

# Jewish Mission in the Second Temple Period: From Circumcision to Education

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## 1. Introduction: Historical assumptions

Despite the fact that the Bible (like other contemporary religious literature) does not contain any teaching on mission, it is nevertheless present there *de facto*. Moreover, the historical assumptions of mission in the history of Israel are obvious. Before settling within Canaan, the chosen nation made a long geographical and historical journey. Having left the Arabian Peninsula, Semitic nomads settled for a long time in South Mesopotamia where they noticeably oppressed the Sumerians and with time created the dominant states of Assyria and Babylon.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet, before the formation of Semitic dominance within Mesopotamia, a part of the Arabian nomads migrated to economically developed Egypt. Exactly there, on the east side of the Nile Delta (Gen 46:34; 47:6) Semites became a distinct ethnic minority: Gen 45:10; Ex 1:9-10; Juvil 46:13. Their deliberate exodus from Egypt was not only a political but a cultural event. Thus, the Torah forbids returning to Egypt and stresses the special, non-economic foundation of the Jewish state in Palestine: cf. Deut 17:16 and 11:10 ff. Canaan became the promised land of Israel that placed the Jews at the crossroads of primary commercial and military routes of the Near East. One may regard the visit of the Queen of Yemen to Jerusalem with the goal “to prove [Solomon] with hard questions” (1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chr 9:1) as a diplomatic manoeuvre for the creation of commercial relations with a king who conducted joint maritime expeditions with the Phoenicians (2 Chr 9:21). From the point of view of mission, the strategic placement of Israel at the crossroads of the so-called Fertile Crescent looks like Divine design.

<sup>[1]</sup> For more details see *HAE* 1:316 ff.



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It was exactly this comfortable geographic location on the not very fertile land of the Near East that made the Jewish nation open to interaction with other cultures. The indications of the half-Semitic roots of the Jews in Eze 16:3.45 (Amorites and Hittites) are not in the least accidental—the Jews permanently lived in an environment filled with various nationalities, and so involuntarily had commerce not only with their traditions but (first of all) their languages as well. In this regard Josephus' words in *A.J.* 20.11.2 §264 are significant:

For our people do not favour those persons who have mastered the speech of many nations, and who adorn their style with smoothness of diction, because they consider that not only is such skill common to ordinary freemen but that even slaves who so choose may acquire it. But they give credit for wisdom to those alone who have an exact knowledge of the law and who are capable of interpreting the meaning of the Holy Scripture.

Other sources prove this report about knowledge of foreign languages, particularly Greek: Philo. *Mos.* 2.32; Acts 21:37-38; Orig. *Cels.* 2.34; T. Sota 15:8; T. Sanh. 8:1; T.J. Sheq. 5:1, 48d.15-17; TB. Sanh. 17a, end; Sota 49b, bar (“Why use the Syrian language in the land of Israel? Either use the holy tongue or Greek!”). Knowledge (even by slaves) of foreign languages, especially Greek—the language of the Septuagint and the New Testament—emphasizes not only the *utilitarian* attitude of the Jews towards knowledge, but also their

ability to have relations with surrounding nations. Greek (as the international language in the Near East<sup>[2]</sup>) was acquired through interacting with pagans.<sup>[3]</sup> In Roman society that lingua franca belonged to various strata: (1) soldiers (Apul. Met. 9.39; Luc. Asin. 44; Acts 21:37); (2) intellectuals (Cic. Rep. 1.36; Finib. 1.1; Senect. 3, 26; Rep. 1.22.36; Plut. Cato M. 2.4; Suet. Gram. 1); (3) the emperors (Suet. Jul. 82.2 – the last words; Aug. 89.1; Tib. 71; Claud. 42).<sup>[4]</sup> With time, as the Jews spread across the Mediterranean, relations began to be not merely a reality, but also more and more a necessity. This led to the appearance of rules for relations with the Gentiles, e.g., the tractate *Aboda Zara*.<sup>[5]</sup>

This inherent and historically cosmopolitan nature of the Jewish nation disposed it to mission as a mode of expanding the non-geographic borders of Israel.

## 2. Historical testimonies

A discussion of the existence of a clearly distinguishable mission<sup>[6]</sup> in the culture of Pharisaic (and already rising Rabbinical<sup>[7]</sup>) Judaism concerns certain aspects of mission, or even the principle of mission as such, rather than its fact. Its obscurity from the point of view of official historical sources can be explained primarily by the fact that Jewish “mission” (in the sense stressed in Matt 23:15) was *always* sectarian—Pharisaic or, beginning in the third decade CE, Judeo-Christian. Available references to the missionary activity of the Judaists or Christians are incidental in nature, e. g., in the philosophical and ethical tractates or

<sup>[2]</sup> Hengel 1989b:7–18.

<sup>[3]</sup> Rajak 1983:60: “The ultimate possibility of such immersion is what was surely implied by the teaching of Greek: a basic, everyday use of the language would not even have been taught, but simply acquired from the environment.”

<sup>[4]</sup> For more details see Rajak 1983:46–64.

<sup>[5]</sup> For more details see Wright 1992:239; Rajak 2001:340 and n. 18; Schnabel 2004:116–122.

<sup>[6]</sup> For more details see Rybinsky 1898; Gafni 1997:19–40; Collins 2000:262–264; Levinskaya 2000:49–73; Matthew 2001:11–16, 110–111, nn. 7–11; Goodman 2007:91–116.

satirical pamphlets of the era. To this one may add the obvious lack of discrimination among Greco-Roman authors concerning the religious problems of small nations in outlying districts of the Empire—cf. the identification of Christians with Jews in Suet. Claud. 25.4,<sup>[8]</sup>—and the deliberate disinclination to examine the affair concerning proselytism in Acts 18:14-16.<sup>[9]</sup> It was exactly this unscrupulousness that became pronouncedly apparent in the abundant anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic attacks of ancient authors.<sup>[10]</sup> Consequently, for example, Roman intellectuals associated the Sabbath with a day of fast (Suet. Aug. 76.2),<sup>[11]</sup> which clearly contradicted the prohibition of a Sabbath fast: Judith 8:6; Juvil. 50:13; M. Taan. 4:3. Besides the explicit mention of the missionary activity of the Jews and Judaic-Christians in particular in the record to Theophilus known as the Acts of the Apostles, implicit witnesses are found in various ancient authors over several centuries, for example: Horace (Serm. 1.4.139-143), Strabo (Jos. *Ant.* 14.7.2 §115-117), Epictetus (2.9.20), Juvenal (6:542-547), and Lucian (Peregr.; Alex.).<sup>[12]</sup> In addition to these testimonies about missionary activity, there is yet a greater quantity of testimonies about the multitude of proselytes in the lands of the Diaspora.<sup>[13]</sup>

Doubtless, in (or towards) the first century CE, the Judaic mission already exist-

ed as a *fact* of Jewish life, although it had not been confirmed by doctrine. The so-called Great Commission in Matt 28:19-20 (a variant in Mark 16:15) assumed that Jesus' disciples were already familiar with mission—cf. also Matt 10:5-16; Luke 9:2-6, 10:1-17; Matt 23:15. This conditional “mission” should be divided into passive—that is, the gradual settling of the Jews among pagans in the Mediterranean area—and active, which was realized by the Pharisees among proselytes and those Jews who were the followers of so-called “common Judaism.” Mission as “settling” was primarily economic in nature, i.e. grounded in the tendency of the Jews to consolidate their position in the pagan world and to be an important part of it.<sup>[14]</sup> In addition, it was partly political<sup>[15]</sup>—cf. Cic. Flac. 66, 67 (“to despise the multitude of Jews, which at times was most unruly in the assemblies, in defense of the interests of the republic, was an act of the greatest wisdom”); Philo. *Legat.* 185 (cf. Jos. *A.J.* 18.8.1 §259); Acts 17:5-8, 12; Jos. *A.J.* 20.2.3 §34 ff., etc. Basically, despite its supposed variety,<sup>[16]</sup> it was based on two methods: (1) lifestyle (religion and *kashrut*), (2) marriage.

Esther is a classic example of influence through marriage; it is especially obvious in Esth 5:1 in LXX; cf. also Herod the Great's being in love in Jos. *A.J.* 15.9.3 §319-322. Josephus lists occurrences of *forced* circumcisions as a necessary require-

<sup>[7]</sup> Rajak 2001:337: “Rabbinic Judaism is that form of religion which took shape after the failure of the first revolt against Rome and the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., and in some measure in response to those events; its foundations, however, had been earlier laid by the Pharisees.”

<sup>[8]</sup> For an analysis of this report see Levinskaya 2000:289–301; Cappelletti 2006:74–81; Mason 2009:310–312.

<sup>[9]</sup> For a detailed analysis of this story see Sherwin-White 1963:99–119.

<sup>[10]</sup> For more details see Lurie 1923.

<sup>[11]</sup> For more details see Schafer 1997:89–90.

<sup>[12]</sup> Concerning the trustworthiness of sources see Smith 1999:208.

<sup>[13]</sup> For numerous testimonies see Levinskaya 2000:74 ff.

<sup>[14]</sup> For a review of the Jews' economic progress among other nations see Lurie 1923:34–72.

<sup>[15]</sup> Hengel 1974:1.307 (“the Jewish mission had its political side”); Schnabel 2004:126 (“The conversion of Gentiles to Judaism always had political implications, as the Jewish nation and the Jewish faith were intimately linked”); cf. Lurie 1923:72–111.

<sup>[16]</sup> Schnabel 2004:126.

ment for marriage: Jos. *A.J.* 20.7.1 §139; 20.8.3 §143. The fact that Nero's petty tyranny and his persecutions did not harm the Jews, as it had done previously (Suet. Claud. 25.4; Jos. *A.J.* 18.3.5 §84; Tac. Ann. 2.85; Dio 57.18.5a; 60.6.6), could be explained by Poppaea's influence, who was secretly a Jewess.<sup>[17]</sup> (Nero's mythical proselytism is mentioned in TB. Git. 56a.) Likewise, Timothy's faith and education (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15) were the result of female influence in his family, in which the man was a Hellene (Acts 16:1) who, very likely, did not permit the circumcision of his son (cf. Acts 16:3).<sup>[18]</sup>

### 3. Essence of mission

The Jews never thought of pagans as objects of missionary activity, much less of sending trained and educated specialists to them with the goal of their conversion and the creation of national varieties of Judaism. Nevertheless, the permanent presence of the Jews among the other nations of the Mediterranean led to the inevitable conversion of their neighbors to Judaism (or *towards* Judaism). This phenomenon is witnessed by the authors of various epochs and religious groups; one can hardly imagine that Luke and Josephus would consciously distort evidence, which could so easily be refuted—Acts 17:4, 12, 34; 18:8 and Jos. *C. Ap.* 2.11 §123; 2.40 §282-284; *A.J.* 14.7.2 §114-118 (with the reference to Strabo). Moreover, these testimonies are proved by ancient authors.

Nevertheless, the existence of mission activity as the practice of the deliberate conversion of pagans to Judaism can be traced, first of all, in the accusation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:15, which also might have characterized the activity of religious fanatics in the fourth decade of the first century CE, as well as the situation in the tenth.<sup>[19]</sup> When, according to Justin (*Trypho* 17:1), who describes the situation *before* the destruction of the Second Temple,<sup>[20]</sup> the leaders of post-war Israel were seriously alarmed by the activity of Christians:

when you knew that He had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, as the prophets foretold He would, you not only did not repent of the wickedness, which you had committed, but at that time you selected and sent out from Jerusalem chosen men through all the land to tell that the godless heresy of the Christians had sprung up, and to publish those things which all they who knew us not speak against us.

Missiology (i.e., the doctrine of mission) in its rudimentary form appeared only in the works of the apostle Paul. Being Gamaliel's pupil, and as a follower of the house of Hillel, he was open to the idea of a mission to Gentiles.<sup>[21]</sup> The expression *παρὰ τοὺς πόδας* Gamaliel in Paul's speech before his compatriots, reflects the normal rabbinic tradition of education, cf. Acts 22:3 and *M. Avot* 1:4. In comparison with the similar expression in Luke 10:39,

<sup>[17]</sup> On Poppaea see Smallwood 1981:217, n. 48; 278, n. 79.

<sup>[18]</sup> On Timothy see Cohen 1999b:363–377; Levinskaya 2000:41–48.

<sup>[19]</sup> Liebeschuetz 2001:245: "A zeal for converts has always been a feature of newly formed sects rather than of established religions" (cf. *ἐξαποστειλῶ* in Acts 22:21); nevertheless, Liebeschuetz 2001:245, n. 69: "It is more likely that the author

means that the Pharisees travelled not only to spread rabbinic Judaism but also, sometimes at least, to win converts among gentiles." Blidstein (1996:531) regards the command in *ARN* A.12 to love mankind and draw them near the Torah "as an 'explicit ... rabbinic text' which encourages a proselytizing mission."

<sup>[20]</sup> For an analysis of this record see Katz 1984.

<sup>[21]</sup> Rybinsky 1898:13.

(πρὸς τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου), this phrase can evidence the spiritual proximity of the disciple to his teacher, which Paul most likely desired to emphasize, cf. also such passages as Ruth 3:4; Luke 7:38; 8:35; Jas 2:3. It is not surprising that the pupil of Gamaliel (i.e., Hillel himself) opened new horizons of Jewish mission. Indeed, Hillel's activity was disposed to openness to Gentiles. Thus, tradition states: "Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world, but Hillel's gentleness brought us under the wings of the Shekinah" (TB. Shab. 31a; also ARN A.15; B.29); later, the conversion of a pagan takes on sacral status ("he who brings a Gentile near [to God] is as though he created him" (Ber. r. 39.14 [on 12:5]). Such a pronouncement, according to the witness of ARN A.3, top, is in accordance also with the respective approaches to pupils:

For the school of Shammai says: one ought to teach only him who is talented and meek and of distinguished ancestry and rich. But the school of Hillel says: one ought to teach every man, for there were many sinners in Israel who were drawn to the study of Torah, and from them descended righteous, pious, and worthy folk.

(Cf. the different lecturers for different levels of listeners in Aul. Gell. 20.5.1-5 and Philo QG 4.102: "For it is necessary that teaching should be more abundant for the intelligent man, and less for the foolish man for the sake of of the fine equality of proportion.") Since education was considered a latent and permanent form of mission, the aforementioned approaches can surely be applied to their conceptions of

mission as well. The call to bring people to the Torah ("under the wings of the Shekinah") in M. Avot 1:12 (ARN A.12; B.26) relates both to education and conversion concurrently.<sup>[22]</sup> To this tendency one can attribute also the appearance of the Septuagint and other religious texts in Greek.<sup>[23]</sup>

If one interprets mission etymologically, it must be noted that the Latin *missio* means "traveling assignment" or "embassy" and its semantic value is close or identical to the Greek ἀποστέλλω, cf. Exod 4:13; Judg 6:14; John 20:21; Acts 26:17; Rev 5:6; etc. That being the case, Ezra would have been regarded as the first Jewish missionary (although sent not outside of, but within a culture). After him Hillel came from Babylon to Jerusalem with the same mission—to re-establish the knowledge of the Torah (and Jewish culture as a whole) (TB. Suk. 20a, end; it was thought earlier that Hillel had come to Jerusalem in order to find the answers to three previously insoluble questions—T. Neg. 1:16; T.J. Pes. 6:1, 33a). Their educational activity within Israel replaced the denunciatory activity of the prophets, and was directed toward the preservation of the elect nation for God in the time of His absence.<sup>[24]</sup> However, they were merely the continuation of Moses through whom the Torah had been given. Therefore, it is not surprising that the use of the same verb *alah* (אלה) in Exod 19:3 and Ezra 7:6 Tosefta (Sanh. 4:7) with the help of *qal va-homer* puts Ezra on a par with Moses: as Moses *went up* on Sinai to receive the Torah, so Ezra *went up* from Babylon to Jerusalem to re-establish the

<sup>[22]</sup> For more details see Blidstein 1996.

<sup>[23]</sup> Goodman 2007:96; for a discussion of religious propaganda as mission see Smith 1999:200 ff.

<sup>[24]</sup> Cf. McGaughey 1975:235 on the parable of the talents: "Jesus' parable, which is constructed around

this saying, is levelled against the rabbinic response to the spiritual crisis alluded to in the saying, viz., that Israel's mission is to guard the traditions of the fathers during Yahweh's absence."

Torah. This is one more witness to the fact that in the Second Temple period education was regarded as mission, which is evident at least in Paul's ministry (e.g., Acts 17:11; 1 Tim. 4:16).<sup>[25]</sup>

Therefore, one may conclude that Jewish mission of the Second Temple period was both the conversion to Judaism (heathens) and the return to Judaism (Jews).

#### 4. Circumcision as a tool of mission

This already completely distinguishes rabbinic mission from the forced conversion to Judaism practiced by the Hasmoneans in the regions of Palestine that they conquered: Jos. *Ant.* 13.10.1 §257; 13.11.3 §318-319.<sup>[26]</sup> It was also practiced notably later than the Hasmonean period: Jos. *Vita* 23 §113; cf. the incident of a captured Roman who decided to be circumcised in order to save his life—Jos. *BJ.* 2.17.10 §454.<sup>[27]</sup> Thanks precisely to the forcible circumcision of the population of Edom when it was conquered (Jos. *Ant.* 13.10.1 §257), Herod was able in his time to lay claim to the Jewish throne, contrary to the prohibition of Deut 17:15.<sup>[28]</sup> A report in Jos. *AJ.* 14.15.2 §403 is pertinent here:

But Antigonus, in answer to Herod's proclamation, told Silo and the Roman troops that it would be contrary to their own notion of right if they gave the kingship to Herod who was a commoner and an Idumean, that is, a half-Jew, when they ought to offer it to those who were of the (royal) family, as was their custom.

Later, the Jews obligingly allowed Herod's heir<sup>[29]</sup> to read a scroll of the Torah as

though he were a real Jew: M. Sota 7:8; T. Sota 7:16; TB. Sota 41a-b. (Precisely this, the rabbis thought, was the reason for divine judgment on Jerusalem.) The nominal ground for this would only have been his circumcision. Perhaps from that time on the Palestinian Jews became more careful in the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism, at any rate, with regard to compliance in the external indicators of being a Jew—e.g., Sabbath keeping: "A heathen who keeps a day of rest, deserves death" (TB. Sanh. 58b, end, based on Gen 8:22). In *Ber. r.* 39.14 [on 12:5] the conversion of Gentiles by Abraham is not even discussed in connection with circumcision. In my view, it was exactly this historical precedent with Herod and his heirs' accession to the throne that was the probable cause of the advice given to the Adiabene king Izates to refrain from circumcision as a requisite ceremony for conversion to Judaism (Jos. *AJ.* 20.2.4 §41-42; the advice was given by a certain merchant, Ananias). In the list of righteous deeds of this royal house in TB. *Nid.* 17a there is no circumcision ("And the people of the house of Monobaz did three things, and on account of these they were honorably mentioned"); however, *Ber. r.* 46.10 [on 17:11] mentions the synchronous circumcisions of Monobaz and Izates. On the other hand, the general laxity with regard to outward Jewish holiness that was widespread in the Diaspora (e. g., T. AZ 1:1; 1:3; etc.), also could have been the reason behind the merchant's advice to the king, whose mother Helene worried about him so much (Jos. *AJ.* 20.2.4 §39). Here Petronius' remark in fr. 37 (// Stern 195) is sig-

<sup>[25]</sup> Cf. Penner 1999:27: "Education had a clearly explicit missionary character, which was its attendant feature from the beginning."

<sup>[26]</sup> For more details see Rybinsky 1898:13–14.

<sup>[27]</sup> This explains why our sources do not mention

the genuine conversion of proselytes to God—see Smith 1999:207.

<sup>[28]</sup> For more details on Herod's Jewishness see Cohen 1999b:13–24.

<sup>[29]</sup> Smith 1999:237: "probably Agrippa I."

nificant enough: a Jew who had no circumcision has to immigrate to a Greek town because of pressure from his own people. Moreover, long before it was known that, “Phoenicians who traffic with Hellas cease to imitate the Egyptians in this matter and do not circumcise their children” (Hdt. 2.104.4). Therefore, the term “uncircumcised Israelites” in *M. Ned.* 3:11, can quite well be applied to the Jews of the Diaspora.<sup>[30]</sup> The widespread non-observance of the Torah by the Jews themselves is witnessed by the remark in Acts 15:10, which was provoked by a discussion about the necessity of circumcision for proselytes.

This lengthy controversy between the orthodox and liberals of the first century CE can be seen as the grounds for the conflict between the apostle Paul and his unnamed opponents in the Epistle to the Galatians. The founder of the churches in Galatia chose to employ exactly this thesis regarding the non-obligatory nature of circumcision in order to counter the adversaries who threatened his communities (later same situation took place in Corinth). These were most likely emissaries of the Jerusalem community, who tried to bring neophytes into conformity to Christ in every respect, including circumcision, as sign of induction into the covenant, cf. Gal 2:4 and 12; from Acts 21:20-24 it is obvious that members of Jerusalem community, like their leader James, still remain in the framework of *Temple* Judaism. 1 Mac. 1:15 reflects the point of view of a legalistic branch of Judaism, according to which it was “lawless sons” who instituted uncircumcision.<sup>[31]</sup> In *As. Mos.* 8:1-3 it sounds quite apocalyptic:

And there will come upon them punishment and wrath such as has never happened to them from the creation till that time when he stirs up against them a king of the kings of the earth who, having supreme authority, will crucify those who confess their circumcision. Even those who deny it, he will torture and hand them over to prison in chains. And their wives will be given to the gods of the nations and their young sons will be cut by physicians to bring forward their foreskin.

The command in Gen 17:11 reflects a phenomenon (which is worthy of a separate study) of attaching a new, spiritual sense to existing traditions. Since ancient times in the Near East<sup>[32]</sup> Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Syrians practiced circumcision, which is noted more than once: Hdt. 2.104.2-3; Strabo 17.2.5; Diod. Sic. 1.28.3; 1.55.5; Eus. PE 1.10.33, 44. According to Philo *QG* 3.48: “but also the Egyptians, Arabs and Ethiopians and nearly all those who inhabit the southern region near the Torrid Zone are circumcised.” First and foremost it was practiced for medical purposes; thus, according to *Jos. C. Ap.* 2.13 §143, even such an ardent critic of the Jews as Apion resorted to such an extreme measure, unless, of course, the Jewish apologist’s remark was a literary device. (Therefore, the scene in *Ber. r.* 93.8 [on 45:2 ff] deserves no credit: “said he: ‘I am Joseph your brother,’ but they did not believe him until he uncovered himself and showed that he was circumcised.”) But in the Torah circumcision takes on a particular, sacral character, and after some time<sup>[33]</sup> becomes

<sup>[30]</sup> For more details see Smallwood 1981:120–143 (“The Diaspora and Jewish religious liberty”); Bickerman 1988:237–256; Rajak 2001:335–346, esp. p. 407 (“...whose Judaism was quite independent at this time, and probably very different in character”).

<sup>[31]</sup> On the importance of circumcision for Zealots see Hengel 1989a:197–199.

<sup>[32]</sup> For more details see Sasson 1966.

<sup>[33]</sup> Cohen 1999b:39: “during the Maccabean period.”

the sign of self-definition.<sup>[34]</sup> Probably, already in the apostle Paul's time, many Jews underwent the operation to reverse their circumcision that is witnessed by  $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\theta\omega$  in 1 Cor 7:18. Undoubtedly, it was a way to avoid gibes in bathhouses where the Jews, even rabbis, became frequent visitors: M. AZ 3:4; T. *Ber.* 2:20; T.J. *Sanh.* 7:19, 25d.21-33; TB. *Shab.* 40b; Vaik. r. 34.3 [on 25:25]; etc. (The avoidance of the baths by James *the Just* [Eus. HE 2.23.4-5] could be explained by his zeal for circumcision.) Those Jews "had to be circumcised" anew (T. *Shab.* 15:9; the only objection against the reverse operation was the following: "because it is dangerous"); otherwise they, alongside with the other "appended" categories of sinners in T. *Sanh.* 12:9, would not inherit the salvation promised in M. *Sanh.* 10:1. Tacitus' criticism in Hist. 5.5.2: "They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples," characterizes this custom as the central one from the point of view of the Gentiles.

The most spiritual and allegorical (even in comparison with Paul's brief remarks) interpretation of circumcision was given by the Alexandrian exegete Philo in *Spec.* 1.8-9:

To these [reasons for circumcision] I would add that I consider circumcision to be a symbol of two things necessary to our wellbeing. One is the excision of pleasures, which bewitch the mind. For since among the love-lures of pleasure the palm is held by the mating of man and woman, the legislators thought good to dock the organ which ministers to such intercourse, thus making circumcision the figure of the excision of excessive and superfluous pleasure, not only of one pleasure, but of all

the other pleasures signified by one, and that the most imperious. The other reason is that a man should know himself and banish from the soul the grievous malady of conceit.

Accordingly, the main stream of Second Temple Judaism neither rejects nor even calls into question the necessity and importance of circumcision to their *self-identity*.<sup>[35]</sup>

## 5. The mission of the Pharisees

However, it should be noted that circumcision, as such, was not at all considered to be the all-encompassing symbol or purpose of mission, which has rather been identified with the synagogue and its traditions (reading the Torah and Prophets, and prayer) than a certain tradition of shedding of blood. In the well-known history of the development of Jewish mission, the following outline for involving of pagans in *qagal* is observed: circumcision (or *miqvah*) – synagogue – education. Here it is necessary to mention several notable aspects in the development of Judaic mission in the Second Temple period:

1) the Jews never built buildings for the religious functions of converted nations;

2) in the Diaspora the synagogue (as a room or a building) was designed for the Jews who wanted to gather in their own quarters for reading and prayer and was the result of Jewish settlement outside of Palestine;

3) the synagogue had no missionaries who could be sent from Jerusalem to the Diaspora for the express purpose of establishing communities of believers from the local nations;

<sup>[34]</sup> For discussions see Cohen 1999b:39–49; Levinskaya 2000:25–48.

<sup>[35]</sup> For more details see Collins 2001:211–235; cf.,

however, Cohen 1999b:49: "From the Jewish side circumcision was not a useful marker of Jewishness."



4) if pagans desired to attend the synagogue, they were required first to become proselytes, i.e., as it were, “half-Jews”;

5) local congregations in the Diaspora did not have their own rabbis, and therefore could not engage in the religious education of Gentiles.

This becomes obvious enough from the following points: (1) the Pharisees and scribes *come down from* Jerusalem (Mark 3:22; 7:1; Matt 15:1); (2) the guests were invited to preach after *reading* the Torah and Prophets (Acts 13:15) – the ἀρχισυνάγωγοι themselves could probably read, but they were not educated enough to preach.

Accordingly, one should distinguish the concept of a general Jewish passive mission from the active mission of religious sects, such as the Pharisees. The difference can be seen in the change from public to personal mission, i.e., from preaching on the town square (within Palestine) to preaching inside a house (within the Diaspora).<sup>[36]</sup> The public reading and interpretation of the Torah in Neh 8:8 is principally different from home preaching in Acts 10:24 ff. It should be noted that, despite even their strongest desires, the Jews of the Diaspora (mainly merchants and financiers) could not offer consistent and professional education to their pagan neighbors. Their leaders (ἀρχισυνάγωγοι) could not take the place of professional sages, such as Saul of Tarsus.<sup>[37]</sup> Justin’s mention in Trypho 137 of ἀρχισυνάγωγοι as those teaching the community in the synagogue is not at all meant to highlight their function as teachers—

they are presented as the leaders of the service: “pour no ridicule on the Son of God; obey not the Pharisaic teachers, and scoff not at the King of Israel, as the ἀρχισυνάγωγοι teach you to do after your prayers.”<sup>[38]</sup> Therefore, all that pagans could do to assimilate to God’s people consisted in the acceptance of a lifestyle, part of which was circumcision. A similar situation developed also in the Judaic-Christian community of Jerusalem under the provincial leadership of James for whom, it seems, circumcision was more important than education (cf. the mention of circumcision equated with Jewish identity in Acts 21:20-24; Gal 2:12 and the total lack of educational features in the halakhic Epistle of James). It is noteworthy that a *baraita* about the rules for conversion among proselytes in TB. Yev. 47a-b<sup>[39]</sup> does not mention education either

But the Pharisees, as those who had “separated themselves from the pagans for the sake of the Torah” according to Neh 10:28, wielded an effective means of mission: their knowledge of the sacred texts. It is precisely they who are shown in Trypho 137 to be “mentors” (the dialogue itself took place within the Diaspora). Later, the rabbis fixed this idealized image in M. *Yoma* 7:1 and *Sotah* 7:7, where the Torah scroll is handed for the reading from *khazan* to the chief of the synagogue and further to the high priest. In the first century CE knowledge of the Holy Scripture came to be the distinctive sign of Jewish (primarily Pharisaic and Christian) culture, which is testified by various texts: Col 4:6 (cf. M. *Avot* 2:14: “Be constant in teaching of the

<sup>[36]</sup> Crossan 1992:139; concerning home synagogues see Feldman 1996:582; Levine 2005:23.

<sup>[37]</sup> Concerning ἀρχισυνάγωγοι see *TDNT* 7:844–847 [Schrage]; Schürer 2:433–436; Feldman 1996:588–592; Levinskaya 2000:308; Rajak 2001:393–419; Levine 2005:415–427; Lightstone 2006:79–80.

<sup>[38]</sup> Cf. Rajak 2001:401: “Justin, a Samaritan by origin, was certainly well-informed about Judaism; but an intensely polemical passage of this kind is no proof that the *archisynagogoi* were either actual teachers or leaders of prayer.”

<sup>[39]</sup> For more details see Cohen 1999b:198 ff.

Torah. And know what to reply to an Epicurean"); 1 Pet 3:15; Jos. *C. Ap.* 2.19 §178; *Vita* 2 §9; TB. *Git.* 58a; *Bekh.* 8b.

The advanced education of the Pharisees was especially effective for mission among wealthy Romans, like the "excellent Theophilus" (κράτιστε Θεόφιλε) in Luke 1:3, who took a great interest in geography and literature. The appearance of new, in most cases eastern, cults in Rome was conditioned also by the curiosity of its citizens, but the flourishing of some of them (especially Egyptian<sup>[40]</sup>) in Italy was also provoked by the curiosity of townsmen. Furthermore, against the background of Roman persecution of the (circumcised) Jews after the defeat of their rebellions in 70 and 135 CE, which are mentioned in various sources (Jos. *B.J.* 7.6.6 §218; Suet. *Dom.* 12.2; Dio 65.7.2), circumcision had to yield its place to education. This could be the reason for the growth in the number of Pharisees and their adepts after the destruction of the Second Temple (T. *Sota* 15:11; TB. *BB* 60b). (The increase in the number of proselytes to Judaism is obvious from archaeological excavations and inscriptions.<sup>[41]</sup>) In that case it may be said that the Pharisees, who *separated* themselves *from* the nations *to* the Torah in the fifth century BCE, began to *draw* them *to* it by the first century CE.

Moreover, education as a form of mission helped to actualize knowledge of the Torah, which was learned by heart beginning from childhood. According to ARN B.35, top., memorizing the Torah since childhood made it indelible:

He who studies the Torah in his youth, to what may he be compared? To plaster, which is spread on stone. Even though all

the rains fall, they do not harm it. He who studies the Torah in his old age, to what may he be compared? To plaster, which is spread on bricks. When a drop of water falls on it, it dissolves and runs.

In the Jewish mentality, memory alongside inspiration serves as an important tool in work and career advancement. Philo *Post.* 151 states: "virtue... comes again to the well to draw water, to the ever-flowing wisdom of God, that her pupil may, by means of memory, fix firmly what was learned." In *Jub.* 32:25 retentive memory is seen to be a divine promise: "I will cause you to remember everything" (cf. John 14:26). Literal memory inhered to such sages as rabbi Meir: "It once happened that rabbi Meir visited Asia Minor, and finding there no Scroll of Esther, he read it from memory and wrote it" (Ber. r. 36.8 [on 9:26], end); the variants of this report are noteworthy: TB. *Meg.* 18b ("he wrote one out by heart"); T. *Meg.* 2:5 ("he did not find there a scroll of Esther written in Hebrew"). This case was cited as a precedent and counter-evidence against the opinion that it is not necessary to remember the Torah by rote. (A statement in M. *Avot* 3:8[9] is said in his name: "whosoever forgets one word of his Mishnah, Scripture holds him to account as though he had forfeited his life.") But good memory was especially necessary for the study of the Oral Torah.<sup>[42]</sup> TB. *Hag.* 9b is favorable to a pupil with a phenomenal memory: "he that repeated his chapter a hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeated it a hundred and one times"; cf. the unpretentious number in TB. *Er.* 54b. In Philo *st.* VA 1.7 "he showed great strength of memory and power of application... and he knew the principles of Pythagoras just as birds know what they learn from men"; cf. *Apul.* *Apol.* 69, a liar should also have good

[40] For more details see Swetnam-Burland 2007.

[41] Feldman 1996:316.

[42] Safari 1987:75–77.

memory. According to the poet Afranius: “Wisdom is the daughter of Experience and Memory” (Aul. Gel. 13.8.3).

It was the Pharisees (as a movement of lay-people<sup>[43]</sup>) who had a reputation as interpreters of the law and a leading sect: cf. Acts 23:6; Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5 and Jos. *BJ.* 1.5.2-3 §110; 2.8.14 §162; *A.J.* 17.2.4 §41; *Vita* 38 §191. Therefore, they could realize themselves in this form of mission more than other groups within Judaism.

## 6. Conclusion: A synthesis of two forms

In the course of a few centuries Jewish mission underwent a complicated transformation and began to reflect common religious changes. Yet in the Babylonian captivity Judaism assimilated a new form of worship to God in the context of the absence of the Temple and its ceremonies. Later on, this form began to be known as the synagogue and spread over the whole Diaspora. The conceptual expression “synagogue” (beginning with “synagogue of scribes” in 1Mac. 7:12) was so often used in the Judaic lexicon that even the apostle James uses it along with the customary New Testament word “ecclesia”—cf. Jas 2:2 and 5:14. This new worship of God did not require blood sacrifices and other rituals and spread easily far away from the Temple and Eretz-Israel. Accordingly, the traditional notion of a representative form of Judaism, i.e., what this religion (or any other) reveals to surrounding nations, also changed. Josephus Flavius’ works are a significant example; this former insurgent found his place in the Roman elite and represented Judaism in a form acceptable to his readers.<sup>[44]</sup> Thus, he calls the known sects of Israel

“philosophical schools” (Jos. *BJ.* 2.8.2 §119) and even adapts the meaning of circumcision (Jos. *A.J.* 20.2.4 §41-42). The apostle Paul in his mission within the Diaspora followed this tradition of simplifying Judaism, which was confirmed at an apostolic council (Acts 15). In this culture the importance of education and knowledge of the Torah for Jewish self-identification (and even salvation) never had been in doubt, cf. 1 Tim 4:16; John 7:49 and *M. Avot* 2:5; *T. Ber.* 6[7]:18.

In this way, Judaic mission obtained a form that was understandable and acceptable for a Greco-Roman audience, especially its elite. It is known that Palestinian emissaries acquired many followers precisely from among the highest strata of society: cf. Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1; 9:15; 13:7, 12, 50; 17:4, 12, 18 and Jos. *A.J.* 20.2.3 §34 ff; *T. Sota* 15:8 (= *TB. Sota* 49b); *Ber. r.* 11:4 [on 2:2] (“Our Teacher made a meal for Antoninus on the Sabbath”); 75.5 [на 32:5]; etc. The Jewish sages’ discussions with Roman matrons are a usual topic in rabbinic literature: *T. Shev.* 3:6; *Ber. r.* 1.9 [on 1:1]; 11.6 [on 2:3]; etc. (At the same time, Christianity, as a new religion had many representatives from the lower strata, cf. 1 Pet 4:15 and *Tac. Ann.* 15.44.) Therefore, in the Diaspora Judaism was represented not by priests of the Temple but by teachers of the various sects. For them, education was a more important feature of Judaism than circumcision.

Nevertheless, religious education as a form of mission could not abolish the mystery of ritual in principle. Examination of the Jews on circumcision, which was practiced by the Romans even after destruction of the Temple, says something about the

<sup>[43]</sup> Finkelstein 1962:75; Jeremias 1969:266; Jeremias 1971:143; Schafer 1991:138 (“Volkspartai”); Steinsaltz, Funkenstein 1997:41–42, 45–46.

<sup>[44]</sup> Concerning Josephus see Meeks 1967:131; Ben Zeev 1998:5–6, 292–293

continuity of this practice; a very noteworthy example is mentioned in Suet. Dom. 12.2: “a man ninety years old was examined before the procurator and a very crowded court, to see whether he was circumcised.”<sup>[45]</sup> Therefore, both forms of initiation retained their meaning for mission; a discussion in the Epistle to the Galatians is a significant example. Different representatives of Judaism in the Diaspora made one or another form their own. A synthesis of both forms is marked in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The so-called “Great Commission” in Matt 28:19-20 harmonizes both methods: a sacral act (baptizing instead of circumcision) and education. Be that as it may, authors of various nationalities and beliefs have recorded the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire: John

11:51-52 (Jerusalem and the Diaspora, between 30 and 90 CE); Tac. Ann. 15.44 (Rome, 60 CE); Plin. Ep. 10.96-97 (Bithynia, between 103 and 105 CE); Acts 18:2 and Suet. Claud. 25.4 (Rome, 49/50 CE); possibly, Tac. Ann. 13.32 (Rome, the second half of 50 CE).<sup>[46]</sup> The availability of religious education for the pagans is indirectly visible in the following remarks of the orthodox sages: “A heathen who studies the Torah deserves death” (TB. Sanh. 59a on the ground of Deut 33:4) and “The teachings of the Torah are not to be transmitted to an idolater” (TB. Hag. 13a on the ground of Ps 147:8-9). These remarks could reflect the intense and perceptible spread of Christian education where Judaic missionaries had formerly worked.

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<sup>[45]</sup> For more details see Smallwood 1981:376–385; Cohen 1999b:42–43.

<sup>[46]</sup> For a review of events in Rome see in Mason 2009:308–313.

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