

THE IMPACT OF JEWISH SCRIPTURE AND PROSELYTISM ON EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY EXPANSION

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Abstract

The paper attempts an examination of the significance of Jewish scripture and proselytism to early Christian missionary enterprise the Gentile nations. The paper is approached from a socio-historical perspective. Among other things, the research brings to the fore that the availability of Jewish scripture (which talks more about the promised Messiah) to the world in the Hellenistic language and the missionary spirit already at home in the first century Judaism which allowed the conversion of Gentiles to Jewish national religion, considerably combined to give the pioneering Christian missionaries the much success they recorded in the early Christian global mission. That if not for these two Hellenistic elements in Judaism, Christianity would probably not have achieved the much success recorded in its first attempt at global mission.

Introduction

Judaism, up to the time of Christ, was not the narrow racial national religion it is sometime made out to be.¹ The translation of the Jewish scripture into Greek, the language of the Greco-Roman world, coupled with Jewish proselytising mission, transformed Judaism from a racial national religion to a universal one. This new religious identity earned by Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, in turn considerably prepared grounds for the “Christian Great Commission” of “making disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

To drive the above point home, this paper examines the ways significant Jewish scripture and proselytism helped in the dissemination of the Christian gospel to the Gentile world in the early phase of Christianity. The work is a socio-historical research carried in the light of biblical literature and scholarly writings.

Jewish Scripture and Early Christian Mission

The Hebrew Scripture, divided into Law, Prophets and Writings, was very precious to the Jews (especially after the exile), among

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whom became pioneers of early Christian mission. No true Jew was at home anywhere without the Jewish Scripture. The widespread of the Jewry both East and West made the Law the centre around which Jewish life and religion had perforce to revolve outside Palestine.²

The main stress in normative Judaism is laid on the *Torah* (Law) much of which is devoted to the Law and the history of the origin of the nation of Israel as the covenant people of Yahweh. After the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem with its sacred objects, the Law of Moses took the place of the Ark of the Covenant. This Law was of a treasure importance to the Jews. They guarded it jealously, respected it a lot, and some were even prepared to die in defence of it.³ There were Jews in the Maccabean age who suffered cruel tortures and death during the mad attempt of Antiochus Epiphanies to Hellenize Judea. They were prepared to suffer shame, contempt and death than to abandon the Law of Yahweh⁴.

The results of the unwavering devotion to the Law of God were of the utmost importance to Christianity. As related by Foakes Jackson, in the first place the martyr spirit obtained recognition, in the second, the Messianic hopes were again aroused.⁵ These martyrs taught the world the lesson, that opinions for which men are prepared to die possess an unquenchable vitality. The obscure and unknown victims who suffered nameless tortures rather than abandon the Law of their God were the precursors of the Christian martyrs whose blood became the seed of the Church. When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews saw the approaching persecution of Christians, he recalled the memory of these Jewish martyrs (cf. Heb.11:35). He stressed that these were prepared to die for the truth with the conviction of a future life and the prospects of a glorious deliverance.

Moreover, the Jewish Scripture contains many prophecies and special references to the coming Messiah. So with the aid of the Scripture which was dear to the pious Jews, the Messianic idea was prevalent in the minds of the Jews.

In addition, the translation of the Jewish Scripture to Greek (the lingua-franca of the Graeco-Roman world) made it possible for the people in the then known world to have direct access to the study

of the Jewish scriptures which speak so much about the coming of the Messiah (GK. *Christos*).⁶ Hence, the Septuagint helped to a considerable extent in the spreading of Messianic ideas and expectations among the Gentile nations.

Owing to its importance, the Jewish Scripture was at the heart of every true Jew. It was expected of parents to teach their children the Law of Yahweh at early age (cf. Deut 6:7). Jesus was well versed in the Scripture. He quoted from it and expounded on it during His teachings (Mt.4:4, Lk. 24:27; John 7:42 cf. with Mt.5:21-48).

He acknowledged it as the word of God (Lk.16:31). He recommended the searching of it to those who did not believe in his messiahship, pointing out that it testified of him and his mission (John 5:39). He spoke of it as profitable for doctrine, instruction and sanctification (cf. Jn.17:17). In John 20:31 it is said to make wise unto salvation. Christ clarified his mission as not that of abolishment of the Scripture but the fulfilment of it (Mt.5:17; Jn19:24). That everything in the Law must be fulfilled before the heaven and earth pass away (Mt.5:18). The dangers of rejecting it or breaking it are spelt out in John 12:48 and Matt.5:19.

In the earliest days of the Church, the Apostles often appealed to it (Acts 2:3; 17:2; 18:24; 28:23). The early Christian writers depended largely on it as on the life, mission and sayings of Jesus. For instance, the four Gospel records were rooted in it, pointing to Jesus as the fulfilment of it; Paul the Apostle, the doyen of Christian theology, drew largely from it in his Epistles etc. In fact, the importance of the Jewish Scripture to the Christian Church cannot be overestimated. As remarked by S.O. Abogunrin, the Bible of the first Christians was the Old Testament known in Palestine as the Septuagint-the Greek version of the Old Testament that contains the apocryphal writings that were held in high honour among the Hellenistic Jews.⁷ Even when Christianity became emancipated from Judaism the Old Testament was not discarded. It was recognized as containing the Christian economy in prediction, symbol and types. It was the delight and duty of the early preachers to show how these found their fulfillment in the Lord's life. The Apostolic doctrine

consisted largely of the Messianic interpretation of Old Testament passages. Thus, the words of Jesus and the teachings of the Apostles formed a parallel with the Old Testament.

Jewish Proselytism and Christian Global Mission

Jewish proselytism in a number of ways prepared grounds for Christian global evangelistic mission. Etymologically, the word proselyte is the technical concept, coined by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *ger* which at first meant a resident alien, who might profess no religious affiliation whatever (cf. Gen. 15:13; Ex. 23:9). The word came later to describe “those who had come over” (Gk. Proselytes) religiously from the Hellenistic environment (cf. Mt. 23:15; Acts 2:11 etc)⁸. According to the teaching of later Judaism, a proselyte, as expatiated by S.O. Abogunrin, was a Gentile who was converted to be circumcised and baptized. In addition to these he was to offer sacrifice and observe the Sabbath.⁹ And as stressed by M.S. Miller and J.S. Miller, not until a candidate was circumcised and cleansed (or baptized) and has offered sacrifices did he become a proselyte to Judaism and eligible to partake of the Passover.¹⁰ The prescribed baptism by immersion was symbolic for purification and consecration of the heathen while circumcision was a necessary requirement for males, only baptism and sacrifice were required of females (though sacrifice became abolished for both sexes after the final destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70). Both baptism and circumcision had the underlying purpose of cleansing the proselyte from the impurity of idolatry and the restoration of the purity of a new born man. It was a baptism of repentance like that of John the Baptist, but that of John was different in that it was administered to the Jews and it was in anticipation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit by the Messiah. The proselyte baptism like those of John the Baptist and the Christians is once and for all unique and unrepeatable.¹¹ At any rate, the proselytism together with its baptism in a number of ways foreshadowed Christianity.

The Dispersion of the Jews considerably enhanced proselytism. The dispersed Jews carried along with them a missionary

spirit to the lands of their sojourning. Contrary to their ancient and modern custom, the Jews became energetic missionaries¹².

The translation of the Jewish Scripture into Greek-the official language of the then known world also facilitated the making of more converts into Judaism as many Gentiles became acquainted with the Septuagint. The constant mention of the persons who worshipped the God of Israel in Acts of the Apostles shows how numerous they must have been in the great cities of the Empire at that time. In fact, the Gentiles themselves seemed to have also recognized something of the divine mission of Israel.¹³

However, Judaism with its proselytism still fell short of assuming the status of a universal religion. While there is no doubt that Jewish theology and ethics held a strong attraction for the serious pagan, weary of polytheism and its attendant moral corruption, two factors still combined to limit the number of proselytes. As related by G.B. Caird, firstly, the Roman government refused to extend to proselytes the privileges and immunities granted to those who were Jews by birth; secondly, most Gentiles hesitated to undergo the rite of circumcision, which would bind them to obey not only the moral but also the ceremonial Law. Accordingly, in most Synagogues of Diaspora there could be found Gentiles who were satisfied to participate in the worship and instruction without becoming more deeply involved.

Moreover, the proselytes were still discriminated against by those that were of Jewish nationality inspite of their conversion to Jewish religion¹⁴. This was because for one to accept the faith of Israel was one thing, but it was a different thing for him to become a Jew¹⁵. And so, among other things (owing to racial discrimination) Gentile converts into Judaism were restrained from going into the Temple proper. They were confined to a place called "the court of Gentiles".¹⁶ And any attempt to go beyond this point, even to "the court of women", was to be met with a heavy penalty. In fact there was an inscription in Greek and Latin prescribing death for anyone making such an attempt.

Even among the so called proselytes there was apostasy. Many of the converts were not strong enough to persevere in their newly found faith probably owing to its legalism and bids to satisfy personal ambitions.

Similarly, there was syncretism between Judaism and various pagan cults. There is ample evidence of this in the passage in Acts 19:13 – 19 where mention is made of Jews who practised magic. In addition, the Magic Papyri are full of references to the Septuagint. This could be attributed to the literary influence of the Septuagint in that the translation of the Old Testament into Greek opened up the possibility of a synthesis between Jewish and Greek thought, (though this synthesis was not attempted by the translations, who left the fundamental nature of Judaism unchanged).¹⁷ This attempt to integrate Jewish theology with Greek philosophy was made by Alexandrian philosophers. For example, in some places the God of the Jews, under the title "Sabaoth", was identified with the pagan deity Sabazins. Similarly, in the Aegean provinces there was a worship of Zeus Hypsistos which almost certainly owed something to the use of Hypsistos as a divine name in the Septuagint.¹⁸ Other reasons for the syncretism included the apostasy of Jews, the lapse of proselytes, and most importantly the visits paid to the Synagogue by partially converted Gentiles.¹⁹

With the shortcomings of Judaism with its proselytism to make itself a faith that could be universally accepted without any limitation sprang the hope and search for a new religion which could be able to make up for the ideals deficient in Judaism. In other words, proselytism in Judaism was only a harbinger of the Christian dispensation with its characteristic dynamic missionary spirit.

The advent of Christianity with its unique message of salvation from sin and the adoption of every true behaviour in Christ into God's family as joint-heirs to the commonwealth of the eschatological Israel irrespective of race, sex or status (cf. Rom. 9:23-26; 10:12-13; Gal. 3:28) resulted in a massive drift from Judaism into Christianity among the proselytes. As corroborated by M.S. Miller and J.S. Miller, many non-Israelites, who had become religious

proselytes of Judaism became proselytes of the Christian way, for example, among the three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost were proselytes from distant lands (Acts 2:9-12); many from Pisidian Antioch, who followed Paul and Barnabas were proselytes (Acts 13:43) and so on.²⁰ That these readily accepted the Gospel, left the Synagogue and followed Christ who made no ceremonial distinction between Jew and Gentile bond and free. That this way Synagogues of Gentile proselytes to Judaism became living cells which grew into new Christian Churches (cf. Acts 13:16, 43, 16:14f).

It is not an overstatement that Paul and other pioneering Christian missionaries of the early centuries of Christian expansion traded on the Jewish missionary spirit of making converts to Judaism of Gentiles from far and remote lands, and the availability of the Jewish scripture in the Hellenistic language. Paul in his three missionary journeys easily found a ready made audience among the proselytes in the different Jewish synagogues in gentile lands. During the first missionary journey in A.D. 45, centred on Asia minor, Paul and his associates preached the Gospel of Christ with much success in the Jewish Synagogues, among others, Salamis, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, where Paul with his sound knowledge of Jewish history and Law, preached in the Synagogue on the Sabbath recapitulating the salvation history of Israel and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty and its adjoining eternal covenant to establish the Messiahship of Jesus, the Saviour.

Equally, in the second missionary journey of between A.D. 50-53 which centered on Asia Minor and Europe preached with great success in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. At Philippi in Macedonia, Lydia, the seller of purple was won into the Faith as the first convert in Europe (Acts 16:14-15), and the miraculous conversion of the city's chief warden equally took place (Acts 16:30ff). At Thessalonica, a large number of Greek converts were won including many prominent women (17:4). Persecution arising from Jewish hostilities however made the missionaries fled to Berea where the Christian message was received with much eagerness with "prominent number of Greek women and many Greek men" also won

into the Faith. Jewish opposition at Berea also drove them to Athens, the home of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Among others, the notable converts at Athens, the capital city of Greek philosophy, were “Dionysius the Areopagite and a women named Damaris” (17:34).

Significantly, at Corinth, Crispus, the chief ruler of the Synagogues, his entire household, and “many of the Corinthians” were converted to Christianity and administered water baptism (Acts 18:8). And Paul spent one and half years in this city teaching the converts the word of God. At Ephesus, Paul equally used the grounds provided by Jewish scripture and proselytism to engage in a kind of theological discourse with the Jews in the Synagogue.

The third missionary journey which started in about A.D. 54 and lasted till about A.D. 58 was devoted to Ephesus where Apostle Paul spent two years in keeping with his earlier promise (cf. 19:10 with 18:21). Opposition in this city however forced Paul to leave. He went through Macedonia to Greece confirming the churches and eventually set for Jerusalem after a farewell speech and a charge to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (cf Acts 20:17, 28).

Though the book of Acts which provides us with the records of the first century Christian mission ends abruptly with the imprisonment of Paul in Rome awaiting trial by Caesar on the basis of his Gentile evangelistic activities (Acts 28:16), extra-biblical records inform that Paul's trial by Caesar was fair. He was discharged and acquitted after which, as speculated by some scholars, he embarked on the fourth missionary journey to Spain.²¹

Apart from the missionary activities of Paul among the Gentile nations, traditions inform that other Apostles of Christ eventually followed suit in strict compliance with the Lord's injunction of preaching the Gospel to every creature without racial discrimination. In fact, each of the Apostles was credited with a field of labour in the then known world. To mention a few, Matthew is credited with preaching the Gospel in Ethiopia; Andrew - Scythia; Bartholomew - India and Arabia; Simon the Zealot - Persia; Thomas - Parthia and India; Philip - Asia; Matthias - Ethiopia or among the "Anthropophagi"; Peter - Rome (figuratively called Babylon in his

Epistles), and so on.²² Although undue weight cannot be given to all these traditions, it is not right for a historian to ignore them altogether since they show that the Gospel of salvation was taken virtually to the utter-most parts of the earth through which the racially despised Gentiles became obedient to the Gospel.

Moreover, it is equally a fact well established in ecclesiastical history that Christianity was established very early enough in the regions of Gallica, Belgica, Germania and Rhaetia, all of which roughly coincide with the present day France, Belgium, the Rhine Valley, Southern Germany, and parts of Switzerland. There were also said to be Christians in Britain before the first decade of the third century.²³

Summary and Conclusion

In a nutshell, the Jewish Scripture was taken over by the Church in her early days as the foundation Scripture for Christianity. It did not only form the groundwork of Christian preaching and teaching, it was as well used for all the purposes outlined in II Timothy 3:15-17. The Jewish Scripture therefore, without mincing words, became the bed-rock upon which the Christian Scripture was founded. In fact, the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, the headquarters of the church, could never have made the world accept the Faith of the Apostles, and the church would have consequently remained an isolated community with no attractions to the outside world, if not for the Hellenistic element which gave Christianity its true character as a missionary religion, and more importantly, the significant roles played by the Greek version of the Jewish scripture and earlier Israel's divine mission among the Gentiles.²⁴ The mission to the Gentiles, inaugurated in the Gentile city of Syrian Antioch in about A.D. 45, barely five years after the conversion of the first fruits of the Gentile church, was made more possible owing to the foundation that Jewish Scripture and proselytism had made in preparing the world to accept the Jewish faith. In other words, the early Christian global mission owes much of its success to the availability of the Jewish scripture in its Hellenistic form which talks more about the promised Messiah, and the earlier missionary spirit among the despised Gentiles which Judaism with its proselytization process had prepared.

References

1. J.O. Buswell, "Proselyte" in J.D. Douglas and M.C. Tenney, (eds), *Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 829.
2. H.L. Ellison "Judaism" J. D. Douglas. *et al.* (eds) *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1974, p. 554.
3. The Law used in the Synagogue was a scroll covered in a velvet or silk robe lavishly decorated and crowned with gold or silver. Before reading, it was carried all round the Synagogue, and as it passed everybody bowed or touched it, and turned round so that nobody had his back to the Law.
4. The aged Eleazar, an highly respected teacher of the Law was beaten to death for his refusal to eat pork as demanded by Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc. 6:18-31). Similarly, a Jewish mother together with her seven sons were in a single day cut into pieces and roasted in the brazen pans for their insistence not to abandon the Law of Yahweh (2 Macc. 7). However, the courageous death of these Jews than compromise with heathenism seen by their fellow Jews as "exploits for the name of the Lord" remained a great lesson to subsequent generations (cf. Dan. 11:31-33).
5. F.J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, Cambridge: Hall and Son, 1914, p. 7.
6. This Greek version of the Jewish Bible is called the *Septuagint* (from the Greek word for seventy) based on the belief that seventy Jewish scholars undertook the translation at Alexandria in Egypt.
7. S.O. Abogunrin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*. Ibadan: Tafak Publications, 1989, pp. 17&18.
8. See Clyde C. Smith "Proselyte" in J.D. Doughlass *et al* (eds.), *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 807.
9. Abogunrin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*, pp. 6 & 7.

10. M.S. Miller & J.S. Miller. *Blacks Bible Dictionary*, London: A & C Black Ltd., 1952, pp. 486-587.
11. See Abogunrin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of the New Testament*, p. 7.
12. Cf Jesus' reference to the missionary activity of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matt. 23:15.
13. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, p. 13.
14. A distinction was always made between *Ioudaios* (a Jew by nation) and *Proselutos* (a convert into Jewish religion).
15. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, p. 14.
16. The "Court of the Gentiles" was outside the Temple proper, but within the Temple compound. In the Temple proper were different divisions: "the court of women" meant only for Jewish women and children; "the Court of Israel" where men sat and watched what the priests were doing at the "Altar area"; beyond the Altar area was the Holy Place" which led to the innermost Holy of Holies. In respect for the Jewish religion, the Roman administrators granted the Sanhedrin the power to inflict death penalty on any Gentile who crossed the barrier into the Temple proper.
17. G.B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age*, London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1955, p. 27.
18. Ibid., p. 30
19. Ibid.
20. M.S. Miller & J.S. Miller. *Blacks Bible Dictionary*, p. 587.
21. This is also suggested by Paul's own statements in Romans 15: 24, 28.
22. For detail see F.C. Cross, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford: O.U.P., 1958.
23. See K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Vol.1), London: Harper and Bros., 1937.
24. Foakes Jackson. *History of the Christ Church*, p. 33.