measure of expulsion for two reasons: the greatly increased number of Jews in Rome; and the danger that the pagans faced as a result of Jewish missionary activity. When Claudius came into power, twenty-two years after Tiberius's expulsion decree, it became clear that the Jews had managed to circumvent the Tiberian ban, once again flourishing in Rome, and probably renewing their proselytic activity. These facts should have forced Claudius to attempt to restore conditions prevailing after the Tiberian decree. Cassius Dio indicates that Claudius refrained from pursuing this course of action since, «because of their multitude, barring them from the city might have created disturbances.» This, however, is unreasonable: the increased numbers of the Jews had already caused disturbances and the conversion of pagans, not the Jews' expulsion from the city. It is worth noting that the disputes between the Jews and the Jewish Christians reported by Suetonius (Claudius, 25:4) served only to increase the disturbances.

¹³ *The Jews* (above, n. 1), 70; cf. Feldman (above, n. 2), 303.

¹⁴ J. Slingerland, Suetonius Claudius 25.4 and the Account in Cassius Dio, *JQR* 79 (1989) 305-22.

¹⁵ He was anticipated in this by F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles – A Sociological Approach*, Cambridge, England, 1986, 92.

IV. Philo and Josephus on Proselytism

Feldman¹⁶ challenged Goodman's assertions on the views of Philo, Josephus and the Sages (of the first century CE) about proselytism. Apart from citing statements showing that each of them «clearly takes pride in the spread of Judaism» (p. 291), Feldman pointed out (pp. 318-19) that some of Philo's works (such as those containing descriptions of the Essenes and the *Therapeutai: Quod omnis probus liber*; and *De vita contemplativa*), as well as Philo's comments on the qualities of Moses, «are definitely addressed to Gentiles.» This is also true of Josephus's intentional omissions in stories from the Torah, as of his additions or changes in them, such as are found in his *Antiquities* (Feldman, p. 320). Commenting on Josephus's apologetic treatise, *Against Apion*, Feldman said (p. 321) that «it seems likely that such a treatise was also employed by missionaries.»

Feldman paid special attention to the rendering of Exodus 22:27: «Thou shalt not revile gods» by the *Septuagint*, Philo and Josephus.¹⁷ This translation, Feldman argued, testifies to considerable concern for the feelings of potential pagan readers. I quite agree that the rendering of *elohim* by the plural «gods» may indicate the *Septuagint* and Josephus's attitudes; Josephus knew Hebrew and deviated more than once from the Hebrew version of Scripture. However, the use of «gods» cannot reveal Philo's attitude, since Philo had no knowledge of Hebrew and was, accordingly, wholly dependent on the *Septuagint* version.¹⁸

«Why do we hear of no Jewish missions into pagan regions? Why are no missionaries mentioned by name in extant Jewish or pagan literature?» This *argumentum e silentio* of Goodman was answered by Feldman (p. 323; cf. p. 140):

Josephus...is careful not to offend his patrons, the Romans, who were sensitive, as we have seen, about proselytizing. In similar fashion, Philo, as the leader, so to speak, of the Anti-Defamation League of Alexandria, must have been sensitive to the charge of Jewish aggressiveness in proselytizing and consequently avoided alluding to it directly.

¹⁶ See *Jew and Gentile* (above, n. 2), 289-92, 318-21.

¹⁷ See *The Special Laws*, I 9: 53; *Antiquities*, 4: 207; *Against Apion*, 2: 237.

¹⁸ This is discussed at length in my «A New Onomasticon Fragment from Oxyrhynchus and Philo's Etymologies,» *JTS*, n.s. vol. 19 (1968), 70-82. The Sages (in BT *Sanhedrin* 66a) interpreted *elohim* as judge, adopting the obvious meaning of the term earlier in the same chapter (Ex 22:8).

V. Matthew 23:15 and the Term *Prosêlytos*

Goodman devoted several pages¹⁹ to the words attributed to Jesus in Matthew 23:15: «Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because ye compass sea and land to gain a single proselyte, and when he is gained, ye make of him a son of hell twofold more than yourselves.» Goodman made a remarkable effort to undermine their validity, since they serve «as a proof-text – often *the* proof-text – for a mission by Pharisees and other Jews to win converts to Judaism from the Gentile world» (Goodman, p. 63; his italics). Goodman suggested that «Matthew is here attacking Pharisees for their eagerness to persuade other Jews to follow Pharisaic *halakhah*.» Feldman (p. 298) rejected this suggestion, commenting that «in order to be credible, polemic, like satire, must be based on reality.»

In his eagerness to undermine the technical meaning of *prosêlytos* in Matthew, Goodman argued (p. 63) that the «sense of *proserchesthai* as the approach to something sacred can be found...in Josephus, *Jewish War* II 8, 7 (142), where those who join the sect of the Essenes are described as *tous prosiontas*, a participial form of the same verb.» But this participle stems from the verb *proseimi* (=πρός εἰμι), not from *proserchomai*, the source of *prosêlytos*, although as far as the meaning is concerned the two verbs are identical.

Goodman admitted (p. 62; his italics) that the term *prosêlytos*, which apart from the reference in Matthew appears only three more times in the New Testament (*Acts* 2:11; 6:5; 13:43), «was clearly *becoming* a technical term among Jews for a converted Gentile.» Feldman noted (his p. 557, n. 35) that «McKnight,²⁰ pp. 106-7, interprets Matthew 23:15 to refer to the attempt of the Pharisees to impose their understanding of the Law on Gentile ‘G-d-fearers.’» He retorted that «there is no indication in the word *proselyte* that is here used that the reference is to such a group.» I would add that *Acts* 13:43 also refutes McKnight’s interpretation. It says that «when the synagogue broke up many of the *God-fearing proselytes* [τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων] followed Paul and Barnabas....»

As for the term *prosêlytos*, it emerges from Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*²¹ that it continued to be used in a loose way, encompassing converts both to Judaism and Christianity, in keeping with its derivation from the verb *proserchesthai*. If we follow the order of the *Dialogue*, Justin’s address (23:3) to Trypho and his friends «who wish to become proselytes,» shows that they were Gentiles wishing to convert to Judaism;²² a little further on (28:2), Justin

¹⁹ See *The Jews*, 60-3. Feldman’s response: *Jew and Gentile*, pp. 298-300.

²⁰ Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis, 1991).

²¹ References are to the Greek text edited by E.J. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten* (Göttingen, 1914).

addresses them, saying that, since Christ's coming is imminent, they have only a very short time in which to proselytize (προσηλύσεως), that is, to become converts to Christianity. In 80:1 of the *Dialogue*, proselytes refers to converts to Judaism; in 122:1, *prosélytoi* signifies Jewish proselytes, with the original Hebrew term *ger* also being recorded in Greek transcription and suffix (*gêoras*). This is also the case in 122:3-4; while 122:5 relates in one verse first to converts to Judaism and immediately afterwards to converts to Christianity. In 123:1, *prosélytoi* are Jewish proselytes. Justin goes on to quote from Isaiah 14:1 (according to the *Septuagint*), in which the Hebrew *ger* is transcribed by *gêoras*. As we will see, a homiletic interpretation of the Amora, R. Helbo (late third-early fourth century CE), that viewed converts negatively is based on the same verse of Isaiah. (The positive attitude of his pupil, R. Berechia, is based on the same verse.) In the *Dialogue's* 123:2, also, *prosélytoi* means Jewish proselytes.²³

VI. The Image of Abraham as a Missionary

At this point Feldman and I part company. As we saw above, Feldman criticized Goodman's claim that Jews were indifferent towards proselytes in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, but agreed with Goodman that, in the third and fourth centuries, the Sages adopted a proselytic policy. Feldman²⁴ discussed Goodman's reliance upon the Midrash stating that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph engaged in converting Gentiles. Feldman remarked (his p. 409): «Even Goodman admits that this function of Abraham as missionary is all the more striking because he lacks this role in the eyes of Philo and Josephus.» In Feldman's note *ad locum*, the gist of Goodman's argument is quoted: «In the case of Josephus (*Ant.* 1. 161, 166-67), we find that Abraham, when he went down to Egypt, taught not Judaism but arithmetic and astronomy.»²⁵

²² See O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile*, Leiden, 1987, 258.

²³ See below (n. 57) for Skarsaune's summary of *Dialogue* 121:4-123:2. Compare J. S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: The Use of Abraham in Early Christian Controversy...*, Princeton Theological Seminary dissertation 1989, 420-24.

²⁴ *Jew and Gentile* (above, n. 2), 408-11.

²⁵ Goodman, *JJS* (above, n. 1), 179; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, n. 71 on p. 586; cf. 211-12. Goodman's own words in *Mission and Conversion* (above, n. 2, 89) are: «But what he taught was not, it seems, Judaism or even monotheism or anything like it. The burden of his teaching emerges unexpectedly as arithmetic and astronomy (*AJ* 1.167),...» A similar interpretation appears in Edouard Will and Claude Orrieux, «*Prosélytisme juif*»? *Histoire d'une erreur*, Paris 1992, 145; «Les résultats de ces débats contradictoires furent qu'il leur apprit l'arithmétique et l'astronomie (*ibid.*, 167), et c'est tout.»

This calls for two remarks: Goodman misrepresented Josephus's words in order to stress the revolution that took place, in his opinion, in the time of the Amoraim. Reading Josephus's description carefully shows that he actually hinted at Abraham's theological-missionary work. Abraham, he said, argued with the Egyptian priests, and succeeded in proving the hollowness and untruthfulness of their beliefs, that is, in persuading them about the superiority of monotheistic Judaism. The teaching of arithmetic and astronomy was referred to only in a secondary remark, which Goodman turned into the main statement. Feldman's own explanation (p. 323; cf. p. 140) – that Philo and Josephus were aware of pagan sensitivity to Jewish proselytism and therefore played down such events – must have slipped his mind. (He raised it against Goodman's claim that, unlike the Christians, the Jews lacked missionary zeal in the first century CE.)

VII. Negative Amoraic Statements about Proselytes and their Interpretation

Feldman (his p. 411) mentioned several Sages of the third and fourth centuries who expressed an unfavorable or even hostile attitude towards proselytes. R. Isaac presented a homiletic interpretation of a verse in Proverbs (11:15) to the effect that «one evil thing after another will befall those who accept proselytes.» The editor of the Talmud likened this to R. Helbo's statement: «Proselytes are as burdensome for Israel as a [leprous] scab on the skin» (BT *Yebamoth* 109b).

Elsewhere (BT *Niddah* 13b), the following *baraita* appears: «The proselytes...hinder the coming of the Messiah.» Here, too, the editor cited R. Helbo's dictum in an attempt to illuminate this harsh *baraita*. R. Helbo did not «argue» what Goodman – and Feldman – claimed he did.²⁶ R. Helbo's full *midrash* appears in BT *Kiddushin* 70b. There, he used the homiletical measure of *gezerah shavah* as follows: «Proselytes are as burdensome for Israel as a [leprous] scab (*sappahath*), for it is said (Isaiah 14:1), 'and the stranger [=ger]²⁷ shall join himself with them, and they shall be attached [*ve-nispehu*] to the house of Jacob.' Here it is written: *ve-nispehu*, while elsewhere it is written:²⁸ 'and for rising, or for a scab [*sappahath*].'»

Feldman commented on these negative comments as follows: «The very vehemence and repeated citation of such statements indicates that proselytism was going on and was apparently a subject of sharp debate.» It is difficult to accept this suggestion. If we follow this line of thought, we will have to explain the positive statements about proselytes – and they are the majority – as

²⁶ Goodman, *JJS*, 176; Feldman, *ibid.*, 411.

²⁷ See the text above, 212-13.

²⁸ In Lev 14:56, the context being the law concerning all kinds of leprosy.

evidence of the *cessation* of proselytism. How would Feldman explain the fact that R. Helbo's own pupil took the opposite position when using the same verse in Isaiah and a *gezerah shavah* (Exodus Rabbah, 19:4):

R. Berechia said: as regards Scripture's saying (Job 31:32): «The stranger [=ger] did not lodge in the street,» [what does it mean] if not that proselytes are destined to be priests serving in the Temple? For it is said (Isaiah 14:1): «And the stranger [=ger] shall join himself with them and they shall be attached [=ve-nispehu] to the house of Jacob,» and *ve-nispehu* is nothing but a priesthood, for it is said (I Samuel 2:36): «Put me [=sephaheini], I pray thee, into one of the priests' offices.»

Bamberger²⁹ discussed R. Helbo's dictum at length, condescendingly noting that it was «an adverse utterance.» Braude,³⁰ on the other hand, suggested that «R. Helbo was not opposed to conversion; he was disturbed about the increasingly severe penalties imposed by the Christianized government of Rome on Jewish proselytizers.»³¹ This suggestion, apart from its apologetic tone, has a chronological drawback: R. Helbo's floruit is estimated to be in the years 290-320, whereas the earliest Christian law imposing punishments on proselytes and proselytizers was enacted by Constantine the Great in 329 CE.³²

VIII. Positive Amoraic Statements about Proselytes and their Interpretation

Let us now consider Goodman's article in the *JJS* (above, n. 1), and see the way in which he handled the Talmudic sources (pp. 178-82). Several third-century Amoraim, such as R. Eleazar b. Pedath in the name of R. Yosé b. Zimra and R. Hoshaya in the name of R. Judah b. Simon, interpreting various verses in the book of Genesis homiletically, attributed the initiative of converting Gentiles to Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. Goodman overlooked the third or fourth century R. Hunia (=Huna), who interpreted verses in Genesis to mean that «Jacob performed conversions» (literally, «converted conversions»).

²⁹ B. J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period*, New York 1968 (1939), xxi, 163 ff.

³⁰ W. J. Braude, *Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era: The Age of the Tannaim and Amoraim*, Providence 1940, 6-7 and n. 15, 42 ff. See G. Alon's review in his *Studies in Jewish History* (Tel-Aviv 1958), II: 278-84 (Hebrew).

³¹ Bamberger, *Proselytism*, xxi.

³² See A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, Detroit and Jerusalem 1987, No. 8, 124 ff.

³³ See *Genesis Rabbah*, 84 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 1004; ib., 39, 378); *Pesikta Rabbati*, 43 (ed. M. Friedman, 181a). In *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, 32 (ed. L. Finkelstein, 54), this is anonymous.

Another third century Amora, R. Yohanan, criticized Abraham's transaction with the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:21), because he deprived Gentile captives of the possibility of «entering under the wings of the Shekhinah.»³⁴ Goodman said (p. 181):

The remarkable assertion that God brought about the exile as a way of increasing the number of proselytes is found both in the name of the tanna R. Eliezer at *bPes.* 87b and, ascribed to a Jewish acquaintance, in the writings of the third-century Christian writer Origen (c. *Celsus* 1:55), but no rabbi even hints that a deliberate prolongation or extension of the exile would be desirable to further this mission to the nations.³⁵

The version of tractate *Pesahim* in *Dikdukei Soferim* (above, n. 11), shows that the name R. Eliezer is a corruption found in the new editions, whereas the reading in both manuscripts and ancient editions is R. *Eleazar*.³⁶ Ironically, this supports Goodman's thesis, since R. Eleazar is R. Eleazar b. Pedath, an Amora who immigrated to Eretz-Israel from Babylonia in the third century, worked together with R. Yohanan and – after R. Yohanan's death – took his place as the head of the Academy in Tiberias. According to the tradition in *R. Sherira Gaon's Letter*, R. Yohanan died in 279 CE. Thus, R. Eleazar flourished at about the same time as Origen was active in Caesarea (Origen died in 253).

Goodman missed the whole point. R. Eleazar's midrashic interpretation must be understood in a totally different context. The enslavement of the Jews, which created a theological problem, became a central motif in the pagan-Christian polemic in the Roman empire. R. Eleazar and other Sages of those generations tried to hearten the people by saying that the situation, although bad, had some redeeming features nonetheless.³⁷ In BT *Pesahim* 87b, we have more third-century Amoraic, midrashic expositions in this vein. It is worth quoting them:

And R. Eleazar [=b. Pedath] said: the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, did not exile Israel among the nations unless in order that converts [*gerim*] might join them, for it is said: «And I will sow her unto me in the earth» (Hosea 2:25) – does a man sow a *seah* unless in order to harvest several *kors*?³⁸ And R. Yo-

³⁴ BT *Nedarim* 32a.

³⁵ This bizarre argument, quoted verbatim in *Mission and Conversion* (137), is put forth also by Will and Orrieux (above, n. 25, 158): «Mais cela [i.e. R. Eleazar's assertion or *midrash*] signifie seulement que Dieu a le pouvoir de tirer un bien du mal qu'est l'exil, non qu'il faudrait s'exiler soi-meme pour aller precher la bonne parole aux nations.»

³⁶ In *Mission and Conversion* (137), Goodman amends his earlier statement to read: «...in the name of the tanna R. Eleazar in some manuscripts of *b. Pes.* 87b.»

³⁷ See my *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict*, Jerusalem and Leiden 1982, 168-208, especially 206-7.

hanan said: from this [of the continuation in Hosea] – «And I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy....» R. Oshaya said: what is the meaning of the verse «Even the righteous acts of His Ruler [*pirzono*] in Israel?» (Judges 5:11) The Holy One, Blessed-be-He, displayed righteousness towards Israel by dispersing [*pizran*] them among the nations.

It is also worth citing Origen's words, since they confirm the Talmudic tradition as well as the fact that this motif was much debated in the third century:

I remember that once in a discussion with some whom the Jews regard as learned [the Sages] I used these prophecies [Isaiah 52:13-53:8]. At this the Jew said that these prophecies referred to the whole people as though of a single individual, since they were scattered in the dispersion and smitten, *that as a result of the scattering of the Jews among the other nations many might become proselytes*.³⁹

Numerous texts – says Goodman (p. 179) –

portray Jethro as a missionary. Exodus 18:27...is glossed in the version of Ps. Jonathan with the assertion that Jethro went home to convert all the inhabitants of his country...; the same interpretation of this incident is found also at *MdRi Amalek* 106-8 and *Sifre Zuta* to Num. 10:30.

Ps. Jonathan is a commentary of the third century, according to Goodman (although it may be even later). In *MdRi* and *Sifre Zuta*, the tanna R. Eleazar of Modiim put the following words in the mouth of Jethro: «I am going to my country and I shall convert all the people of my land...and I will bring them under the wings of the Shekhinah.» R. Eleazar was killed, according to Talmudic tradition, in Bethar at the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt. This fact does not harmonize with Goodman's theory; he simply ignored it.

R. Yosé b. Halafta also constituted a chronological problem for Goodman's thesis. Goodman said (p. 182):

No amoraic text seems to ascribe approval of a proselytising mission to any second-century tanna apart from y*Sanh.* 2.6, 20c, where R. Yosé b. Halafta, of the mid-second century, is credited with the implausible view that Solomon multiplied his wives not from voluptuousness but to bring them under the wings of the Shekhinah.⁴⁰

³⁸ A *seah* measures about 13.3 liters; a *kor* contains about 30 *seahs*.

³⁹ H. Chadwick's translation of I:55, in his *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge, England, 1965), p. 50. The Christians claimed that these verses of Isaiah referred to Jesus. See Y. Kaufman's comprehensive discussion of the «servant of God» issue and of Isaiah's attitudes towards proselytes in his *History of the Israelite Religion*, Jerusalem 1956, IV, 1: 108-37 (Hebrew).

In formulating his theory, Goodman was prepared to acknowledge only its potential *chronological* weakness, but not its *methodological* one, as follows (pp. 182-83; Goodman's italics):

It is therefore *possible* that the anonymous references to Abraham and Jethro as missionaries in the tannaitic midrashim and Ps.-Jonathan were composed by the last generation of the tannaim in the early third century, and that the notion that proselytising is desirable was only first espoused by rabbis at that time; but I am aware that any claim that such midrashic stories were already traditional by that time cannot be disproved.

IX. The Extrapolation of Attitudes towards Proselytism from the Midrash

At the beginning of the century Israel Lévi published a two-part article on Jewish proselytism.⁴¹ In its second part (p. 1), Lévi addressed the question of whether the Sages of the Talmudic period favored or were hostile towards proselytism. His conclusions were as follows (p. 28):

1. there were two approaches among Jews towards proselytism: Diaspora Jews favored missionary propaganda, while among the Sages we encounter a hostile attitude; 2. the favorable dispositions were undoubtedly stronger, but only within a certain milieu, that of the Agadists or preachers; 3. the ideal of Judaism as a religious society is revealed in its works of edification, rather than in its *corpus juris*, just as the spirit of Christianity resides in the Gospels rather than in the laws of the Visigoths.

Bamberger and Braude followed suit (see above, nn. 29, 30). Bamberger (p. 297) argued that a survey of the objective data leads to an unequivocal conclusion: «The Rabbis throughout the Talmudic period were more than favorable to proselytization.» Later (in 1968; p. xxi), he tried to decide the issue quantitatively, stressing that «a full discussion of the negative remarks [on proselytes] occupies four pages, while the positive statements, with much less comment, require twelve.»

Two Israeli scholars, Alon and Urbach,⁴² while deploring the attempts of Bamberger and Braude to play down – or even deny completely – the testimony of the sources about attitudes expressing disapproval of converts and con-

⁴⁰ Thus verbatim in *Mission and Conversion* (150) as well. It is worth noting that his contemporary and colleague, R. Shimeon b. Yoḥai, remarked (*ibid.*) that Solomon did this «really for fornication.»

⁴¹ I. Lévi, «Le prosélytisme juif,» *REJ* 50 (1905) 1-9; 51 (1906) 1-31.

⁴² Alon, above n. 30, 281; E. E. Urbach, in *The Hebrew Encyclopedia*, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv 1960, XI: 179, s.v. *ger* (Hebrew). In his book, *The Sages – Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Engl. transl, Jerusalem 1975), I:541-54, Urbach expressed similar opinions.

version among the Sages, nonetheless concluded that the prevailing attitude towards proselytes in the Talmud and Midrash, as in the Apocrypha, was generally a positive one.

Goodman and the scholars mentioned above base their views on the Agadah. Clarifying his dissent and innovation, Goodman writes:⁴³

These texts have been collected by Braude and Bamberger, and I do not wish to challenge their conclusions that the rabbis often welcomed those who sought them out. But in contrast to them I want to stress that a willingness to accept is quite different from a positive desire to acquire.⁴⁴

X. Varied Types of Evidence (Halakhah, Actions, Midrashim) in the Determination of Attitudes about Proselytism

Many years ago, I considered briefly how one might determine the attitude of the Sages towards Gentiles and proselytes.⁴⁵ It seemed, and still seems, to me that *the position of the Halakhah is of the greatest importance* in this, and that *the acts, the actual behavior of the Sages towards Gentiles and proselytes are second only to it*. Evidence garnered from the Agadah must be used with due caution because of its very nature: the midrashic statements are, for the most part, homilies based on the (Hebrew) Bible's verses. Accordingly, it is natural for them to amplify the words of Scripture, and identify with and follow the dominant tone of this normative holy book. Since the Hebrew Bible reveals a generally hostile attitude towards Gentiles, and a generally favorable one towards proselytes, such homiletical expositions as appear in *the Midrashim cannot provide decisive testimony as to the position of the Sages about Gentiles and proselytes*. Only the utterances in the Midrashim that were not linked to Scripture, and which present, therefore, a definite and independent position, may give a valid picture of their views. Thus, only where homiletical interpretations *contrary* to the general Biblical position – i.e., that reveal a positive attitude towards Gentiles, and a negative one towards proselytes – appear are we in possession of a more accurate picture of the Sages' own thoughts.

⁴³ See *JJS* (above, n. 1), 180-81.

⁴⁴ And in n. 20 *ad locum*: «*Contra* Braude, op. cit., pp. 3, 18; Bamberger, op. cit., 290.»

⁴⁵ See D. Rokéah, On the Attitude of the Sages towards Gentiles and Proselytes, in: *Mahalachim*, No. 5 (1970), 68-74, esp. 72-3 (Hebrew).

XI. Jewish and Pagan Evidence about the Theory and Practice of Conversion

We learn about a positive fundamental attitude towards proselytism, and also of actual proselytic activity (primarily in the first and second centuries CE), from the Jewish, Christian and pagan sources.

The Torah (Deuteronomy 23:4-9) declared that the Ammonites and Moabites would never be allowed to marry Israelites; Edomites and Egyptians were to be excluded for only three generations. Immediately after the deposition of Rabban Gamaliel the Patriarch by the Sanhedrin, there was a public confrontation between Rabban Gamaliel and R. Joshua b. Hanania about the status of the Ammonites and Moabites, as follows:⁴⁶

Rabban Gamaliel also did not absent himself from the Beth ha-Midrash a single hour, as we have learnt: On that day Judah, *an Ammonite proselyte*, came before them in the Beth ha-Midrash. He said to them: Am I permitted to enter the assembly? R. Joshua said to him: You are permitted to enter the congregation. Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: Is it not already laid down, «An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord?» (Deut. 23:4) R. Joshua replied to him: Do Ammon and Moab still reside in their original homes? Sanncherib king of Assyria long ago went up and mixed up all the nations, as it says, «I have removed the bounds of the peoples...» (Isaiah 10:13); and whatever strays [from a group] is assumed to belong to the larger section of the group. Said Rabban Gamaliel to him: But has it not been said: «But afterwards I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon, saith the Lord» (Jeremiah 49:6), so that they have already returned? To which R. Joshua replied: And has it not been said, «And I will turn the captivity of My people Israel» (Amos 9:14), and they have not yet returned? *Forthwith they permitted him to enter the congregation.*

The Mishnah (*Yebamoth* 8:3), reads:

Ammonites and Moabites are prohibited [i.e. to marry Israelites] and their prohibition is for ever, but their females are permitted [to do so] immediately; Egyptians and Edomites are prohibited only for three generations, whether male or female. R. Shimeon [b. Yohai] permits females immediately. R. Shimeon said: There is an inference *a minori ad maius*: If where the males were prohibited forever, the females were permitted at once – where the males were prohibited for three generations only, is there not an inference *a minori ad maius* that we should permit the females [to marry] immediately?! They said to him: If [what you are saying] is a *halakhah*, we will accept it, but if it is an inference *a minori ad maius*, then there is an answer [i.e., we will not accept it]. He said to them: No, I am reporting a *halakhah*.

⁴⁶ BT *Berakhoth* 28a; transl. by M. Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1960). See the discussion in Bamberger (above, n. 29), 76 ff., including the case of the Egyptian proselyte Minyamin (Benjamin).

From this we may conclude that even before R. Shimeon b. Yohai, that is, as early as the first century, the Halakhah distinguished between males and females, and permitted Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite and Egyptian females who converted to Judaism to marry Jewish males immediately. The Halakhah abrogated the Torah's explicit prohibition, probably first as regards women, and only later concerning men. In Urbach's opinion (above, n. 40; p. 376), «Undoubtedly this enactment based on the differentiation 'An Ammonite but not an Ammonitess etc.' is an ancient Halakha, dating, apparently, from as early as the Hasmonean period, from the time of the conquests, when the Jewish population spread to Transjordan.» This stance can be considered to be an «outreach.» It proves that contemporary Sages wished to encourage these people to convert, and so moderated the harsh decree of the Torah. The Sages' missionary purpose becomes all the more conspicuous if we compare it to Philo's attitude towards these prohibitions. Philo not only accepted them and quoted the Torah in their defence, but also showed his approval of the Biblical limitations by presenting allegorical interpretations to support them.⁴⁷

The evidence of actual conversions to Judaism in the first and second centuries provides testimony of this halakhic modification, and proves that a proselytic initiative crowned with success existed even after the Great Revolt. These are some of the foremost testimonies to this:

1. the expulsions from Rome in the first century CE;
2. the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene;⁴⁸
3. the information supplied incidentally by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2:559-61) when reporting the events in Damascus in 66 CE, i.e., that almost all the women in the town were «addicted to the Jewish religion;»
4. Josephus's assertion (*War* 7: 45; cf. 50-1) that the Jews of Antioch had, in 67 CE, been drawing many Greeks for many years to their worship (*thrês-keiai*), thus making them «in some way» (*tropô tini*) part of themselves.⁴⁹
5. the missionary zeal and success of the Christian apostles in the first century (see Feldman, p. 324);
6. the pagan writers of the first and second centuries CE, who attest Jewish proselytism.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See Philo's *Allegorical Interpretation*, iii. 81; *On the Posterity of Cain and his Exile*, 177; *On the Virtues*, 106-8. Line 35 of 4QMMT (for which see Y. Sussman, *The History of Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls – A Preliminary to the Publication of 4QMMT, Tarbiz*, vol. 59 [1989-1990] 33 and n. 98) may hint at «the prohibition of Ammonite and Moabite [women]»; however, as Sussman remarks, «the text here is very fragmentary – and the matter highly doubtful.» (Hebrew.)

⁴⁸ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:17-96; and *Genesis Rabbah* 46:10 (Theodor-Albeck, 467-68). See also Feldman (above, n. 2), 329-30.

⁴⁹ Shaye Cohen (above, n. 4, 27) understood this as referring to full conversion. Goodman (*Mission and Conversion*, 87 and n. 58) thought this referred to the status of «Godfearers.»

Among the writers are the following:

1. Horace (65-8 BCE). Apart from his knowledge of Jewish religious customs (circumcision, Sabbath), Horace indicated that there was vigorous Jewish missionary activity in Rome.⁵¹

2. Seneca (who committed suicide in 65 CE). In a treatise composed shortly before his death, Seneca deplored the spread of Jewish customs throughout the Mediterranean world and the success of the Jewish mission: «The vanquished have given laws to their victors.»⁵²

3. Martial (late first century CE). Although he did not mention Jewish proselytism, Martial referred several times with invective to the Jewish customs of circumcision and the Sabbath.⁵³

4. The emperor, Domitian, executed his cousin, the consul Flavius Clemens, and many others in 95 CE. We are told that the cousin had adopted Jewish customs,⁵⁴ in company with many others. Stern⁵⁵ argued convincingly against any attempt to identify those accused then as Christians.

5. Tacitus (c.56 CE-120 CE). *Histories* (5:1-2) expressed his chagrin at the success of Jewish proselytism and at its effects on Roman society.⁵⁶

6. Juvenal (c.60 CE-130 CE). Like Tacitus, Juvenal took a negative view of the success of Jewish proselytism. He portrayed the stages of a growing attachment to Judaism on the part of pagan families: starting with keeping the Sabbath and abstaining from pork, and ending with circumcision and full conversion.⁵⁷

After Juvenal's time, references to Jewish proselytism virtually disappear from the writings of pagan authors.

XII. Summary and Conclusions

Thus, there is clear evidence for the *first* century and the first half of the *second* confirming the existence of a Jewish proselytizing initiative:

⁵⁰ They appear, with commentary, in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Vols. I-II, Jerusalem, 1974, 1980.

⁵¹ See Stern, I: 321 ff.

⁵² Stern, I: 429 ff.

⁵³ Stern, I: 521 ff.

⁵⁴ Cassius Dio, 67: 14,1-3.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, II: 380 ff. Cf. his «Sympathy for Judaism in Roman Senatorial Circles in the Period of the Early Empire,» *Zion* 29 (1964) 155-67 (Hebrew).

⁵⁶ See Stern, II: 2, 39 ff.

⁵⁷ Stern, II:94-5, 102 ff. On circumcision, see Shaye Cohen (above, n. 4), 27 and nn. 46-7.

a. *a modification of the Halakhah*, although in a less radical form than that of the Christians, who abolished circumcision and the dietary laws;⁵⁸

b. *actual missionary activity*;

c. *homiletical interpretations* of first- and second-century Sages, revealing positive attitudes towards proselytism;⁵⁹ some of them were similar to those of the third-century Sages on which Goodman based his thesis. As we have seen, Goodman himself admitted that the midrashic stories he cited might have originated in earlier centuries, that is, that the Sages' positive attitude towards missionary activity might have developed before the third century.

In view of all this, may I suggest that Goodman's theory be dismissed, and the Christian mission in the first and second centuries be seen not as a new and unusual phenomenon but, rather, as part and parcel of the Jewish mission. This mission was a vigorous one in the first and early second centuries but weakened thereafter. This was because of the disastrous blows suffered by the Jewish people in Eretz-Israel and the Diaspora during their frequent rebellions; it was also a result of Roman imperial legislation against proselytism. The Sages' homiletical expositions in favor of proselytism, in the main, were no more than utterances conforming with the Hebrew Bible's positive stance towards proselytes (*gerim*).⁶⁰

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⁵⁸ The «Apostolic decree» (Acts 15:29) insisted only that newcomers to Christianity «abstain from meats offered to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication.» Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:23-9; Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, X, 96:10.

⁵⁹ See *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, tractate Nezikin 18 (on Exodus 22:20), ed. and transl. by J. Z. Lauterbach, Philadelphia 1949, III:137 ff., for an example.

⁶⁰ Justin Martyr also provides evidence of second-century Jewish missionary activities. Skarsaune's meticulous study (above, n. 22) drew conclusions corroborating my contention. See his p. 349, which reads:

One should note especially *Dial.* 123:1. Justin first quotes Is 14:1...as a Jewish standard text on (Jewish) proselytes, and then comments: «A proselyte who is circumcised with the object of joining the people is like one who is native-born.» This can be directly confirmed from rabbinic texts: Is 14:1 is an important testimony on proselytism [in n. 253 *ad locum* Skarsaune referred to R. Helbo's use of this verse, but overlooked R. Berechia's. See my full citation of both, above pp. 11-12] and the rabbis said about the proselyte: «When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.» (*Yeb.* 47b).

To conclude: Justin's material in *Dial.* 121:4-123:2 represents a Christianized version of a Jewish proselyte tradition.

In his n. 255 *ad locum*, Skarsaune added (his italics): «I think Donahue [=P.J. Donahue, *Jewish-Christian Controversy in the Second Century: A Study in the Dialogue of Justin Martyr*; an unpublished dissertation on microfilm, Yale, 1973] p. 179 is right in relating this material to the over-all setting of the *Dialogue*: Justin and Trypho are *competing missionaries*, Jewish proselytism is a main antagonist for Justin.» And cf. Skarsaune's assertion on p. 371 (emphasis added):

The *Christian missionary tradition* which addresses God-fearing Gentiles in *Dial.* 24:3, inviting them to God's salvation in Jerusalem, is *walking in the footsteps of [the] Jewish mission* to the same addressees. At the same time, a radical discontinuity with regard to the Jewish people is expressed in precisely the same context: «...for he has dismissed his people, the House of Jacob....»