Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism

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Members of a community who accept that suitable outsiders should be welcomed into their society do not imply by their acceptance that a positive search for such newcomers is appropriate. The notion of a proselyte was well established in Judaism long before the end of the Second Temple era, but the impetus for conversion was expected to come from the worthy gentile concerned, not from the Jews whom he or she wished to join. Jews were often eager to change the general attitudes of gentiles both to God and to each other; they liked non-Jews to admire and respect Jewish customs; they encouraged the spread of monotheism; and they speculated with some interest on the eventual status of gentiles in the last days. But a mission to gain converts, a phenomenon most familiar from the history of Christianity, requires an attitude rather different from any of these. In this article I shall examine the emergence of such an attitude in rabbinic Judaism.

Prior elucidation of the stance of prerabbinic Jews would be desirable, but the evidence is complex and ambiguous and it must suffice here to note that the belief in some modern scholarship that Jews before A.D. 70 were eagerly committed to the conversion of gentiles seems to me at best unproven. I have given reasons elsewhere for upholding the somewhat contentious proposition that it was extremely unusual for any Jew in the first century A.D. to view the encouragement of gentiles to convert to Judaism as a praiseworthy act. There is room here only for a brief sketch of the evidence.

No early source holds gentiles morally guilty for not being full Jews. Gentiles had no share in the covenant between God and Israel. If in their own lands they wished to continue to worship their pagan divinities, there

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1 See e.g. references in E. Schürer, rev. G. Vermes et al., The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, vol. III.1 (1986), pp. 170–1.
3 Cf. Schürer, op. cit., III.1, p. 615.
4 Cf. Schürer, op. cit., II.1, p. 154.
6 No study specifically on this subject has been written, but there is much relevant material in B. J. Bamberger, Proselytism in the Talmudic Period (2nd ed. 1968); W. G. Braude, Jewish Proselyting in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era (1940); E. E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs (E.T. 1975), pp. 541–54.
7 On the question of a Jewish proselytizing mission before A.D. 70 there is a huge bibliography. See for instance J. Jeremias, Jesus' Promise to the Nations (E.T. 1958), pp. 11–18; for a contrary view, see e.g. J. Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind (E.T. 1959).
could be no objection. Both Josephus and Philo follow the lead of the Septuagint translators in interpreting Exodus 22:27 as an injunction to Jews not to revile the gods of other nations. The exceptions to this liberalism prove the rule: pagans living among the Jews in the holy land could not be allowed to pollute the sanctified people with idolatry and were compelled either to espouse Judaism or depart elsewhere. In the diaspora Jews were not much concerned whether particular outsiders joined them or not. This lack of concern is reflected in the vagueness of Jewish terminology about the status of gentiles who accreted to their community. To the convert it was doubtless crucial to know whether he was or was not included within the covenant between Israel and God, but native Jews in this period do not seem even to have agreed on publicly recognisable criteria for such inclusion.

Some of these attitudes can be found also in the rabbinic texts, all of which were redacted in the early third century or later. The biblical notion that God rules over all peoples but that his name rests specifically on Israel still predominated (e.g. *MdRi Mishpatim*, p. 334). The rabbis assumed that it is a good thing for Jews to persuade gentiles to be monotheists, just as Abraham told all Babylon to acknowledge that there is only one God. Many texts continue to take it for granted that prospective converts will normally offer themselves and that it is not part of a good Jew’s role to try to increase their number. According to the second-century tanna R. Yose, it will eventually come about that idol worshippers will offer themselves as proselytes (*bAb. Zar*. 3b), but the hard line taken in the anonymous baraita reported at *bYeb*. 24b precludes any assumption that such pagans will always be accepted, for in that passage opportunist conversions in (for?) the days of the messiah are treated with disdain (*אֲפָלָי מַעְכְּלִי יָוְם לְמָשָׁה*). It is notorious that R. Helbo argued that proselytes actually delay the coming of the messiah and are therefore, it must be presumed, to be turned away, or at least not actively to be sought (*bNidd*. 13b; *bYeb*. 109b, and parallels).

Alongside this continuation of older ideas some curious changes can be traced in statements attributed to rabbis who taught between the second and fifth centuries. On the one hand there was a trend to codify the behaviour which would classify as righteous a gentile who has *not* converted to Judaism. On the other hand there emerged among some rabbis, perhaps

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for the first time among any non-Christian Jews, a belief that Jews have a
duty to win proselytes.

The first trend is bound up with the codification of the theoretical
Noachide Laws, a subject which can be discussed here quite briefly since it
has been treated at length in recent years by Novak.14 The first explicit
evidence for such rules being drawn up can be found in the third-century
text *tAb. Zar.* 8:4, but since the tannaim there are portrayed as debating the
number and content of the laws, but not the concept of such a code in itself,
it can be assumed that the principle that gentiles could be righteous without
conversion was generally accepted in rabbincic circles. At first sight it is
rather surprising that in a contemporary passage, *tSanh.* 13:2, it is asserted
by some rabbis that no gentile will be admitted to the next world (*הatronאכהב*),
but, given the cheerful inconsistency of the rabbis on the hypothetical
question of entry to the next world even by Jews, perhaps these views were
not regarded as contradictory; alternatively, it may be thought that the
rabbis who believed all gentiles to be excluded from the world to come
accepted the idea of the Noachide laws but claimed with characteristic
rhetorical exaggeration that no gentile in fact lived up to the Noachide
requirements.

This latter claim was gradually rendered more plausible by a novel
insistence that good gentiles who had no desire to convert to Judaism
nevertheless had a duty to abstain from idolatry.15 At *tBer.* 7 (6):2 it is
argued that Jews should extirpate idolatry only from the land of Israel, and
it seems likely that the godfearers who attended the synagogue at
Aphrodisias probably in the early third century had no suspicion that
continued adherence to paganism was reprehensible—included within their
number were city councillors who, by virtue of their office, could not avoid
involvement with civic cults.16 This liberalism continued among some
amoraic rabbis—thus at *b Hull.* 13b it is stated explicitly that gentiles should
be allowed to practise paganism so long as they are outside the holy land
(see also the parallel at *y Ber.* 9:2, 13b). But in the expansion of the Tosefta
passage mentioned above (*t Ber.* 7 (6):2), the tannaic rabbis cited in the
Babylonian Talmud assert that idolatry will eventually be rooted out not
just from Israel but from the whole world (*b Ber.* 57b), and it is alleged at
*b Meg.* 9a–b that the Septuagint translation of Deut. 4:19 and 17:3 implied
that all humanity was forbidden to worship the heavenly bodies; such
an interpretation is not actually found in any extant Septuagint text and is
most likely to have been the invention of the amoraim themselves.17

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14 D. Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of
15 See Novak, pp. 114–26. I shall discuss elsewhere the possible significance in this regard
of the destruction of pagan temples in Cyrene during the Trajanic revolt.
17 See Novak, pp. 121–2.
The prohibition on returning runaway slaves to a heathen master, found in Sifre Deut. 259, seems to presuppose the undesirability of even gentile slaves practising paganism. The commentary on Ps. 50:20 found at Deut. R. 6:4 (Soncino 6:9) urges Jews to show respect for gentiles, but it shows no trace of the respect for the gentiles' gods which had been advocated in earlier times by Philo and Josephus (see above, p. 176). This new attitude of some rabbis towards gentile paganism had quite considerable potential consequences, for pagan cults flourished in the centuries before Constantine as much as at any previous time in classical antiquity.  

But the same attitude which made it harder for gentiles to live up to the standard in theory required of them by the rabbis might be expected to make the achievement of such recognition all the more significant. The second trend in rabbinic thought about gentiles in this period—and the main subject of this paper—becomes increasingly hard to explain. If rabbis reckoned that keeping the Noachide laws was all that gentiles had to do to be considered virtuous, why seek to convert any of them to Judaism? It may be that the lack of direct statements in rabbinic texts about the desirability of proselytising is due to uneasiness about precisely this paradox. At any rate, the evidence for rabbinic approval of the winning of converts is, as will be seen, extremely indirect and allusive; but I hope that when it is laid out below it may be seen to have some cumulative force.

The most persuasive evidence seems to me to lie in the common rabbinic depiction of Abraham as a missionary. Approving reference is made in many rabbinic passages (e.g. ARNB, ch. 26; Num. R. 14:11; Pes. R. 43.181a, etc.) to the activities of Abraham and Sarah in Haran where, according to Gen. 12:5, they 'created souls'. How, asked the rabbis, could humans create life? Already in the earliest extant reference to this problem, in the tannaitic midrash Sifre Deut. 32, the response is given that the expression 'created souls' (אֲנוּחֵי נְפֶשׁ) means that Abraham and Sarah 'brought men and women under the wings of the Shekhinah' (הַחַטָּא נְפֶשׁ חֵסְכִּיל); this latter phrase possessed a semi-technical meaning, derived from its use in Ruth 2:12, of converting someone to Judaism. In this passage in Sifre the implications of the actions of Israel's ancestors for contemporary Jews are made explicit. The words of Deut. 6:5 (אִמְּדוּ לְךָ אִשָּׁה בַּעֲשׂוֹת אֱלֹהֵי אֲלִילֵי אָנָּתָן) are interpreted by a shift of vowels to mean not 'you should love' but 'you should make the Lord your God be loved [by humanity]'; the reason given for this injunction is that this is what Abraham and Sarah did when they made proselytes (מְנַעֵר) in Haran. Since what they did was praiseworthy, all Jews should try to follow suit.

Nor is the image of Abraham as missionary confined to discussion of his behaviour in Haran. Gen. 12:8, which reads, 'And he [Abraham] called upon the name of the Lord' (אִמִּדְתָּא לְךָ בָּרָךְ אֱלֹהֵי אָזְבַּד), is interpreted at Ber. R. 39:16 as 'he summoned people to the name of the Lord' and taken to signify that he

18 See R. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (1986), esp. pp. 69–82.
began to make converts. In *Mid. Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 12 (ed. Buber, p. 70), it is asserted not only that the Egyptians converted when Abraham came to their country but that this was the same pattern as was later followed when the children of Israel arrived in Egypt.

This new status of Abraham as the great missionary is all the more striking because he lacked the role in the eyes of Philo and Josephus. According to the latter he went down to Egypt intending either to learn about the gods from the natives, or to teach them if he found his own knowledge superior (A.J. 1.161). Discovering that the Egyptians were comparatively ignorant, he imparted to them his wisdom. But that wisdom turns out to have consisted in neither the teachings of Judaism nor even ethical monotheism, but the sciences of arithmetic and astronomy (A.J. 1.166–7). Artapanus in the second century B.C. had an even odder notion. According to him, Abraham instructed the Egyptians in astrology (Euseb., *Praep. ev.* 9.18), and Moses introduced them to their idolatrous animal cults.

Other figures from the Bible are similarly portrayed in rabbinic texts as missionaries, evidently with approval. R. Hoshaya, a third-century amora from Palestine, cited R. Judah b. Simon’s reading of Gen. 37:1 (‘And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s sojournings (מטיר ארבי המשה) as מטיר אביו, with the implication that Isaac had made proselytes in that area—but whether this implies that he had undertaken deliberate proselytising, I am not sure. In his interpretation of the Joseph story the late-third-century Palestinian amora R. Abba b. Kahana alleged that Joseph inspired the Egyptians with a longing to be circumcised (*Ber. R.* 90:6). In the same passage a certain R. Samuel (presumably some rabbi other than the great Mar Samuel?) is said to have interpreted the reading היה נוה in place of the grammatically possible יהוה to mean that Joseph gave the Egyptians life not only in this world but also in the world to come; in the eyes of the redactor of *Bereshit Rabbah* at least, if not necessarily in the opinion of Abba b. Kahana, Joseph’s insistence that the Egyptians be circumcised (cf. *Ber. R.* 91:5) was intended to lead to their conversion to Judaism. Numerous texts portray Jethro as a missionary. Exodus 18:27 (ויהיה המשה את חותנו יאל אראפר) is glossed in the version of *Ps. Jonathan* with the assertion that Jethro went home to convert all the inhabitants of his country (לאנא בר נב ארפר); the same interpretation of this incident is found also at *MdRi Amalek* 106–8 and *Sifre Zuta* to Num 10:30. In *Sifre Num.* 80 it seems that Jethro’s ability to gain proselytes is given as a reason for not leaving the children of Israel, but here too proselytising is seen as a self-evident good.

Apart from such commendation of alleged missionary figures from the past, other evidence for rabbinic approval of positive proselytising is all implicit rather than stated. The behaviour attributed without reference to Rabbah bar Abbuha by Urbach,19 of whom ‘it is related that he said to

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19 Urbach, op. cit., p. 553, n. 17 (p. 938, n. 17).
those who came before him ... “Go, sell all that you have and come and be converted”’ (רָאִיתָ הַצְּבָּא לְךָ אָנָּא לַטְלֵךְ וְאָלֹהֵי אֲבָנָיו) turns out on inspection of the context (bAb. Zar. 64a) to have been not an echo or parallel of Jesus’ missionary call in Matt. 19:21 and parallels, but a practical injunction to gentiles who already intended to convert to sell before conversion those of their possessions which were connected with idolatry so that after the ceremony they might benefit with a good conscience from the purchase price. But the more indirect evidence which is to be found is not without value. For instance, according to the fourth-century Rabin, citing the third-century Palestinian teacher Resh Lakish, the winning of converts is so desirable that one may buy a heathen slave from a gentile for this purpose (bAb. Zar. 13b); Resh Lakish even taught that such purchases could be made at pagan fairs despite the danger of contact with immorality at such events (yAb. Zar. 1.1, 39b). The ritual bath marking the conversion of a woman proselyte in Laodicea was an occasion of sufficient importance for the third-century patriarch R. Judan Nesiah to detain R. Joshua b. Levi in the town overnight for its sake, according to a rather inconsequential story attributed to R. Isaac b. Nahman (yYeb. 8.1, 8d).

More tenuous is the implicit appeal to altruism for any Jew who might accept the tenet expressed at bYeb. 48b by an anonymous group of rabbis (probably of the third century, since R. Abbahu, who lived late in that century, provided a scriptural proof for their view), that the sufferings of proselytes after conversion are a punishment for their delay in entering under the wings of the Shekinah, if such a Jew also accepted the opinion of the fourth-century amora, R. Bun, that in practice converts come over only because the righteous go to seek them, as Joseph went to Asenath, Joshua to Rahab, Boaz to Ruth (!) and Moses to Hobab. Altruism is in the forefront at bNed. 32a, where R. Yohanan takes Abraham to task for his behaviour, as described at Gen. 14:21, in allowing the king of Sodom to take the captives after their victory while he took the goods: such a decision was reprehensible, according to Yohanan, because חפי בָּרָא אֲדֹנֵי הָאֲלָלוֹת חָיָה רַבִּין סָדוֹם. It is not clear whether the sin with which Abraham is charged by an unspecified R. Judah at Ber. R. 40:14 (Soncino 41:8)—his failure to make his nephew Lot cleave to God despite his success in persuading others—was seen by R. Judah as a failure of altruism or of duty to God.

All this adds up to quite strong implicit approval for an active mission to win converts to Judaism. But the reluctance to be more explicit is striking, and it is worth noting how little of the extensive rabbinic literature on conversion even alludes to the topic. Thus, for instance, the two great homilies on proselytes at MdRi Nezikin 18 and at Num. R. 8 do not even refer to the problem of how converts come to consider becoming Jews in the first place.

This reticence should be contrasted to the numerous texts which advise Jews that proselytes who offer themselves should be accepted. These texts have been collected by Braude and Bamberger, and I do not wish to
challenge their conclusions that the rabbis often welcomed those who sought them out. But in contrast to them I want to stress that a willingness to accept is quite different from a positive desire to acquire.\(^{20}\) I do not think that there is justification for the assumption, found quite widely in modern scholarship, that the existence of numerous converts in itself reveals a mission to win them.\(^{21}\) Rabbis did in general assume that a gentile living within a Jewish community (in the land of Israel?) is a potential convert (in halakhic terms, that a רֵעֵר is a potential רֵעֵר נַחֲשָׁב, cf. bAb. Zar. 65a), but this did not imply any onus on Jews to take any action with regard to gentiles who lived elsewhere. As doves scent the food given to their fellow doves and come to partake, so proselytes are converted 'when the elder sits and preaches' (Cant. R. 1:63 (Dunsky, p. 143; Soncino, IV 1, 2, p. 177)), but it is not suggested that such attraction of proselytes is the reason for the teaching in the first place. The remarkable assertion that God brought about the exile as a way of increasing the number of proselytes is found both in the name of the tanna R. Eliezer at bPes. 87b and, ascribed to a Jewish acquaintance, in the writings of the third-century Christian writer Origen (c. Celsum 1:55), but no rabbi even hints that a deliberate prolongation or extension of the exile would be desirable to further this mission to the nations.

In sum, despite the hints outlined above that some rabbis assumed the desirability of a proselytising mission, such a notion does not appear to have been explicitly formulated in any rabbinic text and did not ever become a general rabbinic doctrine. It remained the common assumption that the normal impulse to conversion would be and should be that of the prospective proselyte. Thus, for example, it is reported at Sifre Deut. 354 that the sight of Israel worshipping at the Temple will eventually lead the nations to wish to convert en masse. It is on the gentiles that the onus rests, for in the last days they risk punishment for failing to become proselytes as they could have done (Lev. R. 2:9; but it is worth noting that in the parallel version at Pes. R. 35.161a, in the name of R. Hanina b. Papa, the reproach to the gentiles is only their failure to forsake idolatry; cf. also yR.H. 1.3, 57a). At yYeb. 8.1, 8d R. Isaac b. Nahman even reported a ruling in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi which seems to imply that in certain circumstances even the commonly accepted duty of Jews to convert gentile slaves in their ownership may be waived: נַכְל מֶמָּת הַמַּרְדָּנֶה. The only duty to the gentile world which the rabbis blazoned forth explicitly was the need to be a light to the nations, to sanctify the name of God and proclaim his existence and glory to all men: thus Lev. R. 6:5 interprets Lev. 5:1 (אַל לָא אֲדֹנֵי נַשְׁיָתָם יִרְדֵּי וְנַשָּׁתָּם וְנֵיתְפּוּ) as 'if you will not proclaim me as God unto the nations of the world, I shall exact penalty from you'.

The paradox should not be shirked. On the one hand it was taken for

\(^{20}\) Contra Braude, op. cit., pp. 3, 18; Bamberger, op. cit., p. 290.

granted that conversion to Judaism is an advantage to the proselyte which it was desirable that a Jew should help him acquire. Thus, according to R. Huna, a minor incapable in law of giving consent may nonetheless be converted by a court on the grounds that a court has an absolute power to confer a benefit (bKet. 11a). On the other hand this view, despite its momentous potential consequences, was only implied rather than explicitly formulated in rabbinic texts, and it ran a risk of being undercut by the rabbis’ simultaneous espousal of precise requirements for pious gentiles who remained gentiles, since Jewish acceptance that such requirements are sufficient might appear to make conversion to Judaism irrelevant and any mission to win proselytes otiose. The paradox can be seen at its clearest in the statement of the third-century Palestinian amora R. Yohanan, reported at bMeg. 13a, that any gentile who spurns idolatry is called a Jew. Yohanan’s assertion is rightly branded by Braude as a homiletical conceit, but his ability even to propose such a notion suggests a remarkable unawareness of the conflicting implications of the rabbinic attitudes of his time.

It is tempting to assume that such contradictory attitudes must have been originally espoused either at different times or in different places, but it is not possible to be certain whether in fact this was so. It is possible, but not provable, that the Noachide laws were formulated by the rabbis rather earlier than a positive attitude towards proselytising emerged. It has been noted above that the principle of the Noachide laws seems to have been already accepted by the tannaim, although insistence on abstention from idolatry appears not to have been universally held even in the amoraic period. In contrast all of the comments which imply approval of proselytising are ascribed, when they are ascribed at all, to Palestinian rabbis of the third or early fourth centuries (Ber. R. 84:4 (R. Hoshaya, in the name of R. Judah b. R. Shimon); Ber. R. 90:6 (R. Abba b. Kahana); Pes. R. 43.181a (R. Eleazar b. Pedat, in the name of R. Yose b. Zimri); Mid. Tanh. Lek Lekha 12 (R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin, in the name of R. Levi); bAb. Zar. 13b (Rabin, in the name of Resh Lakish); bNed. 32a (R. Yohanan); yYeb. 8.1, 8d (R. Isaac b. Nahman, with a story about amoraim of the first generation); yAb. Zar. 1.1, 39b (Resh Lakish); Eccl. R. 8:10 (R. Bun); bYeb. 48b (R. Abbahu; some say R. Hanina (b. Abbahu?)). No amoraic text seems to ascribe approval of a proselytising mission to any second-century tanna apart from ySanh. 2.6, 20c, where R. Yose b. Halafta, of the mid-second century, is credited with the implausible view that Solomon multiplied his wives not from voluptuousness but to bring them under the wings of the Shekhinah. On the contrary, the key teaching in Sifre Deut. 32 (see above, p. 178) is ascribed in Pes. R. 43.181a to the third-century amoraim R. Eleazar b. Pedat and R. Yose b. Zimri. It is therefore possible that the anonymous references to Abraham and Jethro as missionaries in the tannaitic midrashim and Ps.-Jonathan were composed by the last generation of the tannaim in the early third century, and that the notion
that proselytising is desirable was only first espoused by rabbis at that time; but I am aware that any claim that such midrashic stories were already traditional by that time cannot be disproved.

Wherever and whenever they originated, these contradictory notions seem to have been held in conjunction by later rabbis in both Palestine and Babylonia, for both ideas appear in both talmuds. How had the rabbis come to commit themselves to such conflicting ideas?

Most who have tried to answer this question have started from the premise that proselytising is a natural religious instinct and that what needs to be explained is therefore only the caution displayed by the rabbis in its espousal. For those who begin thus an answer is readily to hand: Jews were constrained from openly proselytising first by Roman imperial legislation against the circumcision of non-Jews after Hadrian, and then by further laws against the conversion of Christians to Judaism after Constantine. The conversions which did occur, it is alleged, must have been carried out in secret. Active proselytising would risk the ferocity of the state.

This explanation is consistent, but it has flaws. State opposition might have been expected to spur on missionaries to greater efforts rather than dampen their enthusiasm, as in the history of early Christianity and, even more strikingly, third- and fourth-century Manichaeism. Inscriptions on which the status of proselytis is openly displayed, such as that recently published from Aphrodisias, suggest that state legislation on this topic as on others may often have remained theoretical and in practice disregarded.

More importantly, the presumption in favour of proselytising rests on Christianising presuppositions about the nature of religion and ignores the rarity of missionary behaviour in other religious movements in the ancient world. Many religions and philosophies spread throughout the Roman world during the early empire, but in almost all cases apart from Christianity this was through the travel of existing adherents from one place to another for secular purposes and the imitation of such people by interested outsiders: the notion that existing worshippers should put effort into attracting others to their cult was rarely, if ever, found outside Christianity before the third century.

It seems to me that the problem is best tackled from the other end. Since there is so little to suggest that Jews in the first century had an interest in a proselytising mission, why did such a notion emerge, albeit only as an
implicit and occasional assumption, in the sayings of some rabbis of third-century Palestine?

No direct answer to such a question is likely to be provided by the rabbinic texts themselves: the rabbis' espousal of contradictory notions about gentiles suggests that they never tried to probe the reasons for their particular attitudes, and it is worth bearing in mind how small a proportion of rabbinic discourse concerns the status of non-Jews. The explanatory model proposed below is only a hypothesis.

The impetus for Jews to encourage non-Jews to take a respectful interest in Judaism may have been increased after A.D. 70 when the attraction of gentiles to Judaism might help to bridge the gulf which separated Jews' belief in their election with the reality of their defeat and exile. But whereas non-Jews before A.D. 70 accreted to Jewish communities in all sorts of loose ways, without the Jews concerned showing any real interest in whether such newcomers be defined as full converts or just adherents (see above, p. 176), Jews from about A.D. 100 began to delineate much more precisely who was, and who was not, Jewish.

The reasons for this new interest of Jews in the precise boundaries of their communities can only be surmised. It is possible that Jews were keen to differentiate themselves from the burgeoning Church and, in particular, Judaizing Christians, but such an explanation may exaggerate the influence of Christianity on Jews at so early a date. A more mundane reason may have been the need to establish who was liable to pay the fiscus Judaicus to the Roman state.

The fiscus was a two-drachma tax on Jews originally imposed as a punishment for rebellion after A.D. 70. Its collection was reformed under Nerva in A.D. 96, apparently in such a way as to exclude those born as Jews who had forsaken Jewish customs (hence calumnia sublata) but at the same time recognising, probably for the first time, the existence of proselytes whose religious affiliation alone was sufficient to make them liable to the tax. The tax was still being collected in the mid-third century (Origen, Ep. ad Africanum 20 (14)) and perhaps later. It was no longer possible for the status of gentiles sympathetic to Judaism to be left ambiguous: either they paid the tax (and were presumably considered Jews) or they did not.

It may be assumed without undue cynicism that most of the gentiles sympathetic to Judaism preferred when pressured in this way to be considered by the Roman state—and therefore also by the Jews among whom they lived—as non-Jewish. The semi-juridical title 'godfearers' found on the early third-century inscriptions from the Aphrodias synagogue

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27 On the fiscus in general, see Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum I, pp. 80–8; II, pp. 119–36, 204–8.
reveals the willingness of some Jews to give a formal status within the Jewish community to such gentiles.\textsuperscript{29} It is possible, despite the lack of evidence for any direct link, that rabbinic interest in the second and third centuries in the formulation of the theoretical Noachide laws for the definition of righteousness among gentiles (see above, p. 177) was spurred on by the existence of such sympathisers, who were now clearly defined as gentiles but who presumably sometimes still participated in some Jewish communal activities, as they appear to have done at Aphrodisias.

Some sympathisers, presumably a minority, opted for full conversion to Judaism. There was no reason in the second century for Jews to encourage this process by looking for more such proselytes, and there is no firm evidence that they did so. It is only in the third century that we can be certain that some rabbis began assuming the desirability of a mission to proselytise. One new factor that may have encouraged this novel attitude is that rabbis in Palestine were by now aware of the success of some Christians in winning pagans. If the rabbis paid any attention at all to the spread of the Church they will have known that it had succeeded thus far not by positing good behaviour for non-Christians but by an energetic mission to win outsiders into the Christian fold.

What I am suggesting is that the effectiveness of the Church’s methods may have gradually changed the religious assumptions of some non-Christians in the ancient world. Even if such non-Christians were not themselves tempted to convert to Christianity, it may have become more common for them to take it for granted that, for their faiths too, a mission to convert was a natural corollary of religious belief. If this hypothesis is correct, it would be unsurprising to discover that, as with much religious and intellectual change in late antiquity, the rabbis were not immune from trends in the wider society of the Roman Empire.

\textsuperscript{29} Reynolds and Tannenbaum, op. cit., pp. 48–66.