

## PROSELYTISM AND GODFEARERS

“Proselytizing” refers to active attempts on the part of Jews to recruit or evangelize Gentiles as new religious members of [Judaism](#). Recent discussion of the nature and extent of Jewish proselytizing has focused on whether or not [Judaism](#) is a missionary religion and, for historians of the development of the Christian [faith](#), to what degree Christian practice is indebted to Jewish ideology and practice. “Godfearer” describes a Gentile with a certain level of adherence to [Judaism](#), in particular to incomplete commitment to [Judaism](#) but with a corresponding commitment to the Jewish community. In effect Godfearers are Gentiles who stand between pagan Gentiles and faithful Jews.

### [1. History of Scholarship](#)

### [2. Judaism and the Gentile](#)

### [3. Judaism and Proselytes](#)

### [4. Methods of Proselytizing](#)

### [5. Requirements for Proselytes](#)

### [6. Levels of Adherence](#)

## 1. History of Scholarship

While scholarship has addressed more than the issue of whether or not [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion, the specific points of the discussion (e.g., requirements, numbers of proselytes, the meaning of the Lukan expression *Godfearers*) neatly arrange themselves around this issue.

**1.1. The Older Scholarly Consensus.** Older scholarship, especially that of Protestant Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, univocally affirmed, assumed and sought to explain the rise of Christianity on the basis of the [perception](#) that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion. Accompanying the assertion that [Judaism](#) evolved into a monotheistic religion with universalistic dimensions was the consistent contention that [Judaism](#) and individual Jews actively recruited Gentiles to [Judaism](#). [Diaspora Judaism](#) was given prominence of place in this evolution of [Judaism](#) to a universalistic [faith](#) that naturally evolved into the Christian mission to the world (see Bertholet; Jeremias; Hahn; Georgi).

While this strand of scholarship affirmed that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion in impulse, it was also argued by some of these scholars that [Judaism](#) was inferior to Christianity because it either did not live out its natural impulse to evangelize the world or because, when Christianity emerged as more powerful than [Judaism](#) or when [Bar](#) Kokhba’s revolt failed, it then abandoned its universalistic impulse to become a nationalistic and introverted religion. Jewish scholars countered this Protestant propaganda by demonstrating both the openness to proselytes in Jewish formative texts, especially the

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 1. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.

[Talmudim](#) and [Midrashim](#), as well as the fundamental kindness of individual Jews to Gentiles, both ancient and modern. The most important studies of Jewish scholars are those of B. J. Bamberger, W. G. Braude, J. S. Rabin, J. R. Rosenbloom and L. H. Feldman. A conclusion from a well-known Christian scholar of [Judaism](#), G. F. Moore, perhaps crystallizes this view the best when he says that “the [belief](#) in the future universality of the true religion ... led to efforts to convert the Gentiles to the [worship](#) of the one true God and to [faith](#) and obedience according to the [revelation](#) he had given, and made [Judaism](#) the first great missionary religion of the Mediterranean world” (Moore, 1:323–24).

An even more influential articulation of this view was penned by J. Jeremias, whose standing in Christian perceptions of [Judaism](#) was without peer for nearly a generation (though that standing has now been shifted as a result of the work of E. P. Sanders): “Jesus grew up in the midst of a people actively engaged, both by the spoken and written word, in a Gentile mission, whose impelling force was a profound sense of their obligation to glorify their God in the Gentile world.” He can also maintain that “Jesus thus came upon the scene in the midst of what was *par excellence* the missionary age of Jewish history” (Jeremias, 17, 11).

Although Feldman’s recent study does not make such exaggerated claims, his book establishes the conclusion that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion and was actively involved in proselytizing Gentiles in a manner that helped shape the identity of [Judaism](#) (Feldman, 288–341). Feldman’s case is based on two major items: demographics and the evidence found in literature. Recognizing the strength of the arguments against the view that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion, Feldman offers a massive concession: “However, although there is, in [truth](#), no single item of conclusive evidence, as we shall see, the cumulative evidence—both demographic and literary—for such activity is considerable” (Feldman, 293).

The literary evidence will be explained in a contrasting manner below, but a word ought to be said here about the demographic evidence. Feldman’s argument is simple: since the population statistics of numerical growth cannot be explained on the basis of normal birth and survival patterns, there must have been some other factor that contributed to the blossoming of Jews around the Mediterranean. That other factor, he contends, must have been conversion as the result of Jewish missionary activity. The weaknesses of this argument are that it assumes (1) accurate estimations of Jewish populations from two different periods of history (so a comparison could be made) throughout the Mediterranean basin (all Jews need to be numbered) so that the second larger number would require special explanation; (2) an accurate [knowledge](#) of survival rates; and (3) accurate perceptions of immigrations and emigrations, not to mention [knowledge](#) of survival after famines, earthquakes, plagues and other disasters. None of these items can be known with the kind of precision needed in order to have sufficient disparity that could be explained by Jewish missionary successes. For example, our [knowledge](#) of Jewish population lacks precision at every point; all that we have is rough estimations that cannot be taken seriously enough for the kind of comparison required (Rosenbloom). Thus an argument for Jewish missionary activity on the basis of demographics lacks credibility (McKnight forthcoming).

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 2. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.

**1.2. The Recent Scholarly Consensus.** Though the assertion that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion has garnered significant support in the last two centuries of scholarship, that conclusion has recently been challenged to such a degree that it may be said to have been overturned and the consensus today is that [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion. Even if some German Protestant scholars polemically contended that [Judaism](#) failed to live up to its inherent universalistic impulse, recent studies that contend that [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion argue so on the basis of a variety of ancient evidence and not in order to support an ideology.

One of the earliest voices to be heard in this regard was that of A. T. Kraabel, who after exploring the archaeological data at the site of Sardis, concluded that much of what scholars, particularly Christian, were saying about Jewish missionary activity could not be justified on the basis of evidence, either literary or archaeological (Kraabel 1982, 1983). His insights were then confirmed by three monograph studies of Jewish missionary activity, each of which contended that [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion (McKnight 1991; Goodman; Porton). S. Mc-Knight (1991) offers a comprehensive survey of the evidence that has been used to describe Jewish missionary activity, arranging his separate studies around the following topics: [Judaism](#) and the Gentile, [Judaism](#) and proselytes, methods, requirements, levels of adherence and the evidence for Jewish missionary activity in the NT. One result of this study is a more careful approach to terms, including “missionary religion” (a selfconscious religion that defines itself in part in terms of missionary practice) and “conversion” (involves [cognitive](#) agreement, socialization into a new group and personal-bio-graphical reconstruction). The result of Mc-Knight’s study is the contention that [Judaism](#), though it evinced acceptance of Gentiles and proselytes who came to [Judaism](#), (1) was never a missionary religion, (2) occasionally had persons who were involved in what we might call missionary activity and (3) did not set the stage in any substantial manner for early Christian missionary practice (McKnight 1991).

M. Goodman’s study, though it approaches the data from a different angle, comes to the same conclusion: [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion; in addition, he argues that Christianity itself was not always everywhere a missionary religion. The fresh perspective of Goodman is that he approaches the issue from the angle of the ancient Greco-Roman world and seeks to understand not just Jewish practice but also how ancient religious and philosophical groups sought to recruit adherents (if they did). In addition, Goodman introduces nuance into each discussion, especially seeing the historical and social factors at work in [Judaism](#), whether in his approach to the development of missionary work along the lines of Christianity in connection with Nerva or in his insight into the various concerns of missions (information, education, [apologetics](#)) or in his conclusion that the imposition of social order should not be confused with religious conversion.

A final study is that of G. Porton, who presents a nuanced socio-rhetorical analysis of the convert within [rabbinic](#) texts, a convert whose legal ambiguity prompts the title of his book as *The Stranger Within Your Gates*. Diversity is a leitmotif for Porton. Thus, “indeed, even within each of these documents, various strands of Jewish thought and life, representing disparate locations, periods of time, populations, cultural views, and intellectual environments, have been joined together.... Therefore, it is

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 3. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.

most correct to speak of the rabbinic *views* on conversion” (193). This diversity is enhanced by his contention that [Judaism](#), as a national religion with national and ethnic identity, could not by nature be a missionary religion. Porton’s book replaces the older studies of Bamberger, Raisin and Braude because the texts are analyzed with a more critical approach that considers not just ostensive reference but also rhetorical and sociological strategy. These three studies converge in one important way: [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion.

## 2. Judaism and the Gentile

Before the historian can describe the relationship of Jews to proselytes, the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in general needs to be analyzed. This relationship can be characterized as both an integrating tendency as well as a resisting tendency, and this observation needs to take into account the important [perception](#) that [Judaism](#) was diverse (cf. McKnight 1991, 11–29). What for one group was something to be resisted was for another group something to be welcomed; on top of this we need to note that individual groups changed over time so that a constant vacillation characterizes [Judaism](#). Consequently it is historically inaccurate to contend that any one view characterizes [Judaism](#) in its relationship to the Gentiles. Instead we are more accurate if we describe [Judaism](#) (some would say *Judaisms*) as a diversity with various approaches to how Jews related to the Gentile world. In light of these observations, these two features of how they related take on special nuance, but in so describing various dimensions of the integrating and resisting tendencies, specific groups are not in view (i.e., [Philo](#) integrates whereas the [Pharisees](#) resist).

**2.1. Integrating Tendencies.** For nearly two centuries scholars have compared the Hellenistic movement with Jewish culture and religion. Most notable in this regard is the work of M. Hengel, who proved that [Judaism](#), even in Palestine, was heavily influenced by the pervasive influence of [Hellenism](#). At least six features of this interaction can be observed.

**2.1.1. A Growing Universalism.** Within [Judaism](#) scholars have observed a growing [universalism](#) on the part of its various branches. That is, while the [Hebrew Bible](#) has always included the notion that [Yahweh](#) is God of the world and that he rules over all the nations ([Gen 12:1–3](#); [Is 42](#); [56](#)), [Judaism](#) developed a more precise [perception](#) of God and his relation to the world in which not only is God’s [truth](#) revealed to the nation of [Israel](#) but also that God’s [truth](#) in all its dimensions was perceived, even if to a lesser degree, by some Gentiles as well. Ben Sira may speak of God’s compassion being showered upon everyone ([Sir 13:15](#)), but Philo can say that all “created things ... are brothers, since they have all one Father, the Maker of the universe” (Philo [Decal. 64](#); cf. [Spec. Leg. 1.169](#); [Praem. Poen. 9](#); [Prov. 2.6](#)); even further: “they can claim to be children of the one common mother of mankind, nature” (Philo [Decal. 41](#)).

**2.1.2. Friendliness.** These statements are to be differentiated from friendliness, or even love, being shown to other nations, since in the latter category Israel is sharply distinguished from the nations (e.g., [Josephus Ag. Ap. 2 §146](#)). Philo reveals the same kind of distinction when he speaks of general benevolence (Philo [Flacc. 94](#); [Virt. 109–15](#), [147](#)). From the archaeological evidence discovered at Sardis Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

one can see a similar kind of friendliness, a socioreligious distinction of groups that nonetheless broke down as Jews and Gentiles interacted freely, even to the point of pushing against religious boundaries. At Sardis the Jewish [synagogue](#) was connected to a Gentile [gymnasium](#), revealing a breathtaking integration of two cultures and a friendly cooperation. The evidence from Sardis also suggests that Jews had the same jobs that Gentiles had and that Jews were members of the city council, holding positions of considerable influence (Kraabel 1983; Trebilco).

**2.1.3. Participation.** This illustration of integration from the Sardis evidence leads to an observation that Jews regularly permitted Gentiles to participate in the Jewish religion. Even if the balustrade surrounding the inner court of the [temple](#) warned Gentiles not to penetrate any further into the temple, such a prohibition did not prevent Jews from permitting Gentiles, especially the powerful, from offering sacrifices ([Josephus J.W. 2.17.3 §§412–16](#); [5.13.6 §563](#); [Ant. 13.5.4 §§145–47](#); [13.5.8 §168](#); [13.8.2 §242](#)). [Josephus](#) can claim that the Jerusalem temple “flung wide its gates to every foreigner for [worship](#)” ([Josephus J.W. 4.4.4 §275](#)). If the evidence from Sardis suggests an intermingling of Jews with Gentiles in the context of their [synagogue](#), other evidence suggests that Gentiles found famous Jewish religious institutions as something in which they could join (e.g., [sabbath](#); *CPJ* 3.43–87).

**2.1.4. Integration.** Integration into foreign culture finds a primary crystallization when Jews became [citizens](#) and found official recognition. If Philo can describe legal protection in [Alexandria](#) as “the sole mooring on which our life was secured” (Philo [Flacc. 74](#)), [Josephus](#) can confirm the same desire for legal protection in the familiar pursuit at the hands of other governments ([Josephus Ant. 8.2.6–7 §§50–54](#); [12.4.2–10 §§160–224](#); [12.10.6 §§414–19](#)). We should probably infer from this desire for citizenship or recognition the need for Jews to find protection, but we would not be far off in also inferring that the Gentile governments at whose hands the Jews wanted protection also benefitted from having Jews as citizens, as opposed to malcontents. The benefits worked both ways.

**2.1.5. Education.** If our [knowledge](#) of [Judaism](#) came exclusively from the rabbinic documents, especially the Mishnah and [Tosefta](#), we might think that Jews abhorred Gentile [education](#), but the surviving evidence from Philo and [Josephus](#) especially reveals that many Jews, particularly those from landed families, were educated in the Greco-Roman manner (Bonner). Thus, in addition to the [Torah](#), Jewish children in Alexandria were educated in the encyclical (Philo [Vit. Mos. 1.23–24](#); [Spec. Leg. 2.228–30](#); [Leg. All. 3.244](#); [Migr. Abr. 72](#); [Rer. Div. Her. 274](#); [Omn. Prob. Lib. 143](#)). [Herod](#), Archelaus and Philip each had a Roman education ([Josephus Ant. 15.10.5 §373](#); [J.W. 1.31.1 §602](#)). Though this approach is not always approved ([Josephus Ant. 18.5.4 §141](#)), the foundation is laid here for the kind of education that every aspiring politician would need. Such an education is legitimated by [Josephus](#) when he says that Joseph, the patriarch, was given a “liberal education” in Alexandria ([Josephus Ant. 2.4.1 §39](#)); [Moses](#) received the same ([Josephus Ant. 2.9.3 §216](#)).

**2.1.6. Inter marriage.** [Marriages](#) took place for different reasons in the ancient world: in addition to marrying for love, one married also for political, religious and social alliances. Thus inter marriage becomes one further illustration of Jewish integration into the Gentile world. Even if the [tradition](#) connected to Ezra and Nehemiah shapes one [perception](#) of how Jews should relate to the ancient Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Gentile world, not all followed that path of curbing social contact. Jews regularly and consistently intermarried with women of other nations and religions. [Josephus](#) mentions at least the following: Joseph ([Ant. 2.6.1 §§91–92](#)), Antipater ([J.W. 1.8.9 §181](#)) and Herod ([Ant. 17.1.3 §20](#)). Esther’s marriage, according to [Josephus](#), however, was not a source for pride ([Ant. 11.6.2 §§198–204](#)).

Integration, however, can become a problem for [Judaism](#). At times integration slides rather easily into assimilation and adaptation of the Jewish [faith](#) in ways unacceptable to many or even outright [apostasy](#). To be sure, this process might be defined differently by various Jewish persons, but lines were nonetheless drawn, even if not by some authorized [orthodoxy](#). Philo finds a “backsliding” (*paranomia*), or [apostasy](#), when some were “spurning their ancestral customs and seeking admission to the rites of a fabulous religion” (Philo [Spec. Leg. 1.56–57](#)). Antiochus of [Antioch](#) converted to Hellenism, detested Jewish customs and sacrificed in the manner of the Greeks, according to [Josephus](#) ([J.W. 7.3.3 §§50–53](#)). In times of [persecution](#), [apostasy](#) becomes a socially acute issue, and on at least one occasion the bare decision to eat pork was a surrender of the Jewish nation and [faith](#) (Philo [Flacc. 96](#)).

**2.2. Resisting Tendencies.** Resistance to the various forms of Hellenism no [doubt](#) provoked the charge that Jews were misanthropists, but the charges, however observant of special features of Jewish identity, are not founded in fact. Rather, Jewish resistance is not so much a reflection of Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles as it is one of their own identity as the people of God, of their role in the world and of their commitment to the [Torah](#) for divine protection (e.g., Deut). At least five features are notable.

**2.2.1. Separation.** For different reasons, usually pertaining to purity, Jews separated themselves from Gentiles in various ways. In fact, the *Epistle of Aristeas* claims that the [Torah](#) was given to Israel “that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations” (139, *APOT*; cf. 151). At times this separation emerges into nationalism (cf. [2 Bar. 62:7](#)), which can be seen full force in the documents discovered at [Qumran](#) and its environs (esp. [1QM](#); cf. also [CD 6:14, 15; 7:13; 1QS 1:4; 5:1–2; 1QH 14:21–22; 11QTemple 48:7–13; 60:16–21](#); see [Rule of the Community](#); [Temple Scroll](#); [Thanksgiving Hymns](#)). In the [War Scroll](#) the Gentiles seem to be assigned by God to his wrath (cf. [1QM 2:7; 4:12; 6:6; 9:9](#)). The list of derogatory comments about other nations is nearly endless in Jewish literature; one example is Philo’s attitude toward Egyptians, the people with whom he had to live (Philo [Flacc. 17, 29, 96; Spec. Leg. 162, 166; Sacr. 51; Poster. C. 96, 113; Spec. Leg. 3.110; Virt. 131–133](#)).

**2.2.2. Restricted Access to the Temple.** However much the Jews permitted the Gentiles to participate in their religious customs and no matter how much they integrated themselves into the various cultures surrounding them, they remained adamant that Gentiles could not enter into the holiest parts of the [temple](#). This evinces a clear consciousness of separation and of being the elect of God (cf. [Josephus J.W. 1.7.6 §152; 1.18.3 §354; Ant. 3.15.3 §§318–22](#)). Memorialized on a wall at regular intervals around the holy place, there was a sign in the temple prohibiting Gentile entrance, and “[death](#) without appeal” was the consequence for transgression (Bickerman).

2.2.3. *Idolatry*. Especially repudiated among Jewish authors is the [worship](#) of other gods and the practice of other [religions](#). The polemic against idolatry appears in every dimension of Jewish literature (e.g., [Wis Sol 14:12–31](#); [Jos. and As. 8:5–7](#)) and is surely the most common form of Jewish resistance.

2.2.4. *Prohibitions of Intermarriage*. Because of consistent Jewish integration into the Gentile world and the consequent occurrence of intermarriage, we regularly find warnings and prohibitions of intermarriage; the decision not to marry a Gentile woman was a significant public act on the part of a male Jew. Though not a clear teaching of the [Pentateuch](#) (cf. [Ex 34:11–17](#); [Deut 7:3–4](#); [23:2–9](#)), the absolute prohibition of intermarriage in the reform of Ezra and Nehemiah became a rallying cry for national purity ([Ezra 9–10](#)). For instance, in [Tobit](#) we find a consistent prohibition of intermarriage ([Tob 1:9](#); [3:10](#); [4:12](#); [5:11](#), [13](#); [6:12](#); [7:13](#)). Philo, writing where intermarriage was both practiced as well as a source for constant alarm, legitimates such a prohibition by appealing to its eventual deleterious affect on the sons and daughters (Philo [Spec. Leg. 3.29](#)).

2.2.5. *Uprisings and Wars*. The bluntest form of resistance is military uprisings and national wars. At no place is this given greater prominence than in the [Maccabean](#) literature and war stories (1–2 Macc). The marvelous legend of the Jewish boys who die, one by one, in the presence of their mother for honoring their [faith](#) undoubtedly stirred the hearts of many Jews (cf. [4 Macc 8:8](#); [14:11–17:6](#)). And Pilate learned from his own Jewish contemporaries the willingness of Jews to fight if faithfulness to their traditions was under threat ([Josephus J.W. 2.9.2 §§169–74](#)). Undoubtedly this is how many Jews saw the fight with Rome in A.D. 66–73: Jewish resistance against Roman imposition of order (see [Jewish Wars with Rome](#)).

In summary, we are on sure ground when we stand on the following convictions: Jews were convinced that they were the people of God; and because they were the people of God they were different from the rest of the world, especially but not only in their religious customs. However, those two convictions did not lead Jews as a rule to cut off all relations to Gentiles, nor did it lead them to hate Gentiles. Rather, though Jews as a rule accepted Gentiles and lived with and dealt with them in business, they knew that deep in their own identity was a conviction that God had chosen them as a light among the Gentiles.

### 3. Judaism and Proselytes

In a context of integration, yet not without a corresponding resistance, Jews found “proselytes” in their midst (McKnight 1991, 30–48; Feldman, 177–382). Did they favor this development, or did they discourage it?

**3.1. Names of Proselytes.** Names of proselytes appear in nearly every major facet of Jewish evidence (e.g., [Jdt 14:10](#), Achior the Ammonite; Philo [Abr. 251](#), Hagar; [Josephus Ant. 20.2.1–5 §§17–53](#), the royal family of Adiabene; [CII 523](#), Veturia Paulla; [b. Git 56a](#), Nero). But what can be made of names? Some have argued that the presence of names everywhere reveals consistent missionary activity, but surely this outstrips the evidence. It may be the case that names are given because of their exceptional

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

status. The evidence of names is like the evidence of demographics: too much can be made of too little. A more secure foundation must be found to construct a view that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion or that Jews on the whole were regularly proselytizing their Gentile neighbors.

**3.2. Favorable Attitudes.** Much evidence can be brought to the table on this [topic](#), but a selection will provide the essential contours. Tobit, when visiting [Jerusalem](#), gave his second tithe in money to needy people ([Tob 1:7](#)), among whom were “proselytes who attached themselves to the sons of Israel” ([Tob 1:8](#)). And [Tobit 13:11](#) reads: “A bright light will shine over all the regions of the earth; many nations will come from far away, from all the ends of the earth, to dwell close to the holy name of the Lord God, with gifts in their hands for the King of [heaven](#).” While this surely reveals a positive attitude toward proselytism, it divulges nothing about how people became proselytes and even less about the nature of a [Judaism](#) that identified itself as a missionary religion.

In the *Testament of Levi* we find a text that asks what will happen to the world if Jews become pervasively disobedient. The author responds by relating the Jewish mission to the world. [Testament of Levi 14:4](#) reads: “For what will all the nations do if you become darkened with impiety? You will bring down a curse on our nation, because you want to destroy the light of the Law which was granted to you for the enlightenment of every man.” Here conversion is something that will take place in the future (as in [T. Jud. 24:6](#); [25:5](#); [T. Dan 5:11](#); [6:7](#); [T. Asher 7:3](#); [T. Zeb. 9:8](#)), but there is no evidence of Jewish missionaries, of Jewish missionary practice and of only one convert ([T. Naph. 1:10](#)). Rather, what this text expresses is the typical Jewish view that Gentile conversions will take place on the [Day of the Lord](#); when God comes to Zion, Gentiles will swarm to the temple to praise [Yahweh](#) and bring gifts to his people.

Philo, who had abundant opportunity to engage in Jewish proselytizing activities, speaks only occasionally of proselytes. He has a fairly relaxed attitude toward Gentile participation in [Judaism](#) and sees the Jewish nation as having a purpose of revealing what is good (Philo [Vit. Mos. 1.149](#); [2.36](#)). Philo perceives a philosophical-religious element to conversion to [Judaism](#) when one becomes enlightened (Philo [Spec. Leg. 1.51–53](#); [Praem. Poen. 61](#)). In particular Philo sees a [special revelation](#) to the world in the translation of the [Torah](#) from Hebrew to Greek (Philo [Vit. Mos. 2.44](#)). However, he knows of restrictions even for proselytes: it takes three generations for a convert’s family to become fully Jewish (Philo [Virt. 108](#)), though it is possible that Philo sees this restriction only for Egyptian converts.

With pride [Josephus](#) relates that “they [i.e., the Antiochenes] were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks, and they had in some measure incorporated with themselves” ([Josephus J.W. 7.3.3 §45](#)). What this text affirms is hard to discern: that Gentiles converted—probably; that Gentiles were attracted to Jewish customs and were not repelled—certainly; but that [Judaism](#) was therefore a missionary religion or that Jewish missionaries are at work here—clearly not. The evidence does not permit the latter surmises.

We may take the legendary story about [Hillel](#) and [Shammai](#) as a reflection of rabbinic attitudes toward proselytism and proselytes (cf. [b. Šabb. 31a](#); *Abot R. Nat.* 24ab, p. 91). A Gentile wants to be

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 8. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.

taught the whole [Torah](#) while he stands on one foot. [Shammai](#) repulses him; [Hillel](#) expresses the whole law in a negative form of the Golden Rule and accepts him. When another Gentile asks to wear priestly garments [Shammai](#) rejects him; [Hillel](#) teaches him the law and the heathen converts, learns the special prerogative of [priests](#) and abandons his desire for power. While the texts surely represent the Hillelitic viewpoint, the two positions are common sense enough for us to say that within [Judaism](#) there were those who did not want proselytes and those who did. It is likely that [Hillel](#) was more open on this issue.

**3.3. Unfavorable Attitudes.** While the favorable attitude prevails in [Judaism](#), there is evidence that at times Jews either despised proselytes or disapproved of them. We are justified in our suspicion that more often than not unfavorable attitudes toward proselytes probably are the result of bad experiences with either Gentiles or proselytes in particular. Accordingly, in the diverse setting of ancient Judaism it is nearly unassailable that Jews favored proselytes and only rarely did they disapprove of them. However, acceptance of proselytes does not entail an easy transition or an unthinking incorporation of them into the Jewish community (e.g., Porton).

When Philo discusses the [exodus](#) from Egypt he describes the travelers as comprised of a diverse lot, and he looked down on “the children of Egyptian women by Hebrew fathers into whose families they had been adopted” and another group who had converted as a result of miracles from God or his supernatural judgments (Philo [Vit. Mos. 1.147](#)). This latter observation leads one to think of the much later rabbinical category of “lion proselytes” and reveals a much earlier reflection by Jews on the various motives, some of which are not approved, for conversion. What we find in Philo is not a rejection of proselytes but an unfavorable attitude toward certain motives for conversion.

Historically, the negative evidence found in the rabbis has played a major role in Christian reconstructions of post-[Bar Kokhba Judaism](#) with respect to its missionary practices. Thus, [Shammai](#)’s repulsing of the would-be [proselyte](#) ([b. Šabb. 31a](#)), R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus’s exclusion of Amalekites (*Mek. Amalek*, par. 2, lines 177–86), R. Akiba’s rejection of proselytes (*Mek. Shirata*, par. 3, lines 49–63) and R. Helbo’s infamous comment that “Proselytes are as hard for Israel as a sore” ([b. Yebam. 47a](#); [b. Qidd. 70b](#)) are used to suggest that the fundamental approach of [rabbinic Judaism](#) was unfavorable toward proselytes. It is much more likely, however, that these few statements need to be overwhelmed by the positive attitude found throughout rabbinic literature. That is, these statements are occasional exceptions, probably stemming from negative experiences with proselytes.

Just as the positive attitude toward Gentiles was tempered by religious and ethical strictures, so also with proselytes: proselytes could come into the fold of [Judaism](#), but certain moral and theological prescriptions were necessary for an acceptable conversion. There is no evidence that Jews repulsed would-be proselytes who wanted to convert for good reasons; those who wanted to convert for marriage, for political advantages or because they were scared of God’s power were discouraged by some. But this gives no solid basis for considering Jews unfavorable toward proselytes. There is almost no evidence that Jews actively recruited new members or that they aggressively proselytized Gentiles in order that they might become members of [Judaism](#). Rather, for [Judaism](#) conversion was resocialization, and that was nationalization. If Gentiles wanted to join the Jewish nation, to follow its laws, to [worship](#)

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

in its temple, to marry its children ethnically and to fight for its causes, then let them in. But it ought to be noted that a leitmotif of [proselyte](#) evidence in [Judaism](#) is that Gentile conversion is a massive act that will take place on the [Day of the Lord](#) rather than an ongoing challenge to the nation (e.g., [Tob 13:11](#); [Sir 36:11–17](#); [4 Ezra 6:26](#)). For the Jews of this time, they were a light among the nations, not a light to the nations.

#### 4. Methods of Proselytizing

That [Judaism](#) was not a missionary religion does not mean that no missionary activity took place. In fact, there are occasional acts of proselytization that not only reveal dimensions of [Judaism](#) but also may well have been the stock of information drawn on by early Christian missionaries. A survey of the evidence reveals at least eight methods of converting Gentiles to [Judaism](#) and the Jewish nation.

**4.1. God's Intervention.** Above all, Jews believed that when Gentiles did convert, especially on the [Day of the Lord](#), it would be the result of God's intervention in the world. On the last day, Gentiles will stream to Zion ([Tob 13:11](#); [1 Enoch 48:4–5](#); [50:1–5](#); [62:9–13](#); [90:30–33](#); [91:14](#)), even if at times the theme is more triumphalistic than evangelistic (cf. [Jub. 26:23](#); [39:4](#); [T. Sim. 7:2](#); [T. Levi 2:11](#); [4:3–4](#); [18:1–9](#)).

**4.2. Evangelization.** Did Jews evangelize Gentiles? Is there evidence for Jewish missionaries? If we believe the older literature (see [1](#) above), we would argue that there were missionaries who evangelized Gentiles. But the consensus today is twofold: not only is “evangelism” an anachronistic term for ancient [Judaism](#), but also active proselytization was only a rare exception in [Judaism](#). Though Feldman contends that [Judaism](#) was a missionary religion in some sense, he is perplexed by the absence of missionaries: “one of the great puzzles of the proselytizing movement is how to explain the existence of a mass movement [of conversions to [Judaism](#)] when we do not know the name of a single Jewish missionary” (see McKnight 1991, 52).

Though some scholars have pointed to a variety of evidence (e.g., [Sir 39:4](#); [Ep. Arist. 266](#); [T. Levi 14:4](#); [Wis Sol 18:4](#); [Sib.Or. 3:5–10](#); [1QS 10:17–18](#); Philo [Spec. Leg. 1.320–23](#); [Omn. Prob. Lib. 74](#)), by far the most probable piece of evidence can be found in Ananias, a Jewish merchant, who won over Izates ([Josephus Ant. 20.2.3–4 §§35–48](#)). Ananias can profitably be compared with the Christian missionary/[apostle](#) Paul, who used his profession as a tentmaker as a platform for evangelism. After winning over some women of the royal court, Ananias also converted King Izates. Later, a certain Eleazar, knowing that Izates had not yet been circumcised, urged the king to convert completely and be circumcised; and he was. In my [judgment](#), Ananias and perhaps Eleazar may be used as evidence for Jewish missionaries, but only in a guarded sense. It is far more likely that they were merchants who used their professions as opportunities to teach others the customs of the Jews than that they were self-defined missionaries. In this sense, they differ from Paul, who was only tangentially a tentmaker.

However, it is perhaps nitpicking to refuse assignment of these two teachers of the [Torah](#) to the category of missionary. But we need to observe that these are the only two missionaries that we have a Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

record of, if they were even that. That ordinary Jews occasionally spoke up in defense of their religion, that they occasionally explained their religion and practices to others and that they occasionally wanted Gentiles to convert to their religion and took active steps to convert them seems historically plausible. There is no evidence, however, that Jews enlisted missionaries in the Christian sense of the term.

**4.3. Distributing Literature.** Distributing literature for the purpose of converting Gentiles has been regularly considered a method of Jewish proselytism. Documents considered to have been written for this purpose include at least the following: the nonextant Philo, [Apologia hyper Ioudaion](#), [Josephus, Contra Apionem](#), the [Epistle of Aristaeus](#), and [Sibylline Oracles](#), as well as the various texts of [Demetrius](#), Eupolemus and [Aristobulus](#). However, the scholarly classification, definition and explanation, not to mention the historical context from which such literature supposedly emerges, have not yet been delineated with sufficient scholarly rigor to be used in a critical reconstruction of Jewish missionary activity. What has taken place is that scholars have assumed that this literature was designed for Jewish [apologetics](#) and for Jewish proselytization when that assumption is hardly capable of proof. If a given document defends [Judaism](#) against Gentile charges, that alone does not prove that the piece of literature was written to convince Gentiles to convert to [Judaism](#).

There is an insurmountable fact, a phenomenon of the contemporary world, that virtually eliminates such a view from consideration: namely, literature was too expensive to be produced and given to an enemy who may destroy the document (Tcherikover; see [Literacy and Book Culture](#)). We do not need to argue that Jews did not respond to charges against them, but we do need to exercise caution when considering whether they produced literature to convince the opponents to convert. Simple logic reveals that the bulk of apologetic literature fosters internal legitimation rather than external conversion. From a later Christian world, [Tertullian](#) comments on the use of apologetical literature: “to which [literature] no one comes for guidance unless he is already a Christian” ([Tertullian Test.](#) 1). The same scenario best explains the supposed apologetical literature of [Judaism](#). (On Philo and [Josephus](#), see McKnight 1991, 68–73.)

**4.4. Synagogue Influence.** Moore once said, “Their [the Jews] religious influence was exerted chiefly through the synagogues, which they set up for themselves, but which were open to all whom curiosity drew to their services” (Moore, 1:324). Nearly a half century later, however, Kraabel argued the opposite: “There is no evidence from the excavations of attempts to recruit gentiles by means of these buildings. In the inscriptions the word ‘[proselyte](#)’ is very rare: it appears in but one per cent of the Jewish inscriptions from Italy, the largest sample available; and it does not occur in the [synagogue](#) inscriptions at all” (1982, 458). We need not ask whether Gentiles were converted, led to conversion or catechized after their conversion in the [synagogue](#): if they attended the [synagogue](#) those kinds of things happened. What we need to know is whether the [synagogue](#) was intentionally a place for proselytization.

Several pieces of evidence have been offered in defense of the [synagogue](#) as a place of intentional proselytizing through the exposition of [Torah](#) (see Georgi, 83–90): Philo [Spec. Leg.](#) 2.62–63; [Horace Sat.](#) 1.4.138–43; Juvenal [Sat.](#) 14.96–106; [Josephus J.W.](#) 7.3.3 §45. However, the evidence is not as clear as Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

some would have it: (1) Philo's text says nothing about Gentiles, though it does say much about Jewish intensity; (2) Horace's text does not deal with synagogues or with interpreting the [Torah](#) in synagogues; in fact, J. Nolland's recent study suggests that it is concerned with political agitation; (3) Juvenal's comments are also not about synagogues; finally, (4) [Josephus](#)'s comments may lend credence to [synagogue](#) proselytizing, but the text falls short of affirming this as the intention of the activity in the synagogues. It needs to be reiterated that it is probably the case that Gentiles were converted in synagogues, but that the Jews saw their [synagogue](#) meetings as designed to reach out to their Gentile community with the hope of conversion goes well beyond the evidence. The [synagogue](#) was for Jews; if Gentiles wanted to attend and to behave themselves accordingly so that the service could go on without distraction, they were welcomed; that in so attending some found their interest perked or that some of them converted seems reasonable. But that is a long way from arguing that Jews used the [synagogue](#) as a missionary platform (Mc-Knight 1998).

**4.5. Education.** It cannot be demonstrated with probity that the [synagogue](#) was used to proselytize; it remains nonetheless the case that [education](#) was used in proselytizing. If becoming a Jew involved learning the [Torah](#), comprehending the nature of God's dealing with Israel and appreciating the nature of the temple's sacrificial system, then it is undoubtedly the case that concomitant to becoming a [proselyte](#) was being educated in [Judaism](#). The story of [Shammai](#) and [Hillel](#) illustrates the point adequately: when the would-be [proselyte](#) wants to learn [Torah](#) or wear priestly vestments, according to [Hillel](#), he needs to be educated—either as to the [essence](#) of [Torah](#) or to the significance of a specialized priesthood. Philo prides himself on the educational value of the [Torah](#) for humankind: it was translated so “that the greater part, or even the whole, of the human race might be profited and led to a better life” (Philo [Vit. Mos. 2.36](#)). A distinctive feature of [Judaism](#) was the discovering of *asufi* (“foundlings”) and educating them into [Judaism](#) ([Josephus J.W. 2.8.2 §120](#); [m. Qidd. 4:1–3](#)).

**4.6. Good Works.** Probably the most effective, even if fundamentally unconscious, method of attracting Gentiles was through the power of good works and a morally attractive life. The author of the *Epistle of Aristee* has expressed this clearly: “My [belief](#) is that we must (also) show liberal charity to our opponents so that in this manner we may convert them to what is proper and fitting to them. You must pray God that these things be brought to pass, for he rules the minds of all” (226, *APOT*; but cf. *OTP* for a different rendering; see also [T. Ben. 5:1–5](#)). Philo, with his unconquerable praise of the [Torah](#)'s virtues, contends that good behavior led to the translation of the [Torah](#), but “in course of time, the daily, unbroken regularity of practice exercised by those who observed them [the laws] brought them to the [knowledge](#) of others, and their fame began to spread on every side” (Philo [Vit. Mos. 2.27](#)). The son of a Gentile Godfearer described by Juvenal eventually becomes a [proselyte](#) as a result of observing the behavior of others (Juvenal [Sat. 14.96–106](#)).

**4.7. Intermarriage.** Besides the above-mentioned methods of converting Gentiles, we cannot fail to mention that intermarriage was a common means by which a Gentile chose to convert ([m. Qidd. 3:5](#); [b. Yebam. 92b](#); [B. Mes. 16b](#)), and the romantic legend [Joseph and Aseneth](#), in which Aseneth converts as a

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 12. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.

result of her encounter with the wise Joseph, may have legitimated such practice. However, it would be historically unjustified to contend that intermarriage was an intentional method of converting Gentiles.

**4.8. Force.** At certain periods in history certain Jewish movements, led by [charismatic](#) or politically powerful heroes, many conversions took place as the result of force. However triumphalistic the writers' concepts might be, the conversions recorded in Judith ([Jdt 14:10](#)) and Esther ([Esther 8:17](#)) resulted from force. Hyrcanus, Aristobulus I and Alexander Jannaeus each forced Gentiles to convert and be circumcised, even if they saw such as part of an [eschatological](#) program or political purgation ([Josephus Ant. 13.9.1 §§257–58](#); [13.9.3 §§318–19](#); [13.15.4 §397](#); [15.7.9 §§253–54](#)).

In summary, it is likely that the predominant method for conversion in ancient [Judaism](#) was God's stupendous acts in history, especially the future [Day of the Lord](#). It is reasonable to infer from this observation that expectation for conversion in the future emerges from the lack of conversions in the present: that is, since [Judaism](#) was true, since [Yahweh](#) was the one God of the universe and since Gentiles are not now converting to [Judaism](#), they will someday. But there is sufficient evidence of converts, not to mention rules and regulations about them (which imply converts), to contend that some methods were effective in the present. The evidence suggests that the power of good deeds led some Gentiles to inquire about [Judaism](#), and the natural place for their education to occur would be through social discussion or [synagogue](#) activities. It is very doubtful, however, that Jews wrote literature for the express purpose of converting Gentiles, and it is even more doubtful that there were Jewish missionaries.

## 5. Requirements for Proselytes

Conversion theory requires that most religious conversions be accompanied by demonstration events, symbolic actions that communicate the reality of conversion and a commitment to the new religious group. That is, ritual marks the transition from one social body to another and the resocialization process that is thereby implied. Christian scholars need, however, to beware of the common practice of imputing to [Judaism](#) the very ritual that marks the transition into the Christian [faith](#). The evidence from antiquity reveals rather a diverse set of requirements that differ from time and place so that it is no longer accurate to speak of [Judaism](#) requiring [circumcision](#), [baptism](#) and a sacrifice in the temple (replaced by almsgiving after the temple's destruction). Not only is this evidence sparse; it is also skewed in an androcentric direction since the concerns of [women](#) in conversion are silenced.

**5.1. Circumcision.** We can be sure that converts were circumcised ([Jdt 14:10](#)), but the ambiguity of certain authors about the rite reveals that it was not perceived as a necessary requirement by all Jews for all converts (cf. Philo [Som. 2.25](#); [Spec. Leg. 1.304–6](#); [Quaest. in Ex. 2.2](#); but cf. [Migr. Abr. 92](#); see also [Josephus Ant. 20.2.3–4 §§35–49](#)). Circumcision as a conversion ritual becomes confused with how Jews perceived the nation: the act and national identity are not easy to separate ([Josephus J.W. 2.17.10 §454](#)), but when King Izates becomes serious about his commitment to [Judaism](#) he undergoes [circumcision](#) ([Josephus Ant. 20.2.3–4 §§35–49](#)). I suspect that Paul's contention that converts to [Messiah](#) Jesus did not have to be circumcised would not have been either a startling innovation or Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

unacceptable to all, even if it caused no small disturbance for the Jerusalem converts ([Gal 5:2](#), [6](#), [12](#); [6:15](#); [Phil 3:2](#); cf. [Acts 15:1–2](#)). The evidence from the rabbis, though hardly plentiful, suggests that even though there was dispute about how quickly the convert needed to submit to the rite, [circumcision](#) was required because it was in [Torah](#) (cf. [m. ·Ed. 5:2](#); [m. Pesah. 8:8](#); [b. Pesah. 92a](#); [t. Pesah. 7:14](#); [b. Šabb. 135a](#); later see [b. Yebam. 46a](#); [71a](#)). A safe historical inference is that [circumcision](#) was required but there were dissenting voices at different times for special reasons.

**5.2. Baptism.** The evidence for [proselyte baptism](#) is even less clear. Water lustrations were clearly a part of [Judaism](#), and ceremonial cleansings were knit deeply into the fabric of [Judaism](#). Therefore a transition rite, such as [baptism](#), seems reasonable, but the evidence is not as clear as this. Baptism is understood in Christianity as a one-time, unrepeatable initiation rite, but the evidence for [Judaism](#) practicing [baptism](#) in this manner is either unavailable or (which is more likely) nonexistent because it was not a feature of [Judaism](#) until after the [Bar Kokhba](#) revolt.

It seems possible that [Sibylline Oracles 4:162–65](#) refers to a pre-Christian [proselyte](#) baptismal rite. It reads: “Ah, wretched mortals, change these things, and do not lead the great God to all sorts of anger, but abandon daggers and groanings, murders and outrages, and *wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers*” (italics added). Not only is the date of this passage unclear (probably around A.D. 80), but also the heavy use of [metaphor](#) makes one wonder if a physical act is involved. Apart from this text, the evidence from Philo, [Josephus](#) (where Izates is not baptized) and *Joseph and Aseneth* (where Aseneth is not baptized) show a uniform absence of the rite as a conversion act. The rabbinic evidence gains clarity over time: the earliest texts are ambiguous (e.g., [t. Pesah. 7:13](#); [m. ·Ed. 5:2](#); [m. Pesah. 8:8](#); [b. Pesah. 92a](#)), while the latter ones show a rite prescribed for converts ([b. Yebam. 46a](#); [71a](#)). It is reasonable then to argue that [baptism](#), as an initiation rite, was a symbolic rite in progress in [Judaism](#) when John, probably Jesus and certainly early Christians like Paul began to use the rite as the prevailing entry rite into the newfound movement.

**5.3. Sacrifices.** [Judaism](#) was dominated by temple, and that meant [sacrifice](#); it seems reasonable that [Judaism](#) may have required converts to offer a first sacrifice as part of their conversion process. But the evidence is shaky, and the reality of the situation mitigates against sacrifice being a conversion requirement. However important temple was to [Judaism](#), sacrifice was not an integral part of religious life for most Jews, especially those who had no opportunity to visit the temple. Consequently, the voice of Philo may well represent if not a studied view at least a common-sense response: “What is precious in the sight of God is not the number of victims immolated but the true purity of a [rational](#) spirit in him who makes the sacrifice” (Philo [Spec. Leg. 1.277](#)). Thus, “if he is pure of heart and just, this sacrifice stands firm ... even if no victim at all is brought to the altar” (Philo [Vit. Mos. 2.107–8](#)). Though Helene of Adiabene offered a sacrifice when she visited Jerusalem there is no evidence that she did so to fulfill some duty ([Josephus Ant. 20.2.5 §49](#)).

The evidence of the rabbis is explicitly silent regarding first-century practice: why prescribe what can't be done when the temple is no longer standing? Thus we are justified to agree with Moore: “The offering of a sacrifice is, thus, not one of the conditions of becoming a [proselyte](#), but only a condition” (Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

precedent to the exercise of one of the rights which belong to him as a [proselyte](#), namely, the participation in a sacrificial meal” (Moore 1:332). Later rabbis, however, assume the practice and grant a substitute in almsgiving (cf. [m. Ker. 2:1](#); [b. Ker. 8a–9a](#); [b. Roš Haš. 31b](#)).

In conclusion, the requirements for proselytes varied from time to time and according to the dominating customs of local culture. It can be said, however, that all Jews would have expected repentance, obedience and social integration into the Jewish community if one wanted to become a [proselyte](#) (cf. Philo [Det. Pot. Ins. 97](#); [Spec. Leg. 1.277](#); [Cher. 95–96](#); [Jos. and As.](#)). It can also be maintained that the absence of data about requirements perhaps reflects the scarcity of conversions and proselytes.

## 6. Levels of Adherence

The rabbis made several distinctions among proselytes, including the following: the true [proselyte](#) (*ger sedeq*; see [b. Pesah. 21b](#); [b. Git. 57b](#)), the resident alien (*ger toshab*; see [b. Abod. Zar. 64b](#); [b. Git. 57b](#)), the lion/fear [proselyte](#) (*ger arayot*; see [b. Qidd. 75ab](#)) and the dream [proselyte](#) (*ger halomot*; see [b. Yebam. 24b](#); [b. Menah. 44a](#)). The first is the [proselyte](#) who converts for the right reasons and lives righteously according to the [Torah](#); the second is the Gentile who lives appropriately in the land of Israel; the third, stemming from [2 Kings 17:25](#), converts out of fear or as a result of seeing a [miracle](#), and the conversion is not perceived as complete; the fourth refers to those who convert to their own advantage. While this categorization may prove helpful to later rabbis, there is no evidence that any of these terms were used in the first century. Two kinds of evidence are [extant](#), however, that permit us to see that first-century Jews saw levels of adherence among proselytes and these categories allowed them to define the true Jew more accurately as well as the kinds of conversions that were being made.

**6.1. Motives for Conversion.** From Philo’s [exegesis](#) of [Exodus 12:38](#) (“a mixed crowd [*ēreb rab*] also went up with them,” [Vit. Mos. 1.147](#)) we can see that Philo himself saw at least two different motives for conversion (see McKnight 1989). The text reads: “They were accompanied by a promiscuous, nondescript and menial crowd, a bastard host, so to speak, associated with the true-born. These were (1) the children of Egyptian women by Hebrew fathers into whose families they had been adopted, (2) also those who, reverencing the divine favor shown to the people, had come over to them, (3) and such as were converted and brought to a wiser mind by the magnitude and the number of the successive punishments.” As a result of an apparent contact with what we now find in the targumic [tradition](#) (cf. [Tg. Neof. on Ex 12:38](#)) Philo has revolutionized a group: from a “mixed crowd” to three separable groups, two of which are kinds of proselytes! Thus we have children educated into [Judaism](#), proselytes who converted as a result of miracles and proselytes who converted after seeing God’s punishments. Another distinction, that between the true [proselyte](#) and the resident alien, seems to be made by Philo ([Virt. 102–8](#)). Thus we can safely conclude that some Jews knew of levels of adherence to [Judaism](#) and categorized proselytes accordingly.

**6.2. Godfearers.** The issue of the meaning of Godfearers has recently been revisited and deserves consideration (Trebilco, 145–66; Mc-Knight 1991, 110–14). A standard [perception](#) of the Godfearer is Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

that it is a technical term, describing a Gentile who has only partly committed himself or herself to [Judaism](#), but this definition has been overturned. In general, scholars are convinced that the Jewish communities, especially in the [Diaspora](#) (Barclay), attracted in various ways a diversity of Gentiles who may accurately be termed “sympathizers” (Feldman, 342–82). The term *Godfearer* describes either Jews or Gentiles and apparently most of the time on the basis of observable piety ([Jos. and As. 4:7](#); [23:3–13](#); [27:1](#); [28:7](#); [29:3](#); [Josephus Ant. 20.2.4 §41](#)). The question now is what it means when used of a Gentile and whether that term is technical for a specific class of partial converts.

In the Acts of the Apostles the term *Godfearer* is used of Gentiles who honor God in various ways (including almsgiving and [synagogue](#) participation) who are distinguished from run-of-the-mill Gentiles, and the term seems to be nearly synonymous with “[proselyte](#)” or a category of proselytes; that is, for Luke the Godfearer is a quasi-official sympathizer with [Judaism](#) ([Acts 10:2, 22](#); [13:16](#), [26](#), [43](#), [50](#); [17:4](#), [17](#); [18:7](#)).

This quasi-official participation in [Judaism](#) has been recently confirmed by the discovery in Aphrodisias of a stele that dates to about A.D. 210 (Reynolds and Tannenbaum). In a list of subscribers to a Jewish institution, perhaps a soup kitchen or a [burial](#) society, there are three proselytes (*a.* lines 13, 17, 22) and two “Godfearers” (*theosebēs*, lines 19–20). On face *b.* of the stele there is a list of fifty-four Jews and, after a break, a list of fifty Godfearers whose names are either Greek or Greco-Roman, suggesting a Gentile origin for the group. This text reveals there is a distinction, for this community, between Gentiles and Jews, between Jews and proselytes and between proselytes and Godfearers. We do not have hard data about much else regarding this group, such as the nature and degree of their participation or how they became associated with [Judaism](#), but we do now have independent data that suggests, with Luke, that the distinction between proselytes and Godfearers was being made.

See also [ARISTEAS, EPISTLE OF](#); [DIASPORA](#); [EDUCATION: JEWISH AND GRECO-ROMAN](#); [JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN ASIA MINOR](#); [LITERACY AND BOOK CULTURE](#); [PERSECUTION](#); [RELIGION, GRECO-ROMAN](#); [RELIGION, PERSONAL](#); [THEOLOGIES AND SECTS, JEWISH](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY. B. J. Bamberger, [Proselytism in the Talmudic Era](#) (2d ed.; New York: Ktav, 1968); J.G. M. Barclay, [Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora](#) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); A. Bertholet, [Die Stellung der Israeliten und der Juden zu den Fremden](#) (Freiburg and Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1896); E. Bickerman, “[The Warning Inscriptions of Herod’s Temple](#),” *JQR* 37 (1946–47) 387–405; S. F. Bonner, [Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny](#) (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); W. G. Braude, [Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era, the Age of the Tannaim and the Amoraim](#) (BUS 6; Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1940); L. H. Feldman, [Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian](#) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); D. Georgi, [The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians](#) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); M. Goodman, [Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); F. Hahn, [Mission in the New Testament](#) (SBT 47; London: SCM, 1981); M. Hengel, [Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period](#) (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); J. Jeremias, [Jesus’ Promise to](#) Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, [Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[the Nations](#) (SBT 24; London: SCM, 1958); A. T. Kraabel, "[The Impact of the Discovery at Sardis](#)," in *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times: Results of the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, 1958–1975*, ed. G. M. Hanfmann and W. E. Mierse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 178–90; idem, "[The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions](#)," *JJS* 33 (1982) 445–64; S. McKnight, "[De Vita Mosis 1.147: Lion Proselytes in Philo?](#)" in *The Studia Philonica Annual: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* 1 (1989) 58–62; idem, "[Jewish Missionary Activity: The Evidence of Demographics and Synagogues](#)," in *Jewish Proselytism*, ed. A.-J. Levine and R. Pervo (Atlanta: Scholars Press, forthcoming); idem, [A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930); J. Nolland, "[Proselytism or Politics in Horace Satires 1.4.138–43?](#)" *VC* 33 (1979) 347–55; G. Porton, [The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature](#) (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); J. S. Raisin, [Gentile Reactions to Jewish Ideals, with Special Reference to Proselytes](#), ed. H. Hailperin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953); J. Reynolds and R. F. Tannenbaum, [Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary](#) (CPSSV 12; Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987); J.R. Rosenbloom, [Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present](#) (HUCAS: Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978); E. P. Sanders, [Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63 B.C.E.—66 C.E.](#) (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992); V. Tcherikover, "[Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered](#)," *Eos* 48 (1956) 169–93; P. Trebilco, [Jewish Communities in Asia Minor](#) (SNTSMS 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

S. McKnight

Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Page 17. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:35 PM May 1, 2015.