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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

JEWISH MISSIONARY ACTIVITY UNDER REVIEW

Rev. D. P. Ker

Professor E.A. Russell is held in high esteem by those who have had the privilege of sitting at his feet. He has set standards both of thoroughness and graciousness which mark him out as teacher and mentor par excellence. Through his guidance many of us have been encouraged to journey further in the study of Christian origins within and alongside Judaism. This article, a small marker along the way of such a journey, is offered with appreciation and gratitude.

“At the time of Jesus’ appearance an unparalleled period of missionary activity was in progress in Israel”¹. Thus Joachim Jeremias summed up the received wisdom of a generation of scholars. It was assumed that the outreach of the early church, and in particular of Paul, could easily be paralleled with an aggressive campaign in at least parts of Judaism, and that this explained, at least to some extent, opposition such as Paul encountered in Corinth.²

Recently, however, this assumption has been severely challenged. In part the challenge comes from studies which seek to examine more precisely the manner in which Jewish and Christian communities defined themselves. But the concern to place current relationships between Jews and Christians into a clear historical context has spurred on the discussion.

A particularly emphatic questioning has come from Martin Goodman in his study *Mission and Conversion* (Oxford, 1994). In this paper I hope to outline Goodman’s position in contesting the evidence which has been offered for Jewish missionary activity in the first century C.E. and then to offer some assessment of his position.

BASIC DEFINITIONS

Lying at the foundation of this discussion is Goodman’s wish to examine the assumption that “the positive desire to affect

¹ Jeremias, J. *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*. (E.T. London 1958)

² See, for example, Georgi, D.: *The Opponents of Paul in II Corinthians* (E.T. London 1988)

outsiders" is "an integral part of every religion".³ Should we fail to offer such an critique we may be guilty of the unconscious Christianization of the study of ancient religions.

Some terms must therefore be defined. Three ideas considered by Goodman to be considerably less than a conscious desire in mission to win converts are:

(a) the dissemination of religious information without a desire to change the recipient's behaviour or status - best termed "information":

(b) a desire to change the behaviour of recipients by making them more moral or contented, without the auditor necessarily recognising such a change was part of the belief system espoused by the missionary - best termed "education":

(c) recognition of the power of a particular divinity without expecting the audience to devote themselves to his/her worship - best termed "apologetic".

How, then, are we to define proselytism? "Those who...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."⁴

The critical reader may notice some problems emerging even at this stage. The term "defined group" can be problematic, even when applied to the early Christian Church, for we may see within many of the writings of the New Testament that early Christian communities faced considerable difficulties in defining themselves.

A further issue arises regarding the evidence admissible in our search. Goodman is restrictive, permitting only "...explicit or very strongly implied evidence of a universal mission to bring people perceived as outsiders into a particular community and to convert them to the views held by that community. Evidence that could, but need not, imply such proselytising will be examined but will in general be discounted. Nor will even explicit statements in the sources always be taken at face value."⁵

³ Goodman p.3

⁴ Goodman p.4

⁵ Goodman p.14

There is reason for such rigour, even though it is possible that terms of the search will preclude any positive results. Civic religion in the early Roman empire had an important social function, reinforcing the norms of human relations. Thus the implication of proselytising effort is not enough. The attitudes of later centuries, when the state's attitude to Christianity was very different, may not be used to inform our judgements.

BASIC ATTITUDES

We turn to survey the environment in which Christianity was born and grew. This comes to us in two parts.

A. The religious practice and thinking of the cults and philosophies of the pagan Roman Empire. Our questions, springing from our previous definitions, may be posed thus:

- (i) Did the adherents of the variety of cults operating feel that those outside their cult needed educated or informed?
- (ii) Did they feel that it was important to gain the benevolence of outsiders towards their god?
- (iii) Did they feel themselves to be a defined group of worshippers into which all humans should be drawn?

Although Goodman senses that the answer to the third of his questions is "probably not" he recognises immediately that such a negative is difficult to prove, not least because of a lack of first-hand sources. For the most part we are dependent on passing references in secular literature and occasional inscriptional evidence.

Equally problematic in answering the question is the suggestion that, for the most part, pagans might adhere to one or more cults, but they didn't convert to any of them, in the sense of seeing themselves as belonging to a group whose boundaries were determined by cult membership.

There are exceptions. Both Mithraists and followers of the cult of Isis had a distinctive sense of belonging. Yet the distinction must be made between such a sense and the desire for new members. Evidence for the latter is slender.

What of cults which spread? We are offered two examples. In the first Livy (39. 8-19) tells of the growth of the cult of Dionysius through Italy in the second century BCE. Although his report records that it spread like wildfire "because of the delights of

wine and feasts”...”like a contagious disease” Livy makes no specific mention of the work of proselytising missionaries. Thus the spread of Dionysiac religion cannot of itself be considered good evidence for such proselytising activity.

The second example comes from the Satirist Lucian, who tells of how a certain Alexander sought to disseminate a cult of a “New Asclepius”. He organised an energetic mission, but did not encourage his victims to join any defined group or adopt a new way of life. Thus these efforts cannot really be considered propaganda.⁶

The line between “religion” and “philosophy” can be a slender one. Thus we should take note of, in particular, the Pythagoreans and the Epicureans. Here we discover an enthusiasm to teach outsiders, but this mission was to educate rather than proselytise. The two most widely accepted philosophical schools of thought, Platonism and Stoicism, may well have been adopted, not through their desire for new adherents but simply because people sensed their notions to be true.

It may come as a surprise but, as Goodman sees it, the closest one gets to a proselytising mission is the Imperial Cult. Emperor worship was clearly encouraged, and those who partook of the Imperial Cult clearly signalled that they belonged to a defined community - the state itself. However, although there might be occasional hints as to Rome’s destiny of universal government, membership of the cult was, of necessity, politically defined. Any part of the world where Rome did not hold power was also beyond the bounds of the cult, and there seems to have been no attempt by Romans to encourage those who were outside their political control to join their religious community.

Goodman’s summary is blunt. “No pagan seriously dreamed of bringing all humankind to give worship in one body to one deity.”⁷

B. Judaism before 100 C.E.

Activity only makes sense if we understand the attitudes on which it is founded. Thus we need first to consider Jewish attitudes

⁶ See further discussion in Jones, C.P.: *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986)
Goodman p.32

to paganism as we find them expressed Jewish literature, for only then may we interpret the evidence for what has been presumed to be a considerable proselytising mission within Judaism.

A major difficulty, however, is to find sufficient evidence on which to form judgements. "Judaism" is of itself a slippery term, and we need to avoid any tendency to assume that the opinions of one or two authors represent the whole, or indeed a majority, of Jewish thinking. The variety of Jewish attitude and approach in the Diaspora is helpfully outlined by John Barclay who defines behaviour in terms of High, Medium and Low levels of assimilation, while assessing attitude as Cultural Convergence or Cultural Antagonism.⁸

A further difficulty arises in that the three major contemporary sources which we have, Philo, Josephus and St. Paul, are each peculiar in some way, and have a personal agenda which prevents them from offering a broadly-based picture.

So how did Judaism view paganism? There is a variety of approach within the Hebrew scriptures. On the one hand we have Ezra's concern that Judaism should not be polluted by Gentile influence. On the other hand Job, set in a non-Jewish world, suggests that its hero is a Gentile who is applauded for avoiding idolatry and is acceptable within Judaism. Within the prophet Isaiah we have a strongly sarcastic critique of paganism, yet the acknowledgement that a pagan ruler can be God's instrument.

When we turn to the writings of Diaspora Judaism we should be cautious of making over-hasty judgements. Even passages which at first sight appear to offer a strong critique of paganism, such as Wisdom of Solomon chs. 13-15, may not be all that they seem. Since imagination plays its part in casting the author in the role of Solomon might not imagination equally be at work when we see the recipients in the role of pagans. At any rate Wisdom seems not to have been widely read in Judaism, being much more popular within the early Christian community.

Again the romance of Joseph and Aseneth could be considered as evidence of a particularly hostile attitude toward paganism. There is obvious distaste for Aseneth's idolatry before her

⁸ Barclay, J.M.G.: *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*. (Edinburgh 1995)

conversion, which might best be expressed through the constantly repeated demand for repentance. Over against this we should remember that this romance deals with the particularly sensitive issue of marriage between Jew and Gentile, and thus may not be the best example of Jewish attitudes to Gentiles as such.

If this is so it should, according to Goodman, force us to consider afresh the manner in which we interpret the variety of texts which are presumed to refer to widespread Jewish proselytism taking place at the same time as the rise of the Christian community. Judaism may well have seen that it had a role as religious mentor for the Gentile world, and that in the last Days Gentiles would acknowledge the Lord God. But, he suggests, this is very different from any impulse to draw non-Jews into Judaism at the present time.

ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE

We turn to presenting, and then critically examining, the evidence which has been traditionally offered in support of Jewish proselytism in the first century C.E. First and foremost we must acknowledge that proselytes existed. Although some questions, regarding how precisely they were viewed within Israel, remain unanswered there seems little doubt that they were a considerable community, and that they were to be welcomed.

In addition we may note those instances in which Jews insisted that Gentiles should convert. Most notable are the Idumeans and Ituraeans who, Josephus tells us, were forced to become Jews after their conquest during the Hasmonean period.⁹ The female members of the Herodians insisted that their Gentile intended marriage partners should become Jews before the marriage might take place.¹⁰ The presumption behind all of this is that, since Jews insisted on conversion when they had the power to enforce it, they sought to use persuasion when no other means was available.

Evidence comes from another source as we consider possible antagonism to proselytising efforts. Thus the expulsions of Jews

⁹ Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.257-258, 319

¹⁰ Josephus: *A.J.* 20.139, 145

from Rome both in 139 BCE and 19 CE have generally been understood as a punishment for seeking too many proselytes.¹¹

Three direct literary references should be added to the picture. First comes Horace's comment to a friend (*Satires* 1:4 142-143) "veluti te Iudaei cogemus in hanc concedere turbam", which is seen as a reference to proselytising activity. Second, *Philo (De Vita Mosis, 2.44)* expresses a hope that, through the translation of the Septuagint, "each nation might abandon its peculiar ways, and, bidding farewell to its ancestral customs, turn to our laws alone." The third reference is Matthew 23:15, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, that you cross land and sea to make one proselyte..."

But does this collection of evidence in fact suggest a positive desire among Jews of the period to win converts. Goodman thinks not.

Taking the last reference first, Goodman suggests that the Matthaean reference to "Proselutos" does not necessarily refer to a convert from paganism to Judaism. It may also refer to a convert from within Judaism to a Pharisaic interpretation of Halakha. In the context of Matthew's Gospel this is a very plausible possibility. Goodman supports this understanding of "proselutos" by noting, first, that it is a very rare word in the literature of the period in question and that, although it was becoming the word for a gentile who had converted, it still allowed for some flexibility. Evidence for this may be found in the Septuagint's very occasional use of the word to refer to a resident alien (as in Lev. 19:10 and Ex. 22:20). The fact that its meaning was very clearly defined by the fourth century C.E as "...children of the Greeks..now..become Jews" lends further credence to the thought that at one stage its meaning was considerably vaguer.¹²

Should this be the case the Matthaean reference, which is the most critical one, can no longer be used as proof positive of Jewish proselytising activity.

The other evidence is equally questionable. Take, for instance, Horace's throw-away line in a poem which is really

¹¹ For a full discussion see Smallwood, E.M.: *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden 1976)

¹² Goodman pp. 70 ff

concerned with encouraging other to write poetry also. His somewhat disparaging reference to "the Jews" may have nothing to do with proselytising and everything to do with the notorious ability of the Jewish crowd in Rome to get their own way by mass intimidation. Horace's use of the verb "cogere" - "to compel", seems a strong way to speak of what should be persuasive proselytising.

What about Philo? He may have written of his hope that "each nation might abandon its peculiar ways, and, bidding farewell to its ancestral customs, turn to our laws alone", but is this anything other than rhetorical exaggeration - an author carried away with enthusiasm for his subject, the Mosaic Laws? He may sense that the Septuagint translation should win the admiration of all Gentiles for the Jewish laws. The poor political fortunes of the Jews prevented that admiration taking place at the moment, but perhaps the day would come. This, however, was very far from commending immediate proselytising activity.

Having seen that our most direct evidence does not admit of simply one interpretation we may need to re-evaluate our whole approach. "It is unlikely that any of the residual arguments for a Jewish mission in the first century CE would have been proposed if such a mission had not already been presupposed."¹³

Let us consider the forced conversions of the Idumeans to Judaism on which, according to Josephus, the Hasmoneans insisted. Goodman suggests that these were really a political gambit - if Rome could act in this way and thus gain respect then Judaism might be wise to do the same. At any rate these conversions might be considered to be taking place within the land of Israel. (Goodman recognises that it is a bit questionable to see Idumean territory as lying within Israel, but he suggests that it is at least possible.) Thus the theological principle lying behind them, if one were needed at all, was that the land must be kept pure, and so idolatry must be removed. Those living among the Jews must be circumcised.

If this was the rationale behind enforced conversions then it clearly applies only within Israel and not to the Diaspora. The other area of enforced conversion was marriage. It was widely insisted, not least by the Herodians, that conversion should take place before

¹³

Goodman p.75

marriage. But this in no way implies a particular concern to proselytise, since marriage is a special case.

Turning to a further area of supposed evidence for proselytising intentions, namely the large amount of Jewish literature produced in the Greek language, Goodman follows a line of argument which has often been expressed, most clearly by Victor Tcherikover,¹⁴ namely that this material was intended for Greek speaking Jews, not for outsiders. "It is, of course, possible that some of these works were read by Gentiles as well as Jews, and that this was the intention of their authors....but if this was the case it is hard to see what Gentiles were to make of such literature....When the writings urged specifically Jewish customs, such as the observance of the Sabbath, they tended to be pseudonymous: thus the fact that Orpheus was portrayed by a Jewish forger as approving of Jewish morality was likely to be comforting to a Jew who approved of Orpheus but was not likely to persuade a Gentile to become Jewish."¹⁵ All this is based on the supposition that any literature which was intended to persuade Gentiles to abandon their social customs and communities in order to become Jewish would have to be much more direct.

There remains the question of the expulsions of Jews from Rome in 139 BCE and 19 CE, allegedly for their proselytising activities. It is difficult to obtain much by way of good source material for the first expulsion. We learn about it from Valerius Maximus,(1.3,3) whose work survives only through two 5th. century Byzantine epitomators, and they relay his words in slightly different form. The crime is noted as "trying to transmit their sacred rites to the Romans"; private altars were therefore removed by the Roman authorities and they were expelled from the city. Goodman notes that this seems to be rather a strange crime. He doubts that, in the context of second century BCE Judaism any convert would have been encouraged to set up any altar of any kind. Rather two things may have been happening: first the Jews may have upset the authorities by simply bringing in a new cult without proper approval,

¹⁴ Tcherikover, V.A.: "Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered"
Eos 48 (1956) pp 169-193

¹⁵ Goodman p.80

while at the same time some Roman citizens, in admiration of Judaism, may have sought to set up private altars of their own - but this can hardly be construed as missionary activity by Judaism.

The later expulsion in 19 CE is recorded both by Tacitus and Josephus, but neither of them offer missionary activity as an explanation. The possibility of missionary activity is offered by Cassius Dio (in a fragment preserved by the seventh century Christian writer John of Antioch). Does this more likely reflect the situation in Dio's own day?

What of the general growth of the Jewish population which took place during this period? Goodman suggests that, had this been the result of a mass conversion, some writer would surely have recounted it with pride. Thus, while conversion may be a possible cause for such growth the more plausible reason may be the overpopulation of the home country, and Jewish opposition to abortion, infanticide and contraception - thus allowing the population to expand more quickly than that of its gentile neighbours.

It's important to note that Goodman recognises that Judaism DID have an interest in Gentile sympathisers during the first century. In this category he places the comment of Josephus that the Jews of Antioch had for many years been bringing into their cult practices many Greeks whom they had thus quite deliberately made 'in some way' a part of themselves.¹⁶ The intensity of such mission might vary from place to place and, Goodman suggests, the motive may have been political rather than theological - in order to win support from influential friends for their existence in a pagan environment.

One might be tempted to think that Josephus' comment serves to undermine much of Goodman's thesis. He argues rather that the very fact of such a partial mission, largely apologetic in form, has NEGATIVE implications for any concept of a universal proselytising mission. There is, for instance, no evidence that a pious sympathiser was expected to undergo circumcision and become Jewish - unlike the Christian expectation that Christian catechumens be baptised.

Later Judaism did proselytise, as did the Christian church. But "the missionary hero in search for converts to Judaism is a

¹⁶ Josephus: *Wars of the Jews* 7.45

phenomenon first approved by Jews well after the start of the Christian mission, not before it. There is no good reason to suppose that any Jew would have seen value in seeking apostle in the first century with an enthusiasm like that of the Christian apostles.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Goodman’s critique is important, and may not be ignored. He offers important caution against the danger of looking at non-Christian communities through Christian eyes and thus unconsciously Christianising their motives, not to mention filling in the considerable gaps in the evidence with Christian presuppositions. But there are surely some difficulties with his thesis:

1. His categories of mission are tightly drawn, and this very preciseness affects his results. If you are looking for something very specific in the ancient world, and will only accept as evidence that which unquestionably indicates it, then almost inevitably you will end up with “case not proven”. There is greater need to allow sufficiently both for the occasional nature of the sources to be examined and for the mixture of motive which one observes as part of any religious enterprise.

2. The case against Jewish proselytising activity depends considerably on offering a flexible interpretation for the word “Proselyte” in Matt. 23:15. Despite the attraction of reading it, within the context of Matthew 23, as a reference contained entirely within Judaism, we have no clear demonstration that it may be used in this way.

3. Josephus’ account of the behaviour of the Jewish community in Antioch may not point to a “Universal proselytising Mission”, but it would seem to be more significant than Goodman allows. If this kind of activity took place in any particular location it illustrates that there were at least some in the community who thought it desirable.

4. If we are thus allowed to read both Josephus and Matthew at face value then we may not need to see Cassius Dio’s reference to Jewish activity in Rome as being anachronistic.

¹⁷

Goodman p.90

5. It is hard to believe that the clear missionary activity of the early Christian communities emerged from the sort of vacuum which Goodman proposes. His own explanation for the start of Christian Mission is based partly on eschatological fervour, partly on the particular personality of Paul and partly on the disappointment of the early Christians over the delay of the Parousia, which resulted in their adopting an aggressive proselytising stance. While these factors may have played a part they prove less than satisfactory reasons for the missionary expansion of the church if such mission was heretofore an unknown phenomenon.

Despite Goodman, therefore, we may still think in terms of Jewish proselytising activity in the first century C.E. The next step on the journey may well be to discover whether converts to Judaism, or those on the edge of the Synagogue, were among the first to attach themselves to the new Christian communities, and what sort of converts they made.¹⁸

D.P.Ker.

¹⁸

An example of this discussion is introduced by Judith M. Lieu: "Do God-Fearers make Good Christians?" in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*. (Leiden 1994)