CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

Many scholars have sought the origins of the early Christian mission in a prior Jewish mission to gentiles. However, although proselytes and sympathizers from among the gentiles may have been drawn to the Jewish community in antiquity in fair numbers, there were no Jewish missionaries, and evidence which might suggest active proselytizing by Jews is sparse indeed. The lack of evidence in the second temple period for Jewish missionizing activity has suggested to some scholars that there was a lack of interest in conversion of gentiles among Jews in antiquity. This study, by contrast, has shown that interest in gentiles and their conversion is widely evident in the Hebrew Scriptures, above all the book of Isaiah. However, this did not involve the concept of a mission of Israel to the gentiles, but rather an intense expectation of an eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion, linked with an interest in present day conversions as an anticipation of this future ingathering of the gentiles. The focus in Isaiah upon the nations is most prominent of all in chapters 40-55, and reaches a climax in the Servant Songs, where the Servant is commissioned as a “light to the nations” in the time of Yahweh’s impending eschatological reign. The Servant Songs thus contain the unique expression in the Old Testament of a mission for the gentiles; however, the identity of this figure is not explicit in Isaiah.

This study has also documented a widespread and intense interest in conversion of gentiles among Jews throughout the second temple period. To be sure, interest in conversion of gentiles was not shared by all Jews in antiquity. However, this interest is strikingly evident in many texts, both in Palestine and the diaspora, and was certainly widespread. This did not, however, involve a consciousness of mission to the gentiles or an obligation actively to seek proselytes. Shaped profoundly by exegesis of the Scriptures, especially the book of Isaiah, Jewish thought regarding gentiles in the second temple period rather centered in the hope of a pilgrimage of the nations to Zion in the eschatological time of Israel’s restoration. In Jewish thinking in antiquity, as seen in Philo and elsewhere, present day proselytes were understood within the context of this expectation, as in some sense anticipating the conversion of the nations to Judaism in the impending time of the nation’s restoration.
This profoundly Jewish understanding of the role of Israel for the nations, evident in the Jewish documents examined in chapters two and three, illuminates in turn the hotly debated evidence for Jewish proselytizing activity in antiquity discussed in chapter one. The problem of Jewish mission is, in a sense, simply this: why is there firm evidence in the second temple period for an eagerness to embrace and instruct gentile converts, but little or no evidence for active efforts to convert gentiles? Many scholars, giving full weight to the evidence for an eagerness on the part of some Jews to welcome gentile converts, have assumed the existence of a Jewish mission (e.g. Georgi, Feldman, Carleton Paget). Other scholars, recognizing the lack of evidence for proselytizing activity or a consciousness of mission in ancient Judaism, have concluded that Jews in antiquity had little or no interest in conversion of gentiles (e.g. Goodman, Kraabel). A solution to the problem of Jewish mission has proven elusive, because the solutions proposed have in each case failed to explain a good portion of the evidence.

This study, by contrast, suggests that scholars have worked with false alternatives, because they have failed to grasp Jewish thinking in antiquity regarding gentiles and their conversion. The Jewish documents we have examined reveal an intense interest in conversion of gentiles, but the context of this interest is not a Jewish consciousness of mission, but the expectation of a future conversion of gentiles in the impending time of the Jewish nation’s eschatological restoration. In Jewish thinking, proselytes in the present time anticipate this coming conversion of the gentiles. The expectation of a future pilgrimage of the nations and interest in present day proselytes belong together in Jewish thought. This Jewish understanding explains both the eagerness of Jews to embrace gentile converts, and the lack of a Jewish mission to gentiles.

This study has also shown that the Hebrew Scriptures, above all the book of Isaiah, played a formative role in Jewish understandings of the role of Israel in regard to the nations. Strikingly, the Servant Songs of Isaiah, in which the focus in Isaiah 40-55 on Yahweh’s activity for the nations reaches its climax, are in second temple Judaism a major focus of exegetical reflection on conversion of gentiles and Israel’s function for the nations. In a widespread exegetical tradition, the “light to the nations” of the first two Servant Songs is associated with the eschatological pilgrimage of the gentiles, and the Servant is identified with the nation of Israel and its mediatorial role.