

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 8th June 2025: Pentecost Sunday
Jewish Views of Gentiles at the Time of Jesus:
(4) Conversion to Judaism

The final part of Dr Ben Shahar's essay on Jewish views of Gentiles at the time of Christ (1) deals with how Gentiles who so wished were integrated into Judaism. He notes that, historically, non-Israelite women had been accepted into their Jewish husband's family and faith without any apparent process of conversion. Thus Ruth, the Moabite's, simple and celebrated statement (Ruth 1.16): "*your people shall be my people and your God my God*". How men who wished to become part of the Jewish community were accepted is less clear. Much later, during the period of the Hasmonean kings (137 B.C. – 37 B.C.), some Gentiles were forcibly converted, though this was not to proselytise them but rather to achieve religious homogeneity throughout the kingdom of Judea.

By the time of Jesus there are a number of reports of Gentiles from various parts of the Roman Empire voluntarily expressing interest in the Jewish religion and even considered conversion to it. Queen Helena of Adiabene [northern Mesopotamia] converted to Judaism about 30 A.D, and strictly observed the Jewish laws. Also, Gentile princes who wished to marry into the Herodian family underwent conversion.

In addition there were many Gentiles, attracted by the Jewish single, indivisible God, who partially accepted the Jewish faith. One notable example appears to have been Petronius, Roman Governor of Syria. The Emperor Caligula (37-41 A.D.) had ordered Petronius to convert the Temple at Jerusalem into an imperial shrine containing an enormous statue of the Emperor. Petronius played for time, at least in part [it is thought] because he agreed with the fundamentals of the Jewish faith. At real risk to himself from Caligula, he managed to delay long enough until the Emperor was assassinated.

More generally, the Jewish historian Josephus (37-100 A.D.) reflected the influence of Judaism and the Jewish God when writing: "*there is not one city of the Greeks, nor a single barbarian nation, where the custom of the seventh day, on which we rest, has not permeated and where our fasts and lighting lamps and many of our prohibitions with regard to food have not been observed*".

Dr Ben Shahar's essay concludes that Jewish views of Gentiles changed over time and varied across a spectrum from extremely positive to highly hostile, with many views in between these two extremes existing throughout. He ends with what I believe is an interesting observation for us Christians: *"..it is important to remember that the New Testament texts that reflect the Jewish-Gentile relationships were part of a complex attempt at self-definition...therefore one must read the New Testament bearing in mind the full complexity of how Jews evaluated Gentiles and how Gentiles evaluated Jews"*.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this complexity more apparent than in St Paul's epistles. Paul, the Pharisee, spent much time on the subject. He may have considered that Jewish believers in Jesus should keep the law, while for Gentile believers it was unnecessary. A good example is in a long passage in Romans 2:12-3.31. which concludes with the words: *"For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."*

(1) *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* Second edition 2017, Levine & Brettler.

Stephen S.