

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

Sunday 25th May 2025: Sixth Sunday of Easter
Jewish Views of Gentiles at the Time of Jesus:
(2) Social contacts and prohibited relationships

In last week's article we saw how, at the time of Jesus, there was neither full separation nor full integration of Jews and Gentiles. The exigencies of life meant that Jews and Gentiles coexisted and had dealings (not just economic) with each other. Dr Ben Shahar's essay upon which my articles are based (1) tells us that the Jewish dietary laws, which were fully in place and widely observed at the time of Jesus, were, however, a severe impediment to social relationships between Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, the commitment to dietary laws became the hallmark of Jewish separatism among many Jewish groups. So, for example, in the Book of Daniel, written in the 2nd century B.C. and set in the 6th century B.C. during the Babylonian exile, it is recounted that Daniel and 3 other young Israelites abstained from eating 'impure' food provided for them by King Nebuchadnezzar's eunuch. Later, both Greeks and Romans considered the Jewish people to be different since they would not share meals with Gentiles.

Perhaps even more significant than the impediments to social contacts, intermarriage with Gentiles had become prohibited to Jews. Intermarriage has an interesting history. The Book of Deuteronomy (7: 3-4), reflecting the time when Moses addressed his people prior to their entry into the Promised Land, lists 7 gentile nations and continues: *"You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods"*. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see this as a prohibition on intermarriage with all Gentiles. Moses himself and Joseph, son of Jacob, did not have Israelite wives. The context of such intermarriage was probably that the wives would adopt the religious practices of their husbands. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth, a Moabite, left her people to marry an Israelite, fully accepting the Israelites and their God. However, by the 4th-1st centuries B.C., the separatist approach, which forbade marriages outside the Jewish community, had become entrenched. Around the time of Jesus, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, wrote that the prohibition in Deuteronomy on intermarriage with the 7 Gentile nations of Canaan extended to all Gentiles (2).

In reality, at the time of Jesus the social contacts of the ordinary Jewish people were naturally much more confined than those who moved in higher Greco-Roman society. For the ordinary people, the question of intermarriage did not really arise. As for those in higher society, by and large they refrained from marrying Gentiles. Herod the Great stopped his sister, Salome, from marrying Sylleus who refused to adopt Jewish practices. An interesting person is Berenice, daughter of Herod Agrippa, born in 28 A.D. She married Polemon, king of Cilicia, but only on condition that he convert to Judaism. The marriage did not last and Berenice subsequently became the lover of the Roman, Titus, the general responsible for the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. Titus, probably on his accession as Emperor in 79 A.D. refused to marry her and sent her away, fearful of the Romans' reaction to a member of a foreign royal family.

A more relevant example of the prohibition on intermarriage not being absolute is that the Acts of the Apostles (16:1) informs us that Timothy was *"the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek."*

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

(2) De Specialibus Legibus

Stephen S.