

“Discuss to what extent Judaism was attractive to pagans in antiquity. Discuss also to what extent and how Jews were trying to attract converts.”

RRE Fixed Exam

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Interaction: Apologetics and conversion

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Introduction

Judaism was apparently very successful in attracting followers, either as full converts or as “G-d-Fearers,”¹ during the antiquity. The Jewish historian Salo Baron² estimates that there were 8 million Jews in the world around the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, that makes every tenth inhabitant of the Roman empire a Jew. Basing himself on Biblical and archeological data he estimates that the Jewish population around the destruction of the First Temple was around 150.000. In that case, the Jewish population increased vastly in a period of 500 years, and in such a degree that the growth can not alone be explained due to natural population growth. “The most likely explanation of this increase is proselytism, as alluded to by numerous references in Philo, Josephus, the New Testament, Greek and Roman writers and the Talmud” (Feldman 1986: 59).

In my discussion I will agree with the scholarly opinion that Judaism is a “missionary religion”³, in the meaning that it is a religion that is self-conscious about itself having a mission to the rest of the world.⁴ This mission is clearly stated in the Hebrew bible⁵ and it is also laid down in Jewish law, “*Tosafot*, Tractate *chagigah* 13a, states that it is an obligation for the Jews to teach and inform the Gentiles of the Seven Noahide Commandments”⁶. This is also brought forth by Maimonides in his codification of the Talmud, “Moses was commanded by the Almighty to compel all the inhabitants of the world to accept the commandments given to Noah’s descendants”, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 8:10 (Maimonides 2001: 580).

¹ These were non-Jews who were associated with the synagogues and who followed some of Judaism’s precepts in varying degrees. These non-Jews is referred to by different terms; In rabbinic literature they are referred to as *yirei shamayim*, “Fearers of Heaven”. In the scholarly literature they are referred to variably as “sympathizers” or “judaizers”. In Acts is used the greek terms *phobomenoi*, “those fearing” and *sebomenoi ton theon*, “those reverencing G-d”. Elsewhere, *theosebeis*, “G-d worshippers” and *metuentes*, “those who fear”

² in Feldman 1986: 59

³ This is in agreement with much of the scholarly discussion on this subject. See for instance “introduction” in McKnight 1991 where he presents different scholarly opinions concerning this issue.

⁴ McKnight 1991: 4

⁵ see Genesis 12:3, “and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.”; Exodus 19:6, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”; Isaiah 49:6, “I will also make you a light of nations, That My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.” These passages highlight the particularistic role that the Jewish nation has in its universal mission.

⁶ quoted in Weiner 2011: 28

In a recent published *halakhic* work concerning the details of these 7 Noahide laws it is explained that this Jewish obligation towards the Gentile world has not been fulfilled “due to the extreme difficulties of the extended Jewish exile” (Weiner 2011: 28).

In accordance with the above the premise for my discussion will be that the Jewish mission is not to convert the Gentiles to become Jewish, but to make them follow the aspect of Torah that applies specifically to them, i.e. the Seven Noahide laws. Further, it is my premise that the above-mentioned “G-d-Fearers” were followers of this universal aspect of the Torah, in one way or the other. And even though these Gentiles can not be labelled properly as “Jews”⁷, it seems like Baron has numbered them as such, due to some of the Jewish customs that they apparently followed⁸.

In order to discuss to what extent Judaism was attractive to pagans in antiquity I will begin with elaborating on the Jewish mission, and a discussion on how Jews were trying to attract converts and why. In that context I will also discuss the concept of “convert” in Judaism. I will base my discussion on the opinion that the concept and religious category of “G-d-Fearer” can help explain why such a great number of pagans were attracted to Judaism. I will then discuss the evidences that are pointing toward the great success of Jewish proselytism. Finally I will summarize my discussion.

About the Jewish mission - a twofold path.

An important aspect about the Jewish mission is that Judaism is not obliged to make the world Jewish nor has as a stated goal to convert Gentiles to Judaism. As a separate nation (i.e. the Jewish nation) their mission is to make the world (i.e. the other nations) aware of the existence of G-d and that non-Jews are obligated to follow what in Jewish law is referred to as *sheva mitzvot benei Noach*⁹, “the seven commandments of Noah’s descendants.” By following these laws Rabbinic Judaism claim that Gentiles can establish

⁷ “...only he is a convert who formally accepts Judaism before a court, by means of circumcision and baptism.” (Bamberger 1968: 136)

⁸ See for example Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:282, “the multitude of mankind itself have had a great inclination of a long time to follow our religious observances; for there is not any city of the Grecians, nor any of the barbarians, nor any nation whatsoever, whither our custom of resting on the seventh day hath not come, and by which our fasts and lighting up lamps, and many of our prohibitions as to our food, are not observed.”

⁹ Tractate *Sanhedrin* 56a; *Hilchot Melachim* 9:1

a connection with G-d and that they “will merit a share in the world-to-come”¹⁰. By the same token, just and civilized societies will be created. The result being a correcting and refining of both the individual and the world.¹¹

These Noahide laws are separate from the specific Jewish commandments, but they are both part of the Torah of Moses. In order to learn about these laws the non-Jew must accept the teachings of the Jewish sages, since they are educated in the details of these laws as they are specified in the Oral Torah.¹² “For they alone, as students of the earlier Torah Sages, are the authorities who explain the Oral Torah” (Weiner 2011: 28).

It is thus very likely that the Jews in antiquity in their missionizing efforts were not trying to make full converts, but that they instead were teaching and informing pagans concerning the Noahide commandments.

That the “G-d-Fearers” were a distinct category apart from full converts is accepted by most scholars¹³. Bamberger (1968: 135) writes the following about this group: “...in addition to full converts, there were many Gentiles who attached themselves to the synagoge and who accepted the ethical monotheism and some of the forms and ceremonies of Judaism.” The existence of this group, even though contested by some scholars, has been further validated through the archeological finding in 1976 of an Jewish inscription in the town of Aphrodisias¹⁴.

¹⁰ *Hilchot Melachim* 8:11; *Sanhedrin* 105a

¹¹ Weiner 2011: 80

¹² Tractate *Shabbat* 31a; Weiner 2011: 38-45

¹³ Bamberger 1939:14, “There are numerous Biblical references, especially in the Psalms, to “those that fear the L-rd.” In several places, they are a separate category in addition to sons of Aaron, sons of Levi, and sons of Israel. By “those that fear the L-rd,” scholars have understood either converts to Judaism or else semi-converts, who had become fearers (i.e. worshippers) of the universal G-d without accepting all the legalistic and ritual obligations of judaism. ... At any rate these references do indicate that many non-Jews were attracted to the Jewish faith during the post-Exilic period.”

¹⁴ See Feldman 1986. See also McKnight 1991: 91-101 and Feldman 1993: 343-368 for a presentation of the evidence for the existence of “Heaven-Fearers”.

“Fearers of Heaven”¹⁵ - different categories of “convert” within Judaism

A pagan in antiquity who was attracted by Judaism basically had two options, either to become a convert in the conventional sense, that is, to become an adopted member of the Jewish nation and as such obliged to follow all the Jewish laws, ritual as well as ethical. Or, to become an adherent who followed the aspect of Torah that is especially applicable for the Gentile and as such is universally valid, i.e. the seven Noahide commandments.

These two alternatives are brought to light by Josephus and the story about the conversion of the royal family of Adiabene¹⁶. The non-Jewish king Izates who becomes attracted towards Judaism wants to undergo circumcision in order to become a full convert, he is at first persuaded by a Jew named Ananias that it is not necessary to undergo circumcision in order to worship G-d, while later another Jew by the name Eleazar persuades the king to circumcise and hence to become a full convert.

Talmudic literature differentiates between a *ger tzedek*, i.e. full convert and a *ger toshav*, a convert who accepts to follow the Noahide laws while living under Jewish jurisdiction. It is only the *ger tzedek* who is obliged to undergo circumcision. The *ger toshav* can circumcise if he himself desires and still remain a *ger toshav*¹⁷. These categories are formal and the latter can only be granted in a time when the Jubilee years are observed¹⁸, i.e. when the Jews are independent and all the Israelite tribes live in the land of Israel. Thus, since the time of the exile of the Ten Tribes the legal category of *ger toshav* can not be granted to Gentiles, neither are these laws practically applicable. There are also other categories of converts¹⁹, one of these being the non-legal category of “Heaven-Fearer/G-d-Fearer”²⁰. A Tannaitic source identifies this latter category:

¹⁵ The term “Fearers of Heaven” is equivalent to the term “Fearers of G-d”, i.e. G-d-Fearer. The word “G-d” being substituted for the word “Heaven”. Cp. the use of “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of G-d” (Bamberger 1968: 136)

¹⁶ Josephus’s *Antiquities* 20:17–48

¹⁷ *Hilchot Melachim* 10:10, “We should not prevent a gentile who desires to perform one of the Torah’s mitzvot in order to receive reward from doing so, provided he performs it as required.”

¹⁸ *Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 10:6

¹⁹ see McKnight 1991:97-99, here McKnight presents 4 different “kinds” of proselytes which has its basis in Talmudic material.

²⁰ Bamberger 1968: 135-138

And so you find four groups who respond and say before Him-Who-spake-and-the-world-came-to-be, "I am for the L-rd" (Is. 44:5) ... 1) Israelites, 2) Proselytes ... 3) repentant sinners 4) and fearers of G-d (*yirai Shamayim*). *Mekhilta, Mishpatim*, 312.²¹

Thus, we see that Judaism promotes a twofold path, either a Jewish path, which implies to be bound by the specific Jewish commandments²² and thus be part of the Jewish mission as disseminators of G-d's Will for mankind. Or, to remain Gentile, and be an observer of the part of Torah that is universally valid. Maimonides in his exposition of the Talmud underscores in *Hilchot Melachim* 10:9 that Gentiles can either, "become righteous converts (*ger tzedek*) and accept all the mitzvot or retain their statutes [as Noahides] without adding or detracting from them" (Maimonides 2001)

Applied on a global scale the Jewish nation is thus to serve as priests and a light to the nations, while the non-Jewish nations are in this respect, so to speak, the congregation. Both parties being equally valid, the one necessitating the other. It is thus stated in the Talmud, "a Gentile who studies Torah is as great as a high priest" (Tractate Sanhedrin 59a). This seem to contradict another statement in the Talmud, "a Gentile who studies the Torah is obligated to die" (ibid.). This apparent contradiction is resolved by the specification that the first statement is referring to a Gentile who studies Torah that is pertaining the Seven Noahide commandments²³.

²¹ quoted in Novak 2011:26; see also *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 8:2, "(Psalms 146:8) 'G-d loves the righteous.' G-d said: 'I love those who love Me and so it says (1 Samuel 2:30) 'For I honor those who honor Me.' They love Me so I love them in return.' Why does G-d love the righteous? Because righteousness is not an inheritance or a family trait. You find that priests are from a priestly family and Levites are from a levitical family as it says (Psalms 135:19-20) 'O house of Aaron bless G-d! O house of Levi bless G-d!' If someone wants to become a priest [from the family of Aaron] or a Levite he cannot because his father was not a priest or a Levite. However, if someone wants to become righteous even if he is a gentile he can because it is not a family trait as it says (ibid.) 'O those who fear G-d bless G-d!' It does not say the house of those who fear G-d but those who fear G-d. It is not a family trait rather on their own they chose to fear and love G-d. Therefore, G-d loves them."

²² *Hilchot Melachim* 8:10 which differentiates between the Jewish covenant and the Noahide covenant, both of which are contained in the Torah of Moses. Thus, the Israelites are bound by the Sinai covenant, while Noahides (i.e. non-Jews) are bound by the covenant that G-d made with Noah and all of his descendants.

²³ *ibid*; See also *Hilchot Melachim* 10:9

Jewish attractions

That pagans had the option of being “Fearers of Heaven” is in my opinion an important reason that Judaism could become highly successful in gaining followers and its ideas could be disseminated. That meant that pagans could partake of Jewish teachings, ideas, rituals and laws to the extent that they themselves were comfortable with. The men did not have to undergo the painful and irreversible operation of circumcision and neither men nor women were obliged to observe ritual and dietary laws. An observance which otherwise could make it difficult to maintain ordinary business, friends and family relations. Thus, it was possible for the “Fearers of Heaven” to maintain, in a lesser or greater extent, their ordinary life, not necessitating to make a total breaking away with their lifestyle, family and friends, but more tuning their new way of life in accordance with the acceptance of belief in One G-d and adherence to a basic moral code.

A Biblical precedence is the story of the Syrian general Naaman who committed himself to the worship of Israel’s G-d, while still being allowed by the prophet Elisha to accompany his master into a heathen Temple²⁴.

Interestingly this creates a category in-between Nock’s differentiation between “conversion” and “adhesion”²⁵, where the option of being a “Fearer of Heaven” makes it possible to combine both an aspect of conversion and an aspect of adhesion. Thus, it lowers the fence and serves as a bridge and a connection point between the Jewish world and the pagan world. This seems to be a very important reason that helps to explain how Judaism could have such a great impact in the Greek-Roman world in antiquity.

Especially the Sabbath observance seems to have been a very attractive element of Judaism that pagan “Heaven-Fearers” adopted in one form or another. The Roman satirist Juvenal writes mockingly about Roman citizens who “have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds and the divinity of the heavens”, *Satires*, 14.96.²⁶

²⁴ II Kings 5:18-19

²⁵ Nock 1998: 7

²⁶ quoted in Novak 2011: 25

Jewish success in winning followers

Judaism was the first to present itself as, what we today label as “religion”. The Greek-Roman traditions offered “cults”.²⁷ As such, Judaism had something important that the other traditions of the time lacked; sacred scripture, a religious authority, a belief system and a moral code.²⁸ This probably served as a major advantage on behalf of Judaism and perhaps contribute to explain its attraction in the pagan world. The historian Menachem Stern writes, “within the Graeco-Roman world, the Jewish religion had a strong power to attract, to the effect that a notable movement of conversion was produced”²⁹.

Also, much of the attraction of Judaism was its antiquity, which was something that was held in high esteem by the Romans, “the general principle seems to have been that the older and more eastern things were, the more divine and the more credible they were, inasmuch as human beings were closest to the gods in the earliest times and in the East” (Feldman 1993: 177).

In order to be reckoned as authoritative and credible the newly founded religion Christianity connects themselves to the Judaic tradition, claiming to be “the new Israel”. Later Islam does the same. Other elements that could be claimed as attractive for pagans: Judaism’s universality and its prophetic message of world peace. Instead of a multiplicity of gods to choose from, all wanting different things from their worshippers, Judaism presented the idea of G-d being One, that it is only one source for all laws and all morality, and the idea of a day set aside devoted to rest and worship. These concepts has become universal through their adoption by first the Christian world, and later the Islamic world. This is especially visible in the now universal practice of observing the “Sabbath” in one form or the other.

Feldman³⁰ lists several other factors that together makes a good case for Judaism’s attraction in the pagan world. Together the above points toward Judaism’s uniqueness and can help to explain why so many Gentiles were attracted and attached themselves to it.

²⁷ according to Nock 1998: 7

²⁸ See Rives 2007: 43-53

²⁹ quoted in McKnight 1991: 34

³⁰ Feldman 1993: 369-382

Summary

The scholarly literature has pointed to a serious problem concerning Judaism as a “missionary religion”. Feldman writes, “one of the great puzzles of the proselyting movement is how to explain the existence of a mass movement [of conversions to Judaism] when we do not know the name of a single Jewish missionary” (quoted in McKnight 1991: 52). Still, in Jewish writings there is clearly a mission to the world, based on these writings McKnight’s paraphrases the following, “Israel has a responsibility to enlighten the world with the truth of Judaism” (ibid.: 53). He continues with asserting that it is not spelled out how this responsibility is to be carried out, “Thus, I see “mission” here but neither missionary activity nor missionaries.”

My opinion is that this apparent problem dissolves itself when one regards the Jewish mission, not as a mission to convert humanity to becoming Jewish, but as I have been discussing, as a mission to disseminate the universal teachings of the Torah among mankind, the primary teaching being belief in ethical monotheism.

A convert must in this respect not be exclusively regarded as someone who converts to Judaism and adopts its ritual laws, but as someone who turns away from idolatry and towards the Jewish concept of monotheism as it is laid down in the Torah. The precedence for this kind of conversion is found in the patriarch Abraham. “And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had amassed, and the souls they made in Haran” (Genesis 12:5). The *Bereishis Rabbah* exegetical explains that “the souls they made” refers to converts. “Abraham converted the men, Sarah converted the women” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 39:14 in Freedman 1983)³¹. Since this is before the Sinai covenant and thus before the birth of the Israelite/Jewish nation, the convert obviously does not refer to someone who converts to Judaism. Another story from the Hebrew Bible that can illustrate that the Jewish mission is not to convert non-Jews to Judaism, but to make them believe in G-d and to abstain from doing bad deeds, is the story of prophet Jonah who is sent by G-d to the non-Jewish city of Nineveh. “The people of Nineveh believed G-d” (Jonah 3:5) and the city was not destroyed due to the people “were turning back from their evil ways” (ibid.:10).

³¹ See also Tractate *Sanhedrin* 99b

The Talmudic tradition points toward the Jewish exile as G-d's means in order to convert mankind, that is, to turn them towards the universal teachings of the Torah and belief in the One G-d. Rabbi Elazar said "G-d only exiled Israel among the nations in order that proselytes might join them, for it is said: 'And I will sow her to Me in the land:' surely a man sows a *se'ah* [a small measure] in order to harvest many *kor* [a large measure]"³².

This sowing, metaphorically speaking, points toward the messianic era, the end of days, when all the seeds will blossom and "G-d will be King over the entire earth, in that day G-d will be One and His Name One"³³.

The Roman statesman Seneca is quoted as saying: "the customs of that most accursed nation have gained such strength that they have been now received in all lands, the conquered has given laws to the conquerors."³⁴ This is in contradiction with the ordinary laws of history where it is expected that the conquerer gives their laws to the conquered³⁵.

This brings to light the great impact of the Jewish influence through their mission to mankind, an impact that is well documented in antiquity and which is still felt today. The historian Paul Johnson writes:

To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind."³⁶

This is testified by the whole world, practically speaking, being familiar with the concept of ethical monotheism. A concept brought to the world through Judaism, and who later was adopted and promoted by Christianity and Islam. In sum this attests to the attractiveness of Judaism in antiquity and its success in attracting converts.

³² Tractate *Pesachim* 87b

³³ Zechariah 14:9

³⁴ quoted in Augustus' *De Civitate Dei* 6.11

³⁵ Nock 1998: 5

³⁶ Johnson 1988: 585

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