



DEFINING “MISSION” AND “CONVERSION” IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Any assessment regarding the extent and character of Jewish and Christian missionary activity in Second Temple Judaism depends entirely on how one defines “mission” and “conversion.”¹ These are heavily freighted terms loaded with modern theological and cultural baggage. Furthermore, and as we will see, there are different definitions of mission and various models of conversion that have been proposed by historians and sociologists. To speak of a religious mission immediately conjures up questions about *what* the purpose of the mission is—to inform people, to change peoples’ morals, to enlarge the membership of a religious association—*who* the people are, *why* the mission is needed, and by *what* means the mission will be pursued. To speak of religious conversion also elicits questions about rites of passages, medium and message, public recognition, psychological disposition, and varieties of conversion (partial, full, intellectual, cultural, social, etc.). Hence, it is necessary to define these terms in order to develop a religious pattern against which one can weigh and assess the evidence for purported Jewish missionary activity. The substance of this chapter is to engage the

¹ See definitions and comments offered by Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries*, 1.324; McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 4–7; Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 164–66; Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 38–59; Eckhard Schnabel, “Jesus and the Beginnings of the Mission to the Gentiles,” in *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ* (eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 47–49; idem, *Early Christian Mission*, 1.10–12; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 408, n. 11; Paget, “Jewish Proselytism,” 69–70, 76–79; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, 267–73; Barnett, “Jewish Mission,” 263–64; Riesner, “A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission,” 221–23; Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism*, 7–10.

historical, theological, religious, and sociological issues related to defining “mission” and “conversion” as the groundwork for what follows.

MISSION AND CONVERSION: SOCIOLOGICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

A distinctive element of all the major missionary religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) is that they all hold to some great “unveiling” of ultimate truth that is said to be of universal importance for the human race. Judaism claims that Yahweh was at work in creating the nation of Israel and he gave the Torah as the charter for God’s covenant people. Christianity of course refers to the incarnation of Jesus Christ and pouring out of the Holy Spirit as the central nodes of history and the means of reconciliation between human beings and the triune God. In Islam there is the claim that Allah’s final and definitive revelation has been given to Mohammed in the form the Qu’ran. There are of course different ways of trying to convert people to another religion such as through oral proclamation, military conquest, the written medium, cultural inducements, or via social integration into a new group. As will be seen, all of these missionary methods (if we can call them that) can be related to events and episodes in ancient Judaism. A central matter, though, is how the phenomenon of conversions relates to the ethos and identity of those who practiced the Jewish religion. In the ancient world various Gentiles became sympathizers to Judaism, and some even went as far as becoming proselytes. But does that alone justify a description of Second Temple Judaism as a “missionary religion”? According to Scot McKnight, a missionary religion is one that includes an element of religious self-definition whereby members believe that it is their purpose to undertake concerted efforts to persuade non-adherents to convert to their beliefs and adopt their patterns of behavior.² That opens up the question as to which beliefs and what patterns of behavior matter the most and how does one go about persuading non-adherents to join them.

The Problem with Definitions

Arguments about definitions could go on *ad nauseum* and yet they are also unavoidable. This book hasn’t the space for a full engagement

²McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 4–5.

with the secondary literature on conversion and mission. Instead, I'll content myself with noting some of its more significant elements before offering my own definitions. To begin with, Martin Goodman distinguishes four different types of "mission" activity: information, education, apologetic, and proselytization. He describes the latter category in the following way:

Those who approved of proselytizing mission believed that, as members of a defined group, they should approve of those within their number who might choose to encourage outsiders not only to change their way of life but also to be incorporated within their group.³

In contrast, some argue for less activist definitions of mission. For instance, Clifford Bedell argues that Jewish synagogues emitted an attractive presence to Gentiles, a kind of "sacred magnetism," and that is itself a legitimate form of missionary activity.⁴ J. C. Paget criticizes McKnight and Goodman on the grounds that mission can be conceived of in terms other than centrifugal and aggressive activity. It may manifest itself in openness to outsiders or even in a desire to publicize its beliefs.⁵ However, Paget's own definition of a missionary religion as "one which, in a variety of ways, makes it clear that conversion to that religion is a good thing"⁶ is so broad as to be meaningless. Was there in the first century a religion where the members thought that conversion to its beliefs and teachings was a bad thing? I say that, doubtlessly, members of the mystery cults such as Mithraism and Isis would not have thought so, but we do not find in them recruiting practices that are analogous to Jewish or Christian proselytism.⁷ Thus, Paget loads the dice of definition just as much as he accuses McKnight and Goodman of doing.

³Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 4.

⁴Bedell, "Mission in Intertestamental Judaism," 25.

⁵Paget, "Jewish Proselytism," 76–77.

⁶Paget, "Jewish Proselytism," 77.

⁷Cf. Nock, *Conversion*, 122–37; David E. Aune, "Expansion and Recruitment among Hellenistic Religions: The Case of Mithraism," in *Recruitment, Conquest, and Conflict* (eds. Peder Borgen, Vernon K. Robbins, and David B. Gowler; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 39–56; Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 20–37; Stark, *Cities of God*, 187–88. On the spread of Mithraism, Luther H. Martin writes ("Performativity, Narrativity, and Cognition: 'Demythologizing' the Roman Cult of Mithras," in *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianities* [ed. Willi Braun; Toronto: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005], 196): "Although Mithraism was characterized by a widespread

In actuality, conceptions of mission are likely to prove fruitless unless they are anchored in an adequate definition of conversion. This deficiency is evident in John Dickson's work on mission-commitment in Judaism where he defines mission as "*the range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders seek to promote their religion to non-adherents.*" Dickson, though cautious of maximalist and minimalist approaches, regards mission as a continuum so that a variety of activities geared towards Gentiles can still be accommodated under the umbrella of "mission." This is based upon his suggestion that certain practices (e.g., apologetic literature, ethical apologetic) though not "*directly intended*" to cause conversion were still "*oriented*" towards conversion. The underlying assumption is that almost anything that promotes the beliefs and reputation of the group becomes in some sense missional. Notwithstanding the validity of his assumption that practices such as apologetic writings necessarily contributed to conversions, his definition of conversion as "*a new socio-religious allegiance*" fails to discriminate between adherence and incorporation or between the varying levels of commitment that a target audience may respond with.⁸ On such a definition there is no distinction between activities designed to induce political sympathy, evoke philosophical respect, propagate moral superiority, or even urge God-fearers to go the final yard and become proselytes. I would say that promotion and proselytism, though closely linked together, are not necessarily on the same trajectory or seeking the same outcomes. Rainer Riesner is probably correct when he asserts that a definition of mission should include both "*intentionality and activity.*"⁹ Dickson focuses far too much on intention

dissemination throughout the Roman Empire, its spread can be attributed to socio-political factors other than the 'religious' character of the Mithraic groups themselves. Even as the mobility of Egyptian merchants and immigrants facilitated the spread of the Isis cult, so the mobile character of the Roman military and of its civil servants, both of which dominated the demography of Mithraic membership, provides the 'strings of contagion' [citing L. Michael White] for the spread of Mithraism, a spread facilitated more by militarily and politically motivated 'acts of patronage and benefaction than on patterns of conversion of recruitment' [citing L. Michael White] . . . For Mithraism, in other words, as for Greco-Roman religions in general, there was no roving apostles or missionaries who represented and transmitted an approved or orthodox set of beliefs."

⁸ Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism*, 8–10 (italics original).

⁹ Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission," 223.

in his definition of a missionary religion without detailing exactly what that intention might be, and whether the end product is a circumcised proselyte or a pagan philosopher with a greater appreciation for Judaism. To proceed in a logical fashion, then, a more precise definition of mission will follow on from a suitable definition of conversion.

Defining Conversion in Judaism

Broadly put, religious conversion means transferring one's religious allegiance from one religion to another. In the ancient world conversion, though relatively infrequent, was not an unknown occurrence. In the philosophical sects, oriental cults, Judaism, and in Christianity conversions did take place.¹⁰ A. D. Nock's idea of conversion as "a re-orientation of the soul" and turning from "an earlier form of piety to another" fails to grasp the sociological dimension of conversion to Judaism.¹¹ Importantly, conversion to Judaism was more than an alteration of piety but involved joining a new ἔθνος akin to socialization or nationalization.¹² By converting to the Jewish religion one was also becoming a subject of the Judean state. It meant, in most cases, joining a group of people whose way of life was governed by the law of Moses and were distinguished from Greeks and Barbarians by that very fact. This transference required not merely adding Jewish beliefs to one's current religious framework, but jettisoning all, or at least a hefty part, of one's previous religious beliefs and redefining one's social identity around a particular social network with its various religious symbols, language, boundaries, and praxis. Conversion to Judaism (much like

¹⁰The classic study is Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

¹¹Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

¹²Cf. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries*, 1.327; G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (London: Duckworth, 1955), 84; Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 17; Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament* (trans. Frank Clarke; London: SCM, 1965 [1963]), 24; S. J. D. Cohen, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus," *HTR* 80 (1987): 410–12; Alan F. Segal, "The Cost of Proselytism and Conversion," in *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers* (ed. D. Hull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 346, 348; McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 7, 47; J. J. Scott, *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 342; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 408–9; Köstenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 67.

Christianity) required displacing other forms of piety and religious devotion in favor of a new disposition. That is not to say that conversion was always instantaneous or complete; converts rarely make a clean and decisive break with their religious past, and many social arrangements like family or business could obviously remain intact depending on the circumstance. But conversion to Judaism by its very nature tended towards exclusion in the religious and social senses. Whereas pagans could add the devotion of Isis or Dionysius to their web of preexisting religious activities, this was theoretically impossible for a Jewish convert, as Judaism was an exclusively monotheistic faith.¹³ Conversion to Judaism was never purely a matter of a change in one's inward disposition, but it required a social dislocation in leaving one community and joining another. For this reason, we should study conversion and defection as part of a sociological phenomenon in antiquity. It is crucial then to underscore the sociological nature of religious conversion in relation to pagans converting to Judaism.¹⁴ Persons do not necessarily convert because they have found the doctrine or philosophy of a certain religion to be intellectually superior.¹⁵ There are an abundance of other factors in-

¹³That is not to say that the ideal always matched the reality as acculturation, assimilation, and even syncretism were not unknown among Jews in antiquity. Furthermore, it was certainly possible to reinterpret Judaism to make it far more permeable and malleable to the culture of the Hellenistic *polis* and pantheon.

¹⁴Cf. L. R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist, 1997); Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); James G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociobistorical Account of Christian Origins (26–50 CE)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 142–72; N. H. Taylor, "The Social Nature of Conversion in the Early Christian World," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context* (ed. Phil F. Esler; London: Routledge, 1995), 128–36.

¹⁵Josephus in *Life* presents himself as being on a spiritual pilgrimage within Judaism, and he tried various sects and philosophies and evaluated their doctrines until he settled on Pharisaism, which he regarded as the most superior. It is fair to say that the genuineness of Josephus's Pharisaism is open to question. He may have identified himself as a Pharisee since they were the ruling party after 70 C.E. and then projected his allegiance to his youth. Justin

cluding religious experience, economic state, social status, and networks of relationships that facilitate conversions from one religion to another. We should not discount the importance of intellectual persuasion in the conversion process, but it is clearly subordinated to contact with a new religious movement through networks and relationships.¹⁶ Determinative for conversion is social interaction where potential converts begin to share a group’s identity and values, and only then are they formally initiated into the group. It is the convert’s relationship with the group or with one of the group’s members that affects the convert’s eventual decision to join the group and to adhere to its beliefs and practices. In many cases, belonging precedes believing. In the words of Rodney Stark, “conversion is primarily about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines” and “conversion to new, deviant religious groups occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to non-members.”¹⁷ I contend that without these sociological models the conversion of entire “households” or large portions of synagogues to Christianity become impossible to understand.¹⁸

Martyr also utilizes the same form of the spiritual quest in evaluating various philosophies until he came to Christianity. We should not doubt the intellectual curiosity of educated and literate religious persons of antiquity, but the narration of the quest for religious truth was more of a literary genre than a historical occurrence. The real significance of doctrine according to Rodney Stark (*Cities of God*, 113–14) is that it determines if the term conversion even applies to the shift in the religious orientation of the convert.

¹⁶As anecdotal evidence for intellectual conversion, a friend of mine once told me the story of an atheist he knew who was converted to Christianity by reading from cover to cover Louis Berkhof’s textbook on Systematic Theology. As an undergraduate I recollect that reading Berkhof’s book was like swimming through tar, and yet it convinced one particular atheist of the coherence and comprehensiveness of a Christian worldview.

¹⁷Stark, *Cities of God*, 11; idem, *Rise of Christianity*, 18.

¹⁸Wayne A. Meeks (*The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983], 77) writes: “If the existing household was the basic cell of the mission, then it follows from that motivational bases for becoming part of the *ekklesia* would likely vary from one member to another. If a household became Christian more or less en bloc, not everyone who went along with the new practices would do so with the same understanding or inner participation. Social solidarity might be more important in persuading some members to be baptized than would their

As important as the social dimension of conversion is, however, we cannot escape its ideological and behavioral aspects. Peder Borgen delves into Philo and Paul to formulate a paradigm of conversion comprising three elements: religious, ethical, and social.¹⁹ The primary advantage of this paradigm is that it stems from two first-century Jews who were familiar with proselytizing and its surrounding controversies, as opposed to purely sociological models that are either anachronistic or else culturally estranged from Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman culture.²⁰ I think this model is worth following up although it needs some social nuancing. Thus, I define conversion to Judaism as *aligning one's beliefs and practices with the religious framework and social fabric of a Jewish community, which involves (1) an ideological re-orientation of existing beliefs and/or the adoption of new beliefs, (2) an ethical transformation of commitment and values, in accordance with perceived norms, resulting in altered behavior, and (3) identification with and incorporation into the Jewish ethnē*. In other words, conversion to Judaism involves monotheism, Torah, and synagogue.

Conversion and Circumcision

Regarding the full integration of non-Jews into the Jewish community, how does one formally shift from adherent (understood as one who undertakes partial adoption of beliefs and practices) to convert (understood as one who becomes a bona fide member who transfers in)? What signifies that transference has taken place, and what is the authenticating signature of this moment? Specifically, we have to ask

understanding or convictions about specific beliefs. Differential qualities and degrees of engagement with the group would not be surprising.”

¹⁹Borgen, “The Early Church and the Hellenistic Synagogue,” 61; idem, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism*, 56–59; idem, “Proselytes, Conquest, and Mission,” 63–64, 69–70; and see similarly Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” 26, 31; Finn, *Death to Rebirth*, 95–96; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 488.

²⁰A significant problem with sociological models of conversion (esp. post L. R. Rambo) is that they often assume a universal and transferable phenomenon of conversionism. However, the contours of conversion are more likely to be relative and specific to the unique environment of the culture and group in question. What is true and paradigmatic for conversion to Judaism in Alexandria in the first century may not necessarily apply to conversions to Judaism in New York in the 1970s.

whether or not circumcision was a prerequisite for entry into the commonwealth of Israel; or as Borgen contends, was it sometimes perceived as a subsequent duty on admission?²¹ Neil McEleney advocated that "there is some small evidence that the precept of circumcision was not always insisted upon if formerly Gentile adherents otherwise practiced the Law fully."²² But does the evidence support this?²³

Circumcision was the most essential marker of (male) Jewish identity since it connected persons with Israel's covenant history. Circumcision was linked to God's covenant with Israel in which circumcision defined one's identity and status within the Mosaic covenant.²⁴ Going back further, in Gen 17:9–14 circumcision is the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God. Furthermore, in Gen 17:14 anyone who is uncircumcised has broken the covenant and must be cut off. The link of uncircumcision with apostasy appears again in 1 Maccabees where circumcision became a symbol of national resistance to Hellenism.²⁵ According to rabbinic tradition circumcision was necessary for entering the covenant.²⁶ In reverse terms, the Jew who refused to circumcise his children or even attempted to reverse the procedure was regarded as an apostate.²⁷

²¹ Borgen, "The Early Church and the Hellenistic Synagogue," 67; cf. John J. Collins, "A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, Others in Late Antiquity* (eds. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 174, 178–79.

²² N. J. McEleney, "Conversion, Circumcision and the Law," *NTS* 20 (1974): 328.

²³ Note that Paul states in Galatians: "I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law" (Gal 5:3). Similar are the Christian Pharisees reported in Acts, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). The upshot of this is that obedience to the law followed on from circumcision and not vice-versa. Neither Paul nor Luke knew of uncircumcised proselytes who kept the entire law save its regulations about being circumcised. Note also that Justin represents the Jewish view as being basically the same (*Dial. Tryph.* 8). See further Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.164, 175.

²⁴ Cf. Exod 4:24–26; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:2–9; Sir 44:20; *Jub.* 15:28; Philo, *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.51–52; *m. Ned.* 3.11; Acts 7:8.

²⁵ 1 Macc 1:48, 60; 2 Macc 6:10; cf. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.171; *Ant.* 1.192–193, 214.

²⁶ *b. Ker.* 9a.

²⁷ 1 Macc 1:14–16; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.241; and Seutonius, *Domitian*, 12.2 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §320). As Blaschke (*Beschneidung*, 360) points out, circumcision was a key part of being Jewish in post-Maccabean times.

Alternatively, it should be remembered that if the covenantal dimension of circumcision is abandoned, then its importance is clearly undermined and the necessity of the practice for conversion to Judaism is diminished. This is observable in Philo, whose tendency to allegorize the law often drove him to minimize any ethnocentric implications of the law.²⁸ In *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2, Philo asserts that what constitutes a proselyte is not circumcision, but submission to God “because the proselyte is one who circumcises not his uncircumcision but his desires and sensual pleasures and the other passions of the soul (ὅτι προσήλυτός ἐστιν, οὐχ ὁ περιτμηθεὶς τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν ἀλλ’ ὁ τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάθη τῆς ψυχῆς). For in Egypt the Hebrew nation was not circumcised.”²⁹ John J. Collins believes that Philo’s remark here shows how much room there was for debate about who actually was a proselyte. Collins infers from this text from Philo: “The implication of this passage is surely that circumcision is not an essential prerequisite for membership of the Hebrew nation”³⁰ which presents us with two tiers of proselytes: circumcised and uncircumcised. Others advocate that it is not conversion that is being referred to by Philo at all, but only the phenomenon of being a partial adherent or philosophical sympathizer to Judaism. As such, Louis Feldman believes that Philo is talking here only of the “sympathizer” and Shaye Cohen identifies a type of “monotheistic proselyte” who assents to monotheism.³¹ Yet placing *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2 against the phenomenon of adherence does not match the language that Philo uses because “proselyte” and “circumcised” are value-laden terms that are applied only to an elite few. According to John Nolland, Philo’s statement presupposes the necessity and normality of circumcision for proselytes. Philo’s remark is hardly dispensing with the practice of circumcision, rather Philo identifies true proselytes as a subgroup of circumcised proselytes. Philo believes that a deeper reality resides in the circumcision of the mind than in

²⁸ Cf. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 170–76.

²⁹ The text of Philo here cited is based on the Greek rather than the Armenian version where the word order differs slightly.

³⁰ Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness,” 173; cf. McEleney, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” 329; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 299.

³¹ Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 348; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 151.

mere physical circumcision.³² Similar is Andreas Blaschke, “The necessity of the physical circumcision of proselytes is presupposed here and . . . not disputed.”³³ However, the reason given by Philo—“For in Egypt the Hebrew nation was not circumcised”—shows that he did not regard physical circumcision as the most important element of being an incomer or proselyte. Israel was “Israel” before the Exodus and prior to the giving of the law with its regulations about circumcision. Intellectual transformation (“circumcision of your desires”) seems to be at least as important as physical circumcision, and perhaps even more so. So physical circumcision is comparatively devalued rather than denied as normative for conversion by Philo. This is attributable to the philosophical rather than covenantal character of Philo’s thought.³⁴ Thus, contra Collins, if this is an adverse statement against the necessity of circumcision for proselytes it is quite subdued and does not intimate the redundancy of the ritual.³⁵

On initiation into Judaism more generally, Philo is incredibly circumspect when it comes to the role of circumcision. He speaks of the necessity of being initiated into the law without stipulating how, thus leaving open the possibility that circumcision might not be required for full conversion.³⁶ Philo makes reference to true or fuller proselytes, as does Josephus, implying that there was an inferior level of attachment to Judaism, but what marked the inferiority is not stated.³⁷ Philo and Josephus both see some didactic elements of the law being reserved exclusively for the initiated, but that can obviously accommodate a wide

³²John Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?” *JSJ* 12 (1981): 174–79; cf. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 268–71.

³³Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bible und verwandter Text* (TANZ 28; Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1998), 219 [“Die Notwendigkeit der physischen Beschneidung von Proselyten wird dabei vorausgesetzt und . . . nicht bestritten”].

³⁴Cf. Barclay on Philo (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 170): “This move from history to philosophy represents a shift from the particular to the universal; to dehistoricize is to deJudaize.”

³⁵Ellen Birnbaum (*The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes* [Providence: Brown University Press, 1996] 200) notes: “His comments, however, do not address the practical issue of whether or not circumcision is required of proselytes, and it is difficult to know how to apply his remarks to real proselytes.”

³⁶Philo, *Virt.* 178.

³⁷Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1.147; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38–42.

sway of initiation processes.³⁸ When Philo does speak of those who are “incomers” (οἱ ἐπηλύται)³⁹ he emphasizes their moral change and denunciation of idolatry, we find nothing that is particular to Jewish identity and no initiation rites.⁴⁰ To be sure, Philo emphasizes the importance of rejecting idols and upholding the law, but he never explicitly mentions circumcision as being necessary to enter Israel; though neither does he deny it. In a nutshell, Philo does not adjudicate on the necessity of circumcision for proselytes. He only declares the inferiority of circumcision to genuine worship of God.

There are other instances, however, where Philo implies the legitimacy and necessity of circumcision as a key part of Jewish identity. Philo is quite emphatic that those who reduce circumcision to an allegory have gone too far and though it connotes a wider philosophical reality it cannot be easily laid aside.⁴¹ Elsewhere Philo defends the literal practice of circumcision for hygienic, procreative, and spiritual reasons⁴² motivated no doubt by pagan revulsion and mockery against the practice.⁴³ In *Spec. Leg.* 4.176–178 he refers to the converts who have turned away from their own families, left their idolatrous practices, and become pilgrims of the truth and procurers of a better home in Judaism. The content is clearly concerned with social transference from one community to another, and there is no reference to Jewish markers of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath keeping that are necessarily taken on board by proselytes. Yet we should keep in mind the very next paragraph where

³⁸ Philo, *Cher.* 42, 48–49; *Sacr.* 60; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.209–210.

³⁹ Cf. L&S 247.

⁴⁰ Philo, *Virt.* 182; 219.

⁴¹ Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 89–94; cf. *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.48 (and 52) where circumcision is a “symbol, as if to show that it is proper to cut off superfluous and excessive desire by exercising continence and endurance in matters of the Law.”

⁴² Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.4–7; *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.48.

⁴³ Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.1–3 (“The ordinance of circumcision of the genitals is mocked, though it is an act which is practiced to no slight degree among other nations also”); Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (“the other customs of the Jews are base and abominable . . . they adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference”); Martial, *Epigr.* 7.30 (“nor do you shun the lecherries of circumcised Jews”); 7.82 (“the sheath unluckily fell off: lo, he was circumcised!”); (“Your overflowing malice, and your detraction everywhere of my books, I pardon, circumcised poet, you are wise!”) 11.94 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §§240, 243; 245); see also Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.99 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §301); Petronius, *Satirae* 68.4–8; 102.14; frg. 37 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §§193, 194, 195); Suetonius, *Domitian*, 12.2 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §320).

he refers to the “peculiarity of its laws and customs” of the nation of the Jews and how these laws are “of necessity strict and rigorous, as they are intended to train them to the greatest height of virtue.”⁴⁴ It would be difficult to imagine Gentile converts finding a comfortable home in the Jewish community without living under the same peculiar and rigorous laws that defined the Jewish people. On top of that, in *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.62 we read: “Why does Abraham circumcise those of foreign birth? The wise man is helpful and at the same time philanthropic. He saves and calls to himself not only his kinsmen and those of like opinions but also those of foreign birth.” Although Philo starts off with the topic of circumcision in relation to the purchase of slaves (from Gen 17:12, 17), he also applies it more generally to those of “foreign birth” which seems to include the experience of proselytes by implication. If that implication holds true then we have grounds for suspecting that Philo expected proselytes to be circumcised.⁴⁵ Though Philo may, for the most part, wish to emphasize the proselyte’s acceptance of monotheism, rejection of idolatry, and avoidance of immorality, he does not completely extinguish the particularity of Jewish ethnic identity that proselytism involves. He might highlight a form of ethical monotheism in his various discussions of proselytes, but he also emphasizes the social dislocation that converts experience from their own people and their integration into the Jewish commonwealth.⁴⁶ All in all, while the evidence from Philo sometimes appears to be at odds with itself, on balance it seems best to conclude that he did not exempt proselytes from being circumcised, but he attached only relative importance to it compared to what other Jewish groups thought about circumcision.

Josephus assumes that circumcision is the distinguishing mark of a Jewish male.⁴⁷ But he is also aware of the complications of circumcising non-Jews. Consequently, Josephus also preserves several stories dealing with circumcision and conversion and he narrates their often complex circumstances. The most significant and interesting of these stories is the conversion of the house of Adiabene where King Izates and his mother Helena adopted Jewish practices. Yet as to whether or not he should be circumcised, Izates is given two conflicting pieces of advice by, firstly, the Jewish merchant Ananias who tells him that he need not be circumcised,

⁴⁴ Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 4.179.

⁴⁵ Cf. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 267.

⁴⁶ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 243.

⁴⁷ Josephus, *Ant.* 1.192–193, 214; *Ag. Ap.* 1.171.

then, secondly, the Galilean Eleazar informs him that circumcision is completely obligatory. After his initial conversion Izates wanted to be circumcised in order to be “assuredly Jewish” (βεβαίως Ἰουδαίος).⁴⁸ Yet, Josephus depicts the Jewish merchant Ananias as stipulating that Izates “could worship God without being circumcised.”⁴⁹ But is this a position that most Hellenistic Jews would agree with? Collins thinks that in the context given by Josephus, “to worship God” means to do all that is necessary to ensure salvation (though what salvation means is not spelled out).⁵⁰ Ananias (or Josephus) justifies this practice by claiming that worship of God “counted more than circumcision”⁵¹ which may reflect a general Hellenistic Jewish attitude indicative of Philo’s comment in *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2. When Ananias adds that God would forgive Izates for not being circumcised it is unclear whether it refers to forgiveness for failing to be circumcised as a condition of conversion, or forgiveness for failing to meet a subsequent obligation of conversion.⁵² At this point we might think that Ananias’s attitude indicates that it was indeed possible for a Gentile to convert to Judaism without circumcision. But that is a rather selective way of viewing the narrative. Although it can be said that some Jews evidently were more flexible on the issue of circumcision than others, it would be a mistake to conclude from the story of Izates that circumcision was not linked with conversion and integration into Israel for several reasons: (1) Ananias never says that remaining at this penultimate stage of commitment to Judaism makes Izates a Jew.⁵³ (2) King Izates did not regard himself as a Jew unless he was circumcised.⁵⁴ (3) The reasons given for not circumcising

⁴⁸Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38; see also the report of the conversion of Izates’s brother Monobazus and his relatives in *Ant.* 20.75. A later rabbinic midrash states: “Once Monabaz and Izates, the sons of King Ptolemy, were sitting and reading the book of Genesis. When they came to the verse, ‘And you shall be circumcised’ [Gen 17:11] one turned his face towards the wall and commenced to weep, and the other turned his face to the wall and commenced to weep. Then each went and had himself circumcised” (*Gen. Rab.* 46.10).

⁴⁹Josephus, *Ant.* 20.41.

⁵⁰Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness,” 179.

⁵¹Josephus, *Ant.* 20.41.

⁵²Josephus, *Ant.* 20.42; contra Collins (“A Symbol of Otherness,” 178–79) who thinks that it can be taken to imply that circumcision was only a subsequent obligation upon admission. However, either could be possible here.

⁵³Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?” 193.

⁵⁴Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38.

Izates are exceptional; first, the need to avoid an uprising from public resentment at having a Jewish ruler, and second, Ananias's desire for self-preservation. (4) When Eleazar the Pharisee arrived on the scene he reproved Izates for failing to be circumcised, implying it was hardly pardonable or optional.⁵⁵ Eleazar regarded Jewish practices as a matter of law, not *ethos*, even for Gentiles.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Izates consents to undergo the procedure of circumcision. Josephus's comments that the dangers that Izates feared did not eventuate because of God's providence in protecting the faithful, indicates Josephus's own approval of Izates's decision to be circumcised.⁵⁷ Alan Segal is perhaps correct that for Josephus, all things being equal, being Jewish is better than being a God-fearer.⁵⁸ Of course it is open to question whether “God-fearer” was the category that Josephus had in mind. Even so, Izates's status is initially that of a non-Jew taken to observing some Jewish customs and proceeding on towards full conversion. Izates wanted to convert like his mother and that required circumcision. The tension in this vignette is whether Izates would in fact take that step. Josephus reports most favorably that he did.⁵⁹ In light of all this the summary of Blaschke seems correct:

(1) In *Ant.* 20.34–48 circumcision is the crucial step from merely sympathizing with Judaism as a God-fearer to living as a “proper Jew.” (2) The text provides no evidence for the inclusion of uncircumcised non-Jews as proselytes. (3) It seems likely, on its basis, that there was a Judean position, esp. in Diaspora Judaism, which advocated that uncircumcised God-fearers possibly have a share in the salvation of Israel (“God-fearer model”), whereas others inseparably connected participation in salvation for non-Jews to circumcision and conversion (“proselyte model”). (4) Ananias and Eleazar used their professions to propagate the Jewish faith, and they may not have been a singular phenomenon. Above all, pagan women were approached by them. (5) In pagan eyes circumcision is strange, alien, and unseemly.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Cf. Philo, *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.52.

⁵⁶Daniel R. Schwartz, “God, Gentiles, Jewish Law: On Acts 15 and Josephus' Adiabene Narrative,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (eds. J. Frey, D. R. Schwartz, S. Gripentrog; AJEC 71, Leiden: Brill, 2007), 271.

⁵⁷Josephus, *Ant.* 20.43–48.

⁵⁸Segal, “The Cost of Proselytism and Conversion,” 357.

⁵⁹Schwartz, “God, Gentiles, Jewish Law,” 271.

⁶⁰Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 240 [1] In *Ant* 20,34–48 ist die Beschneidung der entscheidende Schritt von bloßen Sympathisieren mit dem Judentum als Gottesfürchtiger hin zum Leben als »rechter Jude«. 2) Der Text ist kein Beleg

Elsewhere there is supplementary evidence from Josephus that indicates the same link between circumcision and conversion to Judaism. In providing an account of the subjugation of the Idumaeans under Hyrcanus I, Josephus notes how the Idumaeans (under duress) submitted to “circumcision and the Jewish way of life” and were “finally called Jews” (ὥστε εἶναι τὸ λοιπὸν Ἰουδαίους).⁶¹ Josephus records that the Roman military leader Metilius who was captured in Jerusalem after the fall of the Antonian fortress was saved from death by “promising to judaize to the point of circumcision” (μέχρι περιτομῆς ἰουδαΐσειν ὑποσχόμενον).⁶² Donaldson says that Metilius “in effect saved his skin by being willing to part with a small portion of it”!⁶³ Here “Judaizing” represents a number of possible measures that involve imitating, sympathizing, and finally identifying with the Jewish people. While pragmatically Metilius was expressing his willingness to change sides in the conflict, we should not play off the political meaning (side with the Jews) against the cultural meaning (adopt Jewish way of life) of Judaizing as Cohen does.⁶⁴ While Judaizing can involve offering political support, it ordinarily means far more than this in practice (e.g., Gal 2:14). On the cultural side, I concur with Blaschke who writes: “According to *J.W.* 2.454 circumcision is the end process of ἰουδαΐζειν [Judaizing] and the beginning of Ἰουδαῖος εἶναι [being a Jew].”⁶⁵ Josephus also includes a report from Strabo that Aristobulus I joined the Ituraeans to Judea by the “bond of circumcision” (ὄκειώσατο δεσμῶ συνάψας

für die Annahme unbeschnittener Nichtjuden als *Proselyten*. 3) Anhand seiner ist aber eine Haltung von Judea v.a. im Diasporajudentum wahrscheinlich zu machen, die auch unbeschnittenen *Gottesfürchtigen* u.U. Anteil am Heil Israels in Aussicht stellte (»Gottesfürchtigenmodell«), wohingegen andere Heilsteilhaben auch für Nichtjuden untrennbar mit Beschneidung und Konversion verbunden haben (»Proselytenmodell«). 4) Ananias und Eleazar haben ihren Beruf zur Propagierung des jüdischen Glaubens genutzt und sind damit eventuell keine singulären Erscheinungen gewesen. Vor allem heidnische *Frauen* wurden von ihnen angesprochen. 5) In heidnischen Augen ist die Beschneidung seltsam, fremd und unziemlich].

⁶¹Josephus, *Ant.* 12.258.

⁶²Josephus, *J.W.* 2.454.

⁶³Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 292.

⁶⁴Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 183; see Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 293–94.

⁶⁵Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 226 (“Nach *Bell* 2,454 ist die Beschneidung Ende des bloßen ἰουδαΐζειν und Anfang des Ἰουδαῖος εἶναι”).

τῆ τῶν αἰδοίων περιτομῆ) which emphasizes circumcision as the chief indicator of shared identity and mutual commitment.⁶⁶ The Herodians (whose commitment to Judaism was always suspect) insisted on circumcision for intermarriage with princes from pagan kingdoms.⁶⁷ If one was to rule the Jewish people then it made sense that one had to be Jewish and the key marker (and in some cases the main deterrent for would-be suitors) was circumcision. Furthermore, Cohen examines several instances of conversion in *Antiquities* and concludes that for converts, “circumcision is the crucial indicator of their new status.”⁶⁸ Circumcision was the end point or the final bridge to be crossed in the movement towards the Jewish way of life. The implication is that Judaizing by Gentiles was a broad concept, but circumcision was the terminus of conversion.⁶⁹ In sum, Josephus understands and appreciates the pragmatic and political reasons why Gentile adherents who wish to convert to Judaism might not go ahead and be circumcised. But he evidently reflects the view that circumcision remains the normal and definitive mark of a Gentile becoming a Jew.

Outside of Josephus, we observe further evidence for the association between circumcision and conversion. In Judith the Gentile Achior believed in God and consequently, “he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin and he was added to the house of Israel” (περιετέμετο τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτοῦ καὶ προσετέθη εἰς τὸν οἶκον Ἰσραηλ).⁷⁰ In Esther it is reported that “many of the Gentiles were circumcised and became Jews” (πολλοὶ τῶν ἔθνῶν περιετέμοντο καὶ ἰουδαίζον).⁷¹ These two texts from Esther and Judith, from books dealing with women as the central characters, show that circumcision was presupposed as part of Jewish identity in a Gentile environment and they have in their background the reception of proselytes in the Diaspora, Palestine, and the Orient, where circumcision was central to conversion.⁷² In the *Epic of Theodotus* the author presents a narration of the massacre of the Shechemites from Gen 34 and states that: “Jacob

⁶⁶Josephus, *Ant.* 13.319.

⁶⁷Josephus, *Ant.* 16.225; 19.355; 20.139, 145–146.

⁶⁸Cohen, “Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus,” 420; cf. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 438–39.

⁶⁹Cohen, “Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus,” 416.

⁷⁰Jdt 14:10 (LXX).

⁷¹Esther 8:17 (LXX); cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 11.285.

⁷²Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 119, 130.

said that he would not give her [Dinah] until all the inhabitants of Shechem were circumcised and became Jews.⁷³

Along with most Jewish authors of the period, Greco-Roman authors also associated circumcision—even of proselytes—with Jewish identity. Juvenal describes how a son of an adherent would inevitably “take to circumcision” as the final step in his conversion to the Jewish way of life.⁷⁴ Tacitus saw circumcision as a distinguishing mark of Jewish males when he says that “they adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference,” and he adds that “those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice.”⁷⁵ Petronius highlights the link of circumcision with Jewish identity: “The Jew may worship his pig-god and clamour in the ears of heaven, but unless he cuts back his foreskin with the knife, he shall go forth from the people and immigrate to Greek cities.”⁷⁶ Petronius also states, with obvious sarcasm, that one can disguise oneself as a Jew by being circumcised.⁷⁷ According to the Acts of the Apostles, although Paul’s traveling companion Timothy had a Jewish mother—and Jewish identity is matriarchal—because he had a Greek father, Paul was compelled to circumcise Timothy so as to dissolve any question of his status as a “Jew” during his missionary travels among Jews and pagans in the Mediterranean coastal cities.⁷⁸ Suetonius reports a case where a man was publicly inspected to determine if he was circumcised in order to ascertain if he was liable to pay the *fiscus Iudaicus* (the war reparation tax levied upon the Jews across the empire in lieu of paying the temple tax to Jerusalem).⁷⁹ Even for those external to Jewish communities circumcision was the primary ethnic and religious indicator that demonstrated acquisition or retainment of Jewish identity (or at least for males).

We seem to be led to the inevitable conclusion that circumcision was the ritual signifier that marks the difference between adherence and conversion. Pagans and Greeks, regardless of their adherence to Jewish customs or their association with Jewish communities, were still

⁷³ *Epic. Theod.* frg. 5.

⁷⁴ Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96–106 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §301); cf. Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.169.

⁷⁵ Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2.

⁷⁶ Petronius, *Satyricon*, frg. 37 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §195).

⁷⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon*, frg. 102.13–14 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §194).

⁷⁸ Acts 16:3.

⁷⁹ Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.2. On the *fiscus Iudaicus* see Josephus, *JW.* 7.218.

of the “nations” (גוֹיִם or ἔθνη) if they were uncircumcised. Only by circumcision could males become *de jure* Jews.⁸⁰ We can make room for exceptions, account for misinterpretation of Jewish views by outsiders, recognize the elastic nature of group boundaries in certain settings; even so, circumcision was the primary expression of entering into the commonwealth of Israel for converts. Overall, then, we possess here an array of evidence that clearly marks out circumcision as the ordinary rite of passage for Gentile males to join Israel and to enter into covenant with their God, Yahweh.

There could be two main reasons for circumcising Gentiles. First, the requirement for circumcision is intensified within *Eretz* Israel as part of the effort to protect the sacred space of the holy land. This is particularly evident in the forced circumcision of the Ituraeans and Idumaeans (see below) and other forced conversions noted by Josephus.⁸¹ One of the first actions of the Maccabean revolt led by Mattathias was that they “forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel.”⁸² This was a counter-response to the forced Hellenization of Judea by the Syrian king and was aimed at both apostates (those who did circumcise their children) but also against any non-Jews living in the land of Judea. According to the Christian author Hippolytus, some Jewish groups would even forcibly circumcise a Jew or a Gentile if they heard them even discussing the law or God.⁸³ The circumcision of Gentiles here is not a matter of mission or conversion but of maintaining the holiness of the land and protecting it against defilement.⁸⁴ More zealous expressions of Judean nationalism at times of conflict or conquest seem to have dissolved the category of “resident alien” or “sojourner” (גֵּר) and did not afford the liberality of Diaspora Jews in assigning a positive, even if limited status, to Gentile adherents and associates.

A second reason for circumcising Gentiles is that circumcision was often expressed in regards to the positive soteriological value of the ritual for Gentiles. Acts 15:1 reflects this debate in early Christianity: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses,

⁸⁰ Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1997), 62.

⁸¹ Josephus, *Life* 112–113, 149–154; *J.W.* 2.454.

⁸² 1 Macc 2:46.

⁸³ Hippolytus, *Refut.* 9.21.

⁸⁴ Hengel and Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch*, 65.

you cannot be saved.”⁸⁵ Paul vigorously opposed the view that Gentiles had to convert to Judaism in order to be “saved.” Yet by going that route Paul did not simply opt for a liberalized Jewish view of salvation without circumcision, but rather, he advocated full inclusion into the people of God on the basis of faith in Christ, which itself is able to deliver believers. For Paul, in the new age that had dawned in Jesus Christ’s resurrection, physical circumcision had been replaced by “circumcision of the heart” as the ultimate sign of covenant inclusion.

There are, however, several strands of evidence from Diasporan, rabbinic, and Greco-Roman literature that show that the designation “Jew” could be applied somewhat flexibly and beyond the marker of circumcision and integration into the Jewish community. In the Hebrew Bible physical circumcision could be spiritualized or subordinated to circumcision of the heart which provided fertile soil for the thoughts of Diaspora Jews and Christians about the conversion of Gentiles. That is, you can theoretically have a situation in which a Gentile is spiritually circumcised and yet a Jew is not.⁸⁶ In some writings from the Jewish Diaspora the ethno-specific obligations of the Torah are downplayed. For example, in the Pentateuch, aliens are not permitted to partake of Passover unless they have been circumcised,⁸⁷ yet in *Ezekiel the Tragedian* circumcision is not mentioned as a prerequisite for celebrating Passover and the matter was disputed in later rabbinic writings.⁸⁸ Michael Lattke⁸⁹ brings attention to the connection between the call to discipleship in Mark 10:28–30 (leaving family, houses, fields and receiving rewards etc.)⁹⁰ and Luke 14:26–27/Matt 10:37–38 (necessity of hating parents and carrying cross)⁹¹ with Philo’s account of the proselytes in *De specialibus legibus*.⁹² In the Marcan and Philonic accounts there is a leaving

⁸⁵On the soteriological benefits of circumcision see also *Jub.* 15:25–34; CD 16:4–6; *T. Levi* 6:3.

⁸⁶Deut 10:16; 30:6; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26; Ezek 44:9; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.304–306; *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2; *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.46, 48; 1QS 5:5; 1QH 18:20; 1QpHab 11:13; cf. Rom 2:29; Col 2:11; *Barn.* 9:1–9.

⁸⁷Exod 12:43, 48–49; Num 9:14.

⁸⁸*Exag.* 175–192; cf. *m. Pesah.* 8.8.

⁸⁹Michael Lattke, “The Call to Discipleship and Proselytizing,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 359–62.

⁹⁰Cf. Matt 19:27–29; Luke 18:28–30.

⁹¹Cf. *Gos. Thom.* 55, 101.

⁹²Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.51–52.

of "house, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children or fields" and the departure from "their country, their kinsfolk and their friends." This stands in contrast with a view to gaining family and eternal life (Mark), or another homeland, relatives, friends, protection and refuge (Philo). Whether or not this language of leaving/gaining signifies a "Hellenistic Jewish definition of a proselyte"⁹³ is not certain. Philo maintains *both* a literal and deeper meaning of circumcision, yet he transfers remarkable esteem and prestige to Gentile converts apart from circumcision.⁹⁴

Rabbinic literature adds further ambivalence as to who could be counted as a Jew. To begin with, it is notable that in some rabbinic discussions anyone who denies idolatry is counted as a Jew, which casts the net very broadly.⁹⁵ Even so, in other rabbinic regulations converts were ordinarily required to make a sacrifice and made to undergo both baptism and circumcision.⁹⁶ Then there is the comical tradition of three Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism who were rejected by R. Shammai but then accepted by R. Hillel. A first Gentile comes to Shammai; he wants to convert to Judaism, but the Gentile insisted on learning the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai rejected him, so he went to Hillel, who taught him: "What you dislike, do not do to your friend. That is the basis of the Torah. The rest is commentary: go and learn!" Then another Gentile who accepted only the written Torah came to Shammai for instruction. Shammai refused, so he went to Hillel. On his first meeting, Hillel taught him the correct order of the Hebrew Alphabet. The next day Hillel reversed the letters. The convert was confused and asked why the order of the letters was changed. Hillel's answer goes on to illustrate the need for the written and oral Torah. Then a third Gentile wanted to convert so that he could

⁹³Lattke, "The Call to Discipleship and Proselytizing," 361.

⁹⁴Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.2–11; *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2; *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.46–52; *Migr. Abr.* 89–94; *Som.* 2.25. Lattke ("The Call to Discipleship and Proselytizing," 361, n. 13) candidly admits that: "There is no reason to assume that Philo does not speak of 'Ganzproselyten.'"

⁹⁵*b. Meg.* 13a; *b. Ned.* 25a; *Sifre Num.* 111.

⁹⁶*m. Ker.* 2.1; *b. Ker.* 8b–9a; *m. 'Ed.* 5.2; *m. Pesah.* 8.8; *b. Pesah.* 92a; *b. Yebam.* 46a–47b; cf. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries*, 1.331–32; Kirsopp Lake, "Proselytes and God-Fearers," in *The Beginnings of Christianity* (eds. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake; 5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1922–1933), 5.78–79; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.173–76; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 198–238.

become the High Priest and wear the Priestly garments. Shammai turns him away, but Hillel accepted him. Subsequently the convert realized that even David, the King of Israel, did not qualify as a priest since he wasn't descended from Aaron's line.⁹⁷ Obviously the story contains exaggeration, hyperbole, and it is not offering casuistic case law about conversions to Judaism (it is probably legend not history). Even so, circumcision is strangely absent from the narrative, and in the interactions between Hillel and the three Gentiles, conversion is a process of education and gradual increase in commitment. In another story, R. Joshua b. Hananiah in his debate with R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus around the end of the first century C.E. argued that baptism is sufficient for initiation into Judaism.⁹⁸ The fact that one rabbi held such a view is not evidence that others did, and in any case it did not become the majority rabbinic view. The general pattern of rabbinic tradition, then, is that in *halakic* rulings there seems to be pretty clear grounds for circumcision being normal and obligatory for conversion by Gentiles, whereas *haggadic* episodes appear to represent more flexible and muddled lines of demarcation.

Greco-Roman authors also seem to have fairly broad ideas as to who is a Jew. Epictetus refers to someone who oscillates between two positions as being like a person who "is not a Jew, but is only acting" (οὐκ ἔστιν Ἰουδαῖος, ἀλλ' ὑποκρίνεται), in contrast to someone who has adopted "the attitude of mind of the man who has been baptized and made his choice (βεβαμμένου καὶ ἡρημένου) then he is both a Jew in fact and is also called one (ὄντι καὶ καλεῖται Ἰουδαῖος)."⁹⁹ In Epictetus's censuring of attitudes about acting versus commitment, he enlists the example of Jewish adherents and Jewish converts, yet he registers baptism as the difference between the two positions. This suggests knowledge of the practice of "baptism" for initiates in Rome (where Epictetus was) as a means of initiation into Judaism.¹⁰⁰ The question is, does Epictetus witness to a time in Rome when baptism

⁹⁷ *b. Šabb.* 31a; *ʿAbot R. Nat.* 24ab; see McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 87.

⁹⁸ *b. Yebam.* 46a; cf. *y. Qidd.* 3:12 where R. Joshua insists on circumcision and baptism.

⁹⁹ Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.9.20 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §254).

¹⁰⁰ See other debated references to baptism as a form of initiation in *Sib. Or.* 4:165; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.262; *Cher.* 95; *Deus Imm.* 7–8; *Som.* 1.210; *m. Pesah.* 8.8; *T. Levi* 14:6. Alternatively, see Robert L. Webb (*John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* [JSNTSup 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic

replaced circumcision as the signifier of conversion? Nolland rightly points out that what Epictetus is doing is decrying those who profess a set of beliefs but do not practice them. Judaism is the example here, but it could be applied *mutatis mutandis* to any religion, philosophy, or cult.¹⁰¹ Suffice to say, circumcision, its necessity or negligibility, is simply not mentioned by Epictetus. Baptism may have been part of the process of conversion for proselytes, but it does not prove that it was the only necessary part of conversion or even a sufficient condition for entrance into the Jewish community. Nor should we read into Epictetus internal debates from among the Jewish community in Rome on this matter since we have no record of baptism replacing circumcision for proselytes in Judaism before the Apostle Paul. More conclusively, what the Epictetus comment indicates is that once people have taken the decisive step and fully adopted the Jewish belief matrix and way of life, they are regarded as Jews even by Gentile outsiders.¹⁰² In addition to Epictetus, several other pagan authors also make sweeping remarks about who belongs in the Jewish constituency. Some pagan writers simply assumed that any person who participates in Jewish practices was a Jew. As an example, Plutarch refers to an event in Cicero's life during his prosecution of Verres who was praetor of Sicily (Verres is Latin for “pig” or “boar”). During the proceedings a freedman named Quintus Caecilius Niger attempted to intervene in the trial. Caecilius was “liable of Jewish practices” (ἔνοχος τῷ ἰουδαϊζειν) and Cicero sarcastically asked him: “What has a Jew to do with a pig?” (τί Ἰουδαίω πρὸς χοῖρον;).¹⁰³ Dio Cassius goes so far as to say that the name “Jews” (Ἰουδαῖοι) can apply “to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who are affected by their customs” (ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους ὅσοι τὰ νόμιμα αὐτῶν, καίπερ ἄλλοεθνεῖς ὄντες, ζηλοῦσαι).¹⁰⁴ This proves only that pagan writers thought that practicing some Jewish customs placed such a person in the Jewish constituency. There is nothing that demonstrates that such an identification was also made in the various Jewish

Press 1991], 122–30) for arguments that there was no proselyte baptism in the Second Temple period.

¹⁰¹ Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?” 180–82; cf. McEleney, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” 332; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 152.

¹⁰² Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 391.

¹⁰³ Plutarch, *Cic. 7.5* (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §263).

¹⁰⁴ Dio Cassius, *Hist. 37.16.5–17.1* (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §406).

communities of the Diaspora who probably knew of a finer distinction between converts and adherents.¹⁰⁵

In sum, views on the entrance of Gentiles into the Jewish fold were not uniform. Its complexity derives from the problem of Jewish self-identity in antiquity.¹⁰⁶ In some quarters, it was not deemed necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised because it was not necessary for Gentiles to convert to Judaism. However, when incorporation into the Jewish nation or full conversion was the issue, the dominating perspective was that circumcision was required. What distinguished sympathizers/God-fearers from proselytes, in Jewish minds anyway, was circumcision. God would be glorified by pagans worshipping him; Gentile adherence to some Jewish customs created a sense of solidarity and sympathy with the Jewish people; and Jews had cause to rejoice at this. But Gentile conversion, understood as initiation and integration into a Jewish community, involved circumcision as the crucial indicator of new identity and new status. Thus, if Gentiles wanted to enter a Jewish community and join themselves to Judaism, then they had to undergo circumcision.

Adherence and Conversion

Ultimately, what separates adherence to Judaism from conversion to Judaism is the level of transformation of ideology, identity, and praxis with the resulting level of conformity to the beliefs and behavior of a Jewish community. Donaldson correctly notes that sympathizers could also progress along the three axes of monotheistic worship, adoption of Jewish practices, and association with a Jewish community to varying degrees, whereas a full convert undertakes full adoption of all three.¹⁰⁷ To flesh this out, for a Gentile to completely Judaize meant that he or she would assent to Jewish monotheism, accept the obligations of *Torah* as a way of life as opposed to the pagan way of life, and join the nation of Israel as a proselyte.¹⁰⁸ Another difference between adherents and

¹⁰⁵ See Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," 20–21.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*.

¹⁰⁷ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 488–89.

¹⁰⁸ In the Septuagint *προσήλυτος* translates the Hebrew word גר ("foreigner") seventy-seven times (elsewhere *ξένος* [once], *γείωρας* [twice], and *πάροικος* [eleven times] are used). It is common to translate *προσήλυτος* as "convert" since by the first century it did by and large hold that meaning in inscriptions (Margaret H. Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans*:

converts is the matter of inclusion, self-description, and public recognition of their transference. When a full conversion has taken place, the Jewish community claims the convert as one of its own full members; the convert self-identifies with the community more closely than with other competing associations and defines his or her biography in light of that association; and those outside of the Jewish community recognize that a transference of allegiance and identity has taken place.

Put simply, conversion and adherence can be differentiated from each other in at least three ways. First, ritual initiation through circumcision (and perhaps marriage for women) is crucial in formalizing the shift of identity, values, and beliefs for the proselyte. There are degrees of sympathizing and types of adherence (e.g., philosophical admiration, ethical imitation, political support, benefaction of Jewish communities, adoption of some rituals, etc.), while conversion requires that a final and recognizable threshold must have been traversed at some point. Second, adherents can add Jewish practices (e.g., Sabbath observance, food laws, attending synagogue) to their current range of religious activities while remaining fully entrenched in Greco-Roman society; whereas converts consciously abandon and break from their prior way of life in paganism in favor of a new way of life defined by the Torah. Third, adherence consists of "alteration" or a limited range of changes that develops one's behavior towards the direction of Judaism, whereas conversion entails a "transformation" of one's social and religious identity to the point of reconfiguring one's biography in light of new social and religious allegiances.¹⁰⁹ Although conversion may take place through a gradual series of alterations, an alteration itself does not constitute conversion

A Diasporan Sourcebook [London: Duckworth, 1998], 171–72; P. Figueras, "Epigraphic Evidence for Proselytism in Ancient Judaism," *Immanuel* 24/25 [1990]: 194–206, the New Testament (Matt 23:15; Acts 2:11; 6:5; 13:43), Philo (*Som.* 2.273; *Spec. Leg.* 1.51, 308; *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.2) and the Septuagint as well (e.g., Exod 12:48–49; Deut 1:16; Pss 93:6; 145:9; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Isa 54:15; Jer 7:6; Ezek 14:7; Tob 1:8). Nevertheless, its meaning in the Septuagint is not uniformly about "converts" since it also denotes resident aliens (Lev 19:10; 24:16) and even Israelites (Exod 22:20; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19). See Nahum Levison, "The Proselyte in Biblical and Early Post-Biblical Times," *SJT* 10 (1957): 45–56; Kuhn, "προσήλυτος," 6.730–31; U. Becker, "προσήλυτος," *NIDNTT* 1.360; Paul F. Stuehrlenberg, "Proselyte," *ABD* 5.503; BDAG, 880.

¹⁰⁹Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 12.

if it lacks initiation and some form of primary (though perhaps not exclusive) adherence to the Jewish way of life.

Women and Conversion

A significant but often overlooked factor to be taken into account in formulating a criteria and explanation of conversion to Judaism is the position of Gentile women vis-à-vis Judaism.¹¹⁰ Women were obviously not circumcised, and this raises a whole host of questions about the means and identification of conversion for women to Judaism. The case of female converts to Judaism underscores how fluid and thin the division between adherent/associate and convert/initiate could be under certain circumstances. While Jewish community boundaries were distinct they were nonetheless permeable, and partial membership was available for men and women.¹¹¹ But the lack of the identifying act of circumcision for women makes it difficult to find verifiable proof for pagan women crossing the boundaries and becoming Jewish. There is no evidence of baptism as a fixed rite for initiation prior to 70 C.E.¹¹²

Two Jewish novellas, the book of Ruth (in Hebrew) and *Joseph and Aseneth* (in Greek), appear to make intermarriage the key mechanism for integration into the Jewish nation for women.¹¹³ Prior to their respective marriages to Boaz and Joseph, Ruth is a resident alien from

¹¹⁰Cf. David Daube, "Conversion to Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Ancient Jewish Law: Three Inaugural Lectures* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1–47; Cohen, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus," 430; Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope," 546, n. 42; Judith M. Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," *NTS* 40 (1994): 358–70; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Daniel R. Schwartz, "Doing Like Jews or Becoming a Jew? Josephus on Women Converts to Judaism," in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (eds. J. Frey, D. R. Schwartz, and S. Grippentrog; *AJEC* 71, Leiden: Brill, 2007), 93–109.

¹¹¹Tessa Rajak, "The Jewish Community and Its Boundaries," in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak; London: Routledge, 1992), 19.

¹¹²Hengel and Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch*, 66.

¹¹³Aseneth does have her own ritual initiation, as it were, involving consumption of bread, wine, oil, and honeycomb. Yet this is more of an idiosyncratic feature of the narrative rather than a common aspect of female conversion to Judaism as far as is known.

Moab and Aseneth is a pagan woman in Egypt. There is also the instance of Venturia Paula, the synagogue matron who became a proselyte at the age of 70 and took the name Sarah.¹¹⁴ Providing benefaction for a synagogue and changing one's Roman praenomen to a Hebrew name has all the hallmarks of one who has undergone transference from one group into another given the outward presentation of the self (name change) and recognition by others (formalized synagogue association). There is no indication if this was normative, common, or an exceptional action for a woman to take in order to convert to Judaism. What can be said with more certainty is that the absence of circumcision made it far easier for women, especially for those from the upper echelons of society and with some degree of independence, to frequent synagogues and to observe Jewish rites. This brought them in closer proximity, religiously and socially, to Jewish communities and the line between adherent and convert was probably more flexibly drawn for women.

CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing discussion, which links conversion with circumcision (at least for males), "mission" within Judaism may be defined as *the diverse array of activities that consciously attempts to draw, recruit, or persuade persons into conversion consisting of ideological, axiological (ethical), and social transformation*. A mission of this order meant trying to convince Gentiles of monotheism, bringing the values and behavior of Gentiles into alignment with those of a Jewish community, and formally recognizing them as members of their own religious and social identity after the appropriate rituals and rites have taken place. For most Jews this meant, as the desired end, seeing a Gentile circumcised and integrated into the Jewish community. It is not too much to say that circumcision (at least for men) was the rite of passage and *sine qua non* of conversion to Judaism. Thus, as Paul Barnett rightly asserts, mission in Judaism must be drawn in relation to circumcision.¹¹⁵ Yet the question is, did pre-Christian Jews aspire and attempt to convert Gentiles into becoming Jews? This is the question that will now be addressed.

¹¹⁴Frey, *CIJ* 1: §523.

¹¹⁵Barnett, "Jewish Mission," 264; cf. Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," 24–27; Finn, *Death to Rebirth*, 96.

EXCURSUS 1: GOD-FEARERS

Relevant to the discussion is the significance of the so-called “God-worshippers/fearers” (σεβόμενοι/φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν), particularly prevalent in Acts,¹¹⁶ and what they contribute to the evidence for the extent of Jewish missionary activity. The existence and identity of these purported “God-fearers” is disputed by a small contingent of scholars. It is necessary, then, to provide some adjudication on the evidence as to whether or not such God-fearers existed and what kind of relationship they had to Judaism. Any judgments about the existence and identity of the “God-fearers” influences how the evidence cited in the following chapters is to be understood.

According to Kuhn, the “God-fearers” were a well defined group of Gentiles who, “attended synagogue worship, believed in Jewish monotheism, and kept some part of the ceremonial law, but who did not take the step of full conversion to Judaism by circumcision.”¹¹⁷ Yet the claim that σεβόμενοι and φοβούμενοι are technical terms for non-Jewish adherents is problematic¹¹⁸ since the appellation “God-fearer/worshipper” can describe Jews,¹¹⁹ proselytes,¹²⁰ and even

¹¹⁶ Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7.

¹¹⁷ K. Kuhn, “προσήλυτος,” 6.731; cf. U. Becker, “προσήλυτος,” *NIDNTT* 1.361.

¹¹⁸ The problem of assuming such a technical meaning for the terms was pointed out long ago by Lake, “Proselytes and God-Fearers,” 5.84–88 and Louis H. Feldman, “Jewish ‘Sympathizers’ in Classical Literature and Inscriptions,” *TAPA* 81 (1950): 200–208. See further Max Wilcox, “The ‘God-Fearers’ in Acts: A Reconsideration,” *JSNT* 13 (1981): 102–22; Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 146–47; Judith M. Lieu, “The Race of God-Fearers,” *JTS* 46 (1995): 483–501.

¹¹⁹ LXX: Pss 113:17–19; 117:4–6; 118:74; 134:20; Sir 2:7–9, 15–17; 6:16–17; 10:24; Jon 1:9; Jdt 8:8; *Pss. Sol.* 13:12; 18:8; *Sib. Or.* 3:575; *Ep. Arist.* 159; *Jos. Asen.* 8:5–9; 3 Macc 3:4; 4 Macc 5:24; 15:8; *T. Benj.* 3:4; *T. Gad* 3:2; 5:4; *T. Jos.* 11:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.96; 7.130, 153; 12.284; John 9:31; the inscription from the theatre at Miletus could read “Jews who are also God worshippers” (Εἰουδαίων τῶν καὶ θεοσεβῶν) [Frey, *CIJ* 2: §748]. For argument that this inscription refers to ethnic Jews see Rick Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (BZNTW 80; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 185–86.

¹²⁰ Acts 13:43; an inscription from a sarcophagus in Vigna Randaini reads: “Jewish proselyte . . . God-fearer” (ἰουδαία προσήλυτος θεοσεβῆ) [Frey, *CIJ* 1: §202]. Cf. McLeleny, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” 327.

Gentiles.¹²¹ More recently, Bernd Wander has pointed out that "God-fearer" can be used in at least three different ways in ancient literature functioning as: (1) an honorary title for a specific Jew, (2) a makeshift designation for Gentiles who sympathize with Jewish customs and are attached to the peripheral edges of Jewish communities, and (3) an honorary title for Gentile benefactors of Jewish synagogues.¹²²

In addition, the existence of such adherents/sympathizers as represented by Luke in Acts was questioned by A. T. Kraabel who suggested that, "at least for the Roman Diaspora, the evidence presently available is far from convincing proof for the existence of such a class of Gentiles as traditionally defined by the assumptions of the secondary literature."¹²³ Kraabel grounds his thesis on two key lines of evidence: (1) The archaeological evidence fails to demonstrate the existence of a group of Gentiles loosely connected to a synagogue known as "God-fearers," and (2) the "God-fearers" in Acts are Luke's own literary creation that symbolically demonstrate "how Christianity had become a Gentile religion *legitimately* and without losing its Old Testament roots."¹²⁴ In any case, the words *σεβόμενοι/φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν* are not frequent in inscriptions whereas "fearer" (*metuens*) and "God-worshipper" (*θεοσεβής*) are more common.

Despite the arguments of Kraabel, there exists substantial evidence for a group of Gentile adherents/sympathizers to Judaism who remained on the fringe of Diaspora synagogues and were known loosely as God-fearers/worshippers. Although much of the epigraphic evidence is ambiguous to varying degrees there are several inscriptions which imply a recognizable group of Gentiles attached to a Jewish community, but not actually part of it. In the Panticapaeum manumissions (ca. first century C.E.) a freedman is emancipated by the synagogue "of the Jews and God-worshippers" (*τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ θεὸν σέβων*).¹²⁵ At Deliler,

¹²¹ (1) Pagans: e.g., Herodotus, 2.37; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.140; and (2) Sympathizers: e.g., Sir 10:22; *T. Naph.* 1:10; 2 *Enoch* 48:7–8; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.34, 41, 195; and disputably Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16–17, 50; 16:14–15; 17:4–9; 18:7.

¹²² Bernd Wander, *Gottesfürchtige und Sympathisanten* (WUNT 104; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1998).

¹²³ A. T. Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the God-Fearers," *Numen* 28 (1981): 121; cf. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 87.

¹²⁴ Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the God-Fearers," 120.

¹²⁵ Cited in Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 74–75. Strictly speaking a translation of either "Jews and God-fearers" or "Jews who

Lydia, a memorial (ca. third century C.E.) is erected in a synagogue which reads “To the most holy synagogue of the Hebrews, Eustathios, the God-worshipper, in remembrance of my brother Hermophilos, I have dedicated together with my bride [or sister-in-law] Athanasia, the wash-basin” (Εὐστάτιος ὁ θεοσεβῆς).¹²⁶ The synagogues at Sardis and Acmonia could also be added as further instances of God-fearers being publicly recognized as constituent members of the synagogue.¹²⁷ At the synagogue in Sardis (ca. 270–320 C.E.) there is reference to several God-fearers including these:¹²⁸

Aurelios Polyippos, God-Fearer, I, having made a vow, fulfilled it.
 Αὐρ(ήλιος) Πολύιππος θεοσεβῆς εὐξάμενος ἐπλήρωσα.

Aurelios Eulogios, God-fearer, I have fulfilled my vow.
 Αὐρ(ήλιος) Εὐλόγιος θεοσεβῆς εὐχὴν ἔτελεσα.

Aurelios Euphrosynos II, a citizen of Sardis, Councillor.
 Αὐρ(ήλιος) Εὐφρόσυνος [β Σαρδ. βου]λ τὸ περιμασχάλον ἐκ τῶν τῆς [Προνοία]ς ἐσκούτλω[σα].

Leontios, God-fearer, from the gifts of Providence, in fulfillment of a vow. I gave the *skoutlosis* of the bay.

are also pious” are possible (the ambiguities are noted especially by Figueras, “Epigraphic Evidence for Proselytism in Ancient Judaism,” 202). Trebilco (*Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 156–57) prefers the former option since the inscriptions are not lauding the piety of the Jewish members as much as they are demanding the synagogue attendance of the ex-slaves who enjoy the benefaction of the synagogue or synagogue members.

¹²⁶Frey, *CIJ* 2: §754; for ambiguities see Figueras, “Epigraphic Evidence for Proselytism in Ancient Judaism,” 202; Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 162; Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 61–62. Eustathios may be an ethnic Jew who is simply performing a pious act in dedicating a memorial to his late brother, and such a self-description as “pious” (ὁ θεοσεβῆς) is not unheard of among Jews. The name “Eustathios” itself simply means “well-built, stable” and is little help in determining his ethnicity. Still, the phrase remains ambiguous either way and Eustathios may belong to a family of God-fearers/worshippers which also is not unprecedented.

¹²⁷Andrew Overman, “The God-Fearers: Some Neglected Features,” in *New Testament Backgrounds* (eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997 [1988]), 260; John H. Kroll, “The Greek Inscriptions of the Sardis Synagogue,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 5–55.

¹²⁸Cited from Kroll, “Sardis,” 20, 25, 27, 42.

Λέοντιος θεοσεβῆς ἐκ τῶν τῆς Προνοίας δομάτων τὸ
διαχώρον ὑπὲρ εὐχῆς ἐσκούτλωσα.

Aurelios Hermogenes, citizen of Sardis, God-fearer, from the gifts of Providence, having made a vow, I gave the seven-branched candlestick. Ἀὐρ(ήλιος) Ἑρμογένης Σαρδ. θεοσεβῆς ἐκ τῶν τῆς Προνοίας εὐξάμενος τὸ ἑπταμύξιον ἐποίησα.

Kroll says of these inscriptions: “This dossier of preserved inscriptions from [the] . . . Sardis Synagogue reveals a congregation that counted among its most active, supporting contributors a significant number that, as members of the Sardis City Council, belonged to the local economic elite. It also included a good number of adherent gentiles or Godfearers. The dossier gives us the personal names of nearly forty members of the congregation, nine of whom are identified by some professional title or by a title within the synagogue community.”¹²⁹ This picture of amiable relations between the Jewish community and Roman civic leaders in Sardis is confirmed by Josephus who refers to documents from Roman officials and the people of Sardis confirming the rights and privileges of the Jews living there (*Ant.* 14.235, 259–262; 16.171). One of the rights of the Jews was, in Trebilco’s words, “a place to come together with their wives and children to perform their ancestral prayers and offerings.”¹³⁰ Even amidst a growing Christianity in the third and fourth centuries, civic leaders in Sardis still permitted the Jews their place of worship and, to some degree, participated in its upkeep, and perhaps even its service.¹³¹ The synagogue at Acomia in Phrygia refers to: “This building erected by Julia Severa; P(ublius) Tyrronios Klados, the head for life of the synagogue, and Lucius, son of Lucius, head of the synagogue, and Publius Zotikos, archon, restored it with their own funds and with money which they had deposited.”¹³² The restoration of the Acomian synagogue was made possible by a mixture of Jewish and Gentile benefactors. While the word “God-fearer” is not used, the social dynamics here are similar to other synagogues at Sardis and Aphrodisias whereby pagan patrons contribute to the life and welfare of a Jewish community through various gifts and deposits. What

¹²⁹ Kroll, “Sardis,” 48.

¹³⁰ Trebilco, *Asia Minor*, 38–39.

¹³¹ Kroll, “Sardis,” 48.

¹³² Frey, *CIJ* 2: §766 (trans. from Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 463).

is particularly interesting here is that Julia Severa was a Roman noble woman, well known from ancient coinage, and married to Servenius Capito who held a magistrates office some time around 58 to 59 C.E. In other inscriptions, she was also a high priestess (probably of the imperial cult) and president of the games. Her relationship to the synagogue may be no more than an act of patronage designed to enhance her honor and prestige in the city. However, as Donaldson correctly notes, it is difficult to envisage a woman of such prominence making a donation of such substance to a religious community of this order without possessing some appreciation of Judaism and its religious aspects.¹³³

The strongest evidence for a more definable group of Gentile sympathizers known as “God-fearers” derives from the Aphrodisias synagogue inscription (ca. second–third century C.E.).¹³⁴ This inscription details on side “A” the benefactors of a soup kitchen including thirteen people consisting of Jews, three proselytes, and two “God-worshippers” (θεοσεβῆς). On side “B” are the names of seventy-four people and the lower list is entitled “and as many are God-worshippers” (καὶ ὅσοι θεοσεβῆς). The revisers of Schürer comment: “It would be difficult to imagine clearer evidence that *theosebeis* could be categorized as a formal group attached to a Jewish community, and distinguished from Jews and from full proselytes.”¹³⁵ Feldman goes so far to state that the inscription “establishes once and for all that there was a special class” known as “God-fearers.”¹³⁶ The qualification that needs to be made, as Murphy-O’Connor has pointed out, is not only the relative lateness of the Aphrodisias inscription compared to Luke-Acts (the inscription is ca. third century C.E.), but also that the appellation θεοσεβῆς is used to describe those Gentiles who follow Jewish customs on side “A” and civic officials who provided patronage but probably not religious adherence on side “B.”¹³⁷ In which case, θεοσεβῆς refers to both genuine religious sympathizers and civic well-wishers and for the latter group

¹³³ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 466.

¹³⁴ J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987); Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 152–55.

¹³⁵ Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.166; Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 153.

¹³⁶ Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 367.

¹³⁷ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Lots of God-Fearers? Theosebeis in the Aphrodisias Inscription,” *RB* 99 (1992): 418–24.

the designation is really a gracious compliment to their moral character and generosity.¹³⁸ That qualification notwithstanding, the Aphrodisias inscription is reasonable proof for Gentiles associated with a Jewish community being called θεοσεβής even if the designation is not a technical nomenclature, nor does it presuppose a particular mode of sympathy, loyalty, and allegiance to the Jewish way of life.¹³⁹

The cumulative case for an indeterminate class of Gentile “God-fearers” grows when literary evidence is adduced.¹⁴⁰ In making a vituperative remark against the Jews, Juvenal refers to the “father who Sabbath-fears” (*metuentem sabbata patrem*) as different from his son who eventually converts.¹⁴¹ Juvenal’s comment clearly identifies Gentile figures that followed Jewish customs but did not go the whole way of being socialized into the Jewish community. In the Septuagint the phrase “the fearers” (οἱ φοβούμενοι) occurs in Mal 3:16 where it denotes pious Israelites, but in 2 Chron 5:6 (LXX) “fearers” appears to be distinguished from “all the congregation of Israel” (πᾶσα συναγωγή Ισραηλ). The inclusion of the “fearers” in 2 Chron 5:6 is probably a gloss by a Greek translator since no equivalent phrase occurs in the Hebrew text. The translator was highlighting the universal relevance of the temple as a house of prayer for the nations by giving these “fearers” a cameo appearance at its dedication (and note 2 Chron 6:32–33 where Solomon asks

¹³⁸ Kraabel, “Immigrants, Exiles, Expatriates, and Missionaries,” 81.

¹³⁹ I would also point out that it would be strange to see θεοσεβής as simply designating someone who is pious. Surely all donors to a synagogue, Jewish or Gentile, were pious anyway, so why mention it only for a few? Moreover, in some inscriptions (like those at Sardis) there is a juxtaposition of God-fearers and those who took measures to emphasize their Jewish ancestry. For example, at Sardis two donors are called “God-fearers” but a third nominates himself as from “the Tribe of Levi.” This is a case of a Jewish donor who wanted to distinguish himself from the adjacent Gentile donors (Kroll, “Sardis,” 9–10, 21).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 147–52; Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 117–26.

¹⁴¹ Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §301). Juvenal uses *metuo* (to fear) twice: once in relation to the Sabbath and again in relation to the Jewish code, but not in relation to God (there is no *metuentes deum*). Even so, like others (e.g., Stern, *GLAJJ* 2: §§103–6), I still think that this is a relatively clear description of a type of socioreligious activity (as opposed to a well-defined religious class) that could adequately be described as being a “God-fearer.” However, see in counter-point Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 347–48; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 408–9.

YHWH to hear the prayers of foreigners who come to the temple). It is difficult to assert Luke's invention of the term when it probably appeared in whatever version of the Septuagint he utilized.¹⁴² Josephus knows of Gentiles who are involved in Jewish life in some way either by practicing Jewish rituals or by participating in the synagogue.¹⁴³ On one occasion, Josephus explains that the wealth of the temple originated from the gifts of Jews and God-worshippers (τὴν οἰκουμένην Ἰουδαίων καὶ σεβομένων τὸν θεόν) from Asia and Europe who contributed to it and this seems to suggest two distinct classes of persons committed to the veneration and adornment of the Jerusalem temple.¹⁴⁴ He also relates the account of how the Syrians contrived to "rid themselves of the Jews" but had to be wary of the fact that "each city still had its judaizers" (ἰουδαῖζοντας). When juxtaposed with "Jews," the term "judaizers" denotes some kind of Gentile attachment to Jewish practices but seems to fall short of full conversion.¹⁴⁵ These Judaizers remained "alongside" (παρ' ἑκάστοις) rather than in the Jewish community in Syria. Cohen has argued that verbs of this type, when the ἰζειν ending is added to an ethnic designator, indicate foreigners who accommodate themselves to or sympathize with the beliefs and boundaries of a particular ethnic group by giving political support, adopting some of their customs, and speaking their language (e.g., Romanize, Hellenize, Judaize).¹⁴⁶ Philo also refers to non-Jews who admire the Jewish laws and how the Jews welcome such admirers like their own countrymen.¹⁴⁷

Finally, we should consider also the testimony of Luke to the presence of non-Jews associated with Jewish communities among the eastern Mediterranean cities of the Roman Empire. Luke's description of the centurion of Capernaum, the centurion Cornelius, the devout

¹⁴²Overman, "The God-Fearers," 258–59.

¹⁴³Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.282; *J.W.* 7.45; *Ant.* 20.195.

¹⁴⁴Josephus, *Ant.* 14.110; but see Lake ("Proselytes and God-Fearers," 5.85) who thinks it denotes "all the Jews worshipping God." Against Lake, Donaldson (*Judaism and the Gentiles*, 326) points out the incongruity of Lake's translation since Lake failed to take account of the conjunction καὶ ("and") and such a reading would require the article, i.e., the Jews, the ones revering God. See also accounts of the temple receiving foreigners in *J.W.* 4.262, 275, 324; 5.15–18.

¹⁴⁵Josephus, *J.W.* 2.463.

¹⁴⁶Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 175–93.

¹⁴⁷Philo, *Virt.* 108; *Vit. Mos.* 2:17–44; *Leg. Gai.* 210–211.

women of high standing in Pisidian Antioch, Lydia the trader in purple fabric in Philippi, Jason and the devout Greeks in Thessalonica, and Titius Iustus in Corinth all refer to a phenomenon of Gentile association with Jews and Judaism that was well known to both himself and his readers.¹⁴⁸ Overall, the notion of some pagans being connected to Jewish communities in an “of-but-not-in” manner was not an incongruity in Greco-Roman antiquity, but was a familiar religious stance.¹⁴⁹

Donaldson rightly draws the following concluding observations from the material in Luke-Acts regarding a class of Gentile “God-fearers”: (1) Luke seems to know the difference between a full convert to Judaism and a pious sympathizer (like Cornelius in Acts 10); (2) Luke appears to assume that “proselyte” refers to full conversion; (3) Luke took it for granted that in a typical synagogue one would encounter a body of non-Jews associated with the synagogue community in some ongoing fashion; (4) this body contains both full converts (i.e., proselytes) and those whose association and identification with the Jewish community was less complete (e.g., Cornelius); (5) once the decisive breakthrough in the Gentile mission had taken place in Peter’s ministry to Cornelius climaxing in Cornelius’s conversion and acceptance, Luke ceases to be interested in differentiating converts from adherents; (6) Luke uses various terms to refer to this group and its members including attributive terms (e.g., pious [Acts 10:2]; righteous [Acts 10:22]; and worshipping [Acts 13:43, 50; 17:4]) and substantive terms (e.g., the one who fears God [Acts 10:35]; those who fear God [Acts 13:16, 26], and a worshipper of God [Acts 16:14; 18:7]); (7) the constructions οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν (“those who fear God”) and οἱ σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν (“those who worship God”), cannot refer to a well-defined category of Gentile adherents because of the multiplicity of terms used and due to the diverse range of affinity levels that these Gentiles have with Jewish communities in Luke’s narration; and (8) yet one cannot rule out the possibility that these terms already carried a Gentile connotation for Luke and his intended readers.¹⁵⁰

In summary, when all of this epigraphic, archaeological, and literary evidence is placed beside the accounts in Acts about certain Gentiles

¹⁴⁸ Luke 7:1–10; Acts 10:1–48; 13:16–17, 43, 50; 16:14–15; 17:4–9; 18:7.

¹⁴⁹ Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias*, 88; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 475.

¹⁵⁰ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 432–34.

associated with Jewish synagogues called “God-fearers,” it is hard to avoid the inference that Luke is tapping into a well-known social phenomena of Gentile adherence to certain tenets of Judaism and association of some degree with local Jewish communities. Thus, there is reasonable evidence for the association of a “vague class”¹⁵¹ of Gentiles with variegated levels of interest in and attachment to Jewish communities who could be designated with the equivocal term “God-fearers” or “God-worshippers” as found in Acts.¹⁵²

EXCURSUS 2: PROSELYTISM AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The increase of the Jewish population from the exile to the Greco-Roman period is frequently attributed to Jewish proselytization activity.¹⁵³ For instance, Salo Baron estimated that at the time of the exile (ca. 586 B.C.E.), Israel had a population of around 150,000, but by middle of the first century C.E. it had reached approximately 8 million. Baron

¹⁵¹ Lake, “Proselytes and God-Fearers,” 5.88.

¹⁵² Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness,” 182–83; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.168; Thomas M. Finn, “The God-fearers Reconsidered,” *CBQ* 47 (1985): 83; Segal, “The Cost of Proselytism and Conversion,” 350–53; Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias*, 65; Cohen, “Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus,” 419; Figueras, “Epigraphic Evidence for Proselytism in Ancient Judaism,” 201–3; Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope,” 541–42; McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 113–14; Lieu, “The Race of God-fearers,” 483; Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 51; Paget, “Jewish Proselytism,” 93; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 279; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, 249–57; Overman, “The God-Fearers,” 261–62; Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans*, 163; Barnett, “Jewish Mission,” 265; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1.129–33; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 433–34, 445–46.

¹⁵³ See Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity*, 1.8–11; Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries*, 1.348; Schürer [F. Millar], *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3.1.171; Safrai and Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 1.117–83; Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*, 83–84; Feldman, “Was Judaism a Missionary Religion in Ancient Times?” 26–27; idem, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 293; Paget, “Jewish Proselytism,” 70–71, 82–83, 101; A. Wasserstein, “The Number and Provenance of Jews in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: A Short Note on Population Statistics,” in *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg* (ed. R. Katzoff; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), 307–17.

wrote: "During the two centuries of Hasmonean and Herodian rule over Palestine the Jewish people expanded numerically to an unprecedented degree not only in Palestine but also in other lands, in part by active proselytization."¹⁵⁴ Similar is Harnack: "[I]t is utterly impossible to explain the large total of Jews in the Diaspora by the mere fact of the fertility of Jewish families. We must assume . . . that a very large number of pagans . . . trooped over to Yahweh."¹⁵⁵

Several scholars have asserted that this dramatic increase in the Jewish population provides at least circumstantial evidence for Jewish missionary activity. Feldman advocates that "[o]nly proselytism can account for this vast increase."¹⁵⁶ More cautious is Paget: "An increase in the number of proselytes does seem the most likely explanation."¹⁵⁷ But the attribution of the increase in Jewish population to proselytism has come under severe criticism on several points.¹⁵⁸ First, it is simply not clear if there even were major increases in the Jewish population in the first century B.C.E. and C.E., since the available figures of ancient Jewish populations are far from exact.¹⁵⁹ In the case of the twelfth-century Syrian writer, Bar-Hebraeus, upon whom Baron relies, the figures are quite spurious.¹⁶⁰ The problem is accentuated by the fact that numbers

¹⁵⁴ Salo Baron, "Population," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (ed. Cecil Roth; 16 vols.; New York: MacMillan, 1971), 13.870.

¹⁵⁵ Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity*, 1.10–11.

¹⁵⁶ Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 293.

¹⁵⁷ Paget, "Jewish Proselytism," 83.

¹⁵⁸ Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope," 538; McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 33; Cohen, "Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?" 19–20; Goodman, "Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century," 55–56; idem, *Mission and Conversion*, 84; Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans*, 13; Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission," 220–21; Brian McGing, "Population and Proselytism: How Many Jews Were There in the Ancient World?" in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities* (ed. John R. Bartlett; London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 88–106; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1.124.

¹⁵⁹ Ezra 2:64–65; Philo, *Flacc.* 43; Josephus, *Life* 235; *Ag. Ap.* 1.197; *J.W.* 2.80; 6.420–425; 7.445; *Ant.* 11.133; 17.300; 18.83–84; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13; *Ann.* 2.85.4; *b. Pesah.* 64b. See also Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 2.1–19; 3.1.3–86.

¹⁶⁰ For an evaluation of Bar-Hebraeus see McGing, "Population and Proselytism," 92–94, who concludes from Bar-Hebraeus's errors elsewhere that: "It is high time that the evidence of Bar-Hebraeus was given decent burial and removed from our consideration."

in antiquity are often exaggerated for rhetorical purposes or else are symbolical. McKnight suggests we lack the demographic information on geographical population statistics, birth and survival rates, and immigration patterns to be able to make an informed judgment about the magnitude of Jewish population trends.¹⁶¹ Brian McGing notes:

I do not believe we have the first notion of how many Jews there were in the ancient world, even roughly speaking, nor do we have the means to discover it. This may sound like a counsel of despair, but pretending otherwise and basing important theories on wishful thinking, will get us nowhere.¹⁶²

A second response to the view that Jewish population increases provide evidence for missionary activity is that even if a conservative estimate of 4–6 million Jews in the first century is accepted, there is no reason to postulate proselytization as a dominant cause for the increase. Other factors may account for the growth such as superior Jewish hygiene, Jewish refusal to engage in infanticide and abortion,¹⁶³ immigration, intermarriage, forced conversions in Iturea and Idumaea by the Hasmonians,¹⁶⁴ assimilation of the Phoenicians into Israel, and an increase in the agricultural output of Ptolemaic Egypt that could sustain larger populations. A third critique is that even if one assented to proselytization as causing a swelling of Jewish numbers, it tells us nothing of the *how* and *who* and *why* of proselytizing.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles*, 33.

¹⁶² McGing, "Population and Proselytism," 106; cf. Wasserstein, "The Number and Provenance of Jews in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 312–14, who thinks that the Jewish population at the time was definitely large but also unquantifiable. Jonathan L. Reed, "Population Numbers, Urbanization, and Economics: Galilean Archaeology and the Historical Jesus," in *SBL Seminar Papers 1994* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 203–19, raises similar cautions.

¹⁶³ Tacitus. *Hist.* 5.5.3.

¹⁶⁴ Ptolemy in Ammonius, *Adfin. Vocab.* 243 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §146); Strabo, *Geog.* 16.2.34 (Stern, *GLAJJ* 1: §115); Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257–258, 318–319, 395–397; 15.254–255.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Paget, "Jewish Proselytism," 83.