

The Proselytes of Matthew 23:15

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EDITORS' NOTE: Mt 23:15 faults the Pharisees for energetically seeking converts, a claim which has puzzled many readers. As an aid in understanding, we offer excerpts from pages 221 and 228 (slightly abbreviated) of Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (1959; tr 1961).



This universalistic inspiration bore fruit, and in the century of the Hasmonean ascendancy gave rise to Jewish missionary propaganda. About the actual scope of this it is difficult for us today to form a clear idea. For in the first place, in the period of the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem the rabbis' friendly attitude to proselytes abruptly changed, while secondly, the Jewish successes in the missionary field gave way without a struggle to nascent Christianity. Nevertheless, we know that the Diaspora, hence Hellenistic Judaism, was the chief participant in this missionary propaganda, which is very well attested by ancient authors (Seneca, Tacitus, Suetonius, Horace, Juvenal, Dio Cassius, Strabo, Josephus, etc) . . .¹

We know positively that the Jewish world mission won many proselytes even in the highest strata of society. Josephus tells us that the Empress Poppaea Sabina at the court of Nero became a God-fearer (*Ant* 20/8:11) and that a large circle of like-minded people gathered around her, whose interests she represented at court. After her death she was not burned according to Roman custom, but embalmed in the manner of foreigners. Further, in the time of Claudius and Nero, on the borders of the Empire in the direction of Parthia, King Izates II of Adiabene on the upper Tigris was converted to Judaism with his whole house. Josephus (*Ant* 20/3:3) was especially proud of this triumph of missionary endeavour.

¹Cf H Gressmann, "Jüdische Mission in der Werdezeit des Christentums," ZMR (1924) 169-183; sources in Schürer 3/167ff, Moore 1/323ff.

Hence there is no reason to be suspicious of the claim of Philo (*Apion* 2/39): “There is not a single Greek or barbarian city, not a single people, to which the custom of Sabbath observance has not spread, or in which the fast days, the kindling of the lights, and many of our prohibitions about food are not heeded.” In *Ant* 14/7:2 Josephus has proudly invoked the assertions of the Roman Strabo in respect of the considerable spread of Judaism in the Diaspora . . .

In Paul’s own time, Jewish proselytism must have reached its height. The summons to salvation (Mekhilta Ex 12:1) rang our far and wide into the world. It was believed that the Gentiles were turning to God from the purest of motives and by divine inspiration (Mekh Ex 18:6) The promise to Abraham, who was now called the father of all proselytes (Tanch Lekh Lekha VI, 32a; Jer Bikkurim 64a; Yehuda ben Ilai) was being fulfilled. Very beautifully, the Mekhilta on Ex 22:21 speaks of Abraham, who once had described himself as a *ger* (Gen 23:4): “beloved are the *gerim*, for Abraham our father was circumcised when he was ninety-nine years old.” Had he been circumcised when he was twenty or thirty, a *ger* could only have become a proselyte up to the age of thirty. For this reason God delayed the conclusion of the covenant with him until he was ninety-nine so that *gerim* to come might not be excluded.² By exegesis of Deut 29:13-15 proselytes were expressly included in the Sinai covenant (Shebuoth 39a). In fact, it was even asserted that proselytes like the Israelites were exempted from the inheritance of original sin, from the “corruption of the Serpent” (Sabb 146a). As the “spiritual seed of Abraham” they were fully entitled to all the rights and privileges of the Jews (Jer Bikk 1:4). Philo too makes Abraham the very prototype and pattern of all proselytes (*De Nobil* 2/443, *De Abr* 2/39, etc).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: In 1933, Schoeps was instrumental in organizing German Jews, especially veterans, along military and German nationalistic lines, in hopes of an accommodation with National Socialism. These organizations were outlawed in 1935. Schoeps emigrated to Sweden in December 1938, and with the aid of the Swedish church, sought to bring his parents to join him. In this he was unsuccessful: his father died at Teresienstadt, and his mother in Auschwitz. Schoeps was especially interested in the earliest Christianity, including the Jewish origin of Gnosticism (which he disputed, despite evidence of Jewish and anti-Jewish strands in Nag Hammadi texts). He advocated an antinomistic, non-national Judaism which was accordingly close to Christianity, but without the Christian rituals. He returned to Germany after the war, and taught at Erlangen from 1947 until his death in 1980.

Further Reading

- H J Schoeps. Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History. 1959; tr Westminster 1961
- Hans-Joachim Schoeps. Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church. 1964; tr Fortress 1969
- H J Schoeps. Judenchristentum und Gnosis; in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina* 13-18 Aprile 1966, Brill (1967) 528-537

²About Abraham as the first to convert, cf also Gen Rabba on 12:5 and 8. Also Cahiers Sioniens (1951) #2.