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The Invention of the Jewish People, 2009

It is a common belief that Judaism is a religion into which one is born. Conversions are infrequent and not even encouraged by some orthodox groups. We saw in the last chapter that Judaism was indeed an inherited national religion for the people of ancient Palestine. But in the Hellenistic period (after Alexander the Great and his successors spread Greek culture throughout the Middle East), some schools of Judaism embraced a more global view of their place in the world. We saw different manifestations of such universalism in the teachings of Daniel, Jesus, and, especially, Paul. But maybe Paul was neither as unique nor such a break with Judaism as is usually maintained.

In this selection by an Israeli historian we are asked to consider the possibility that Christianity was not the only branch of Judaism that converted large numbers of people in the centuries of the Roman Empire. What is the argument of Shlomo Sand? What is his evidence? What do you think of his conclusion?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Sand makes a number of startling claims for both continuity and change. What claims of change does he make for the spread of the Jewish and Christian religions? What claim of continuity does he make for both religions? Why is a religion based on belief that one chooses to convert to more open to changes than a religion that one is born into?

The popularity of Judaism before and after the Common Era spread beyond the Mediterranean region. In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus tells the fabulous story of the conversion to Judaism in the first century CE of the rulers of Adiabene (Hadyab). As this conversion is described in other sources, there is no reason to doubt its broad outline.

The kingdom of Adiabene was in the north of the Fertile Crescent, roughly corresponding to today's Kurdistan and Armenia. Jewish proselytizing led to the conversion of the kingdom's much-loved heir to the throne, Izates, as well as his mother Helena, herself an important personage in the kingdom. They were persuaded to convert by a merchant named Hananiah, who assured the prince that it was enough to observe the precepts without being circumcised. However, when the prince

Source: Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, trans. Yael Lotan (London: Verso, 2009), 165–73, 176.

ascended the throne, a stricter Jewish preacher, a Galilean named Eleazar, demanded that he circumcise himself in order to complete his conversion, and Izates complied. Josephus reports that the ruling dynasty's conversion annoyed Adiabene's nobility, some of whom tried to rebel. But Izates succeeded in suppressing and eliminating his pagan enemies, and when his brother Monobazus II (Monobaz) succeeded him, he too converted to Judaism, along with the rest of the royal family. Queen Helena, accompanied by her son, went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she helped the Judeans to survive a severe drought, and she was buried in the holy city in a grand "royal tomb" built for her. The sons of Izates also went to the holy city in the center of Judea to be educated in the faith. . . .

The kingdom of Adiabene was the first political entity outside Judea to convert to Judaism, but it was not the last. Nor was it the only one to give rise to an important Jewish community that would survive until modern times.

If Alexander's conquests created an open Hellenistic sphere, Rome's expansion and her enormous empire completed the process. Henceforth, all the cultural centers around the Mediterranean basin would undergo the dynamism of blending and the forging of new phenomena. The littorals¹ grew closer, and the passage from the eastern to the western end became easier and faster. This emerging world opened a fresh perspective for the spread of Judaism; at its high point there, Judaism was professed by 7 to 8 percent of all the empire's inhabitants. The word "Jew" ceased to denote the people of Judea, and now included the masses of proselytes and their descendants.

At the height of Judaism's expansion, in the early third century CE, Cassius Dio described this significant historical development, asserting: "I do not know how this title [Jews] came to be given to them, but it applies also to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their customs." His near contemporary, the Christian theologian Origen, wrote: "The noun *ioudaios* is not the name of an *ethnos*, but of a choice [in the manner of life]. For if there be someone not from the nation of the Jews, a gentile, who accepts the ways of the Jews and becomes a proselyte, this person would properly be called a *ioudaios*."* . . .

As the rate of conversion to Judaism intensified, so did the government's disquiet and the resentment on the part of many Latin intellectuals.

* See DAH 105

¹ Coasts. [Ed.]

The great Roman poet Horace made a humorous reference to the Jewish missionary drive in one of his poems: "like the Jews, we [the poets] will force you to come over to our numerous party." The philosopher Seneca thought the Jews were a damned people, because "the customs of this accursed race have gained such influence that they are now received throughout all the world. The vanquished have given laws to their victors." The historian Tacitus, no lover of Jews, was even more acerbic about the converts to Judaism:

The most degraded out of other races, scorning their national beliefs, brought to them their contributions and presents. This augmented the wealth of the Jews . . . Circumcision was adopted by them as a mark of difference from other men. Those who come over to their religion adopt the practice, and have this lesson first instilled into them, to despise all gods, to disown their country, and set at naught parents, children, and brethren.

Juvenal, the author of the *Satires*, written in the early second century CE, was especially sarcastic. He did not hide his disgust at the wave of Juda-ization sweeping over many good Romans, and ridiculed the process of conversion that had become popular in his time:

Some who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine's flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practise and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses committed to his secret tome, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life.

At the end of the second century, Celsus, a philosopher known for his dislike of the Christians, was much less hostile to the Jews. But as the conversions grew apace, and the old religions were abandoned, he became openly antagonistic toward the proselytized masses, stating, "If, then, in these respects the Jews were carefully to preserve their own law, they are not to be blamed for so doing, but those persons rather who have forsaken their own usages, and adopted those of the Jews."

This mass phenomenon annoyed the authorities in Rome and upset a good many of the capital's prominent literati. It upset them because Judaism became seductive to broad circles. All the conceptual and intellectual elements that would make for the future appeal of Christianity

and its eventual triumph were present in this transient success of Judaism; traditional, conservative Romans felt the danger and voiced their concern in various ways.

The crisis of the hedonistic culture, the absence of an integrating belief in collective values, and the corruption infecting the administration of the imperial government appeared to call for tighter normative systems and a firmer ritual framework—and the Jewish religion met those needs. The Sabbath rest, the concept of reward and punishment, the belief in an afterlife, and above all the transcendent hope of resurrection were enticing features that persuaded many people to adopt the Jewish faith.

Furthermore, Judaism also offered a rare communal feeling that the spreading imperial world, with its corrosive effects on old identities and traditions, seemed to lack. It was not easy to follow the new set of commandments, but joining the chosen people, the holy nation, also conferred a precious sense of distinction, a fair compensation for the effort. The most intriguing element of this process was its gender aspect—it was the women who led the large-scale movement of Judaization.

Josephus's story about Damascus noted that Judaism was especially popular among the city's women, and as we have seen, Queen Helena of Adiabene had a decisive role in the conversion of the royal family. In the New Testament, we are told, Saul of Tarsus, known as Paul, had a disciple who was "the son of a certain woman which was a Jewess and believed, but his father *was* a Greek" (Acts 16:1). In Rome, too, the women were drawn more readily to Judaism. The poet Martial, who came from Iberia, made fun of the women who observed the Sabbath. Epigraphic material² from the Jewish catacombs names as many female converts as male. Especially notable is the inscription about Veturia Paulla, who was renamed Sarah after her conversion and became the "mother" of two synagogues. Fulvia (wife of Saturninus)—on whose account, according to Josephus, Jews were expelled in the year 19 CE—was a full convert. Pomponia Graecina, the wife of the famous commander Aulus Plautius, who conquered Britain, was put on trial and divorced by her husband for her devotion to the Jewish (or possibly the Christian) faith. Poppaea Sabina, the emperor Nero's second wife, made no secret of her tendency to Judaism. These women and many other matrons spread the Jewish faith in Rome's upper classes. There is evidence that Judaism was also becoming popular among the lower urban classes, as well as among the soldiers and freed slaves. From Rome, Judaism spilled over to parts of Europe annexed by the Roman Empire, such as the Slavic and Germanic lands, southern Gaul and Spain.

The pivotal role of women in proselytization might indicate a particular female interest in the religion's personal laws, such as the early

²Inscriptions. [Ed.]

rules of personal purification, which were preferred to the common pagan customs. Possibly it was also due to the fact that women did not have to undergo circumcision, which was a difficult requirement that deterred many would-be male converts. In the second century CE, after Hadrian prohibited all circumcision, the emperor Antoninus Pius permitted the Jews to circumcise their sons, but forbade males who were not children of Jews to do it. This was another reason that, parallel with the increase of converts, there was a growing category of "God-fearers"—probably an adaptation of the biblical term "fearers of Yahweh" (*sebomenoï* in Greek; *metuentes* in Latin).

These were semi-converts—people who formed broad peripheries around the Jewish community, took part in its ceremonies, attended the synagogues, but did not keep all the commandments. Josephus mentions them several times, and describes Nero's wife as God-fearing. The term is also found in many extant synagogue inscriptions as well as Roman catacombs. The New Testament confirms their massive presence. For example: "And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). When Paul reached Antioch, he entered a synagogue on the Sabbath and began his sermon with the words, "Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience" (Acts 13:16). In case some of his hearers were puzzled by this address, he said further: "Men *and* brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent" (13:26). The text goes on: "Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas" (13:43). The next week, a row broke out between zealous Jews and the two successful preachers—"But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts" (13:50). The two missionaries went on their way and reached the city of Philippi in Macedonia. There, "we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted *thither*. And a certain woman . . . whose heart the Lord opened . . . was baptized, and her household" (Acts 16:13-15).

It was precisely in these gray areas, between troubled paganism and partial or full conversion to Judaism, that Christianity made headway. Carried by the momentum of proliferating Judaism and the flourishing varieties of religious syncretism, an open and more flexible belief system arose that skillfully adapted to those who accepted it. It is amazing to what extent the followers of Jesus, the authors of the New Testament, were conscious of the two competing marketing policies. The Gospel of Matthew offers additional testimony to outright Jewish missionizing as well as its limitation: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves" (Matt. 23:15).

This was, of course, the criticism of experienced, professional preachers about the strict commandments from which they were distancing themselves. These new preachers were better at interpreting the sensitivities of the shaky polytheistic world, and knew how to offer it a more sophisticated, user-friendly approach to the monotheistic deity. . . .

In this lively culture of God-fearers, partial converts, full converts, Christian Jews, and born Jews, canceling commandments while preserving the belief in the one god was a revolutionary move of liberation and alleviation. For the spreading monotheism to withstand persecution and external opposition, it had to loosen the exclusivist tendency that lingered in it from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.³ In the rising Christian world, there was greater equality between new and established members, and there was even some preference for the “poor in spirit,” namely the newcomers. The young religion discarded the element of privileged genealogy—now limited to Jesus as the son of God—and opted for a more sublime genealogy, that of the messianic-universal telos: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye *be* Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3: 28–9)

It was Paul who completed the transformation of “Israel in the flesh” into “Israel in the spirit,” an idea that conformed with the open and flexible policy of identities that increasingly characterized the Roman Empire. It was not surprising that this dynamic monotheistic movement, which introduced the idea of charity and compassion for all (and the resurrection of at least one person), eventually triumphed over paganism, and cast it into the rubbish bin of history throughout Europe.

³Fifth Century B.C.E. [Ed.]

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Source: P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *The Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), 489–91.