1. Issues

Most scholars hold that for practical purposes, after the massive defeats of the Jews in the uprisings of 66-74, 115-117, and 132-135, proselytism by Jews ceased after the last of these uprisings because of the penalty of death imposed by the Romans for proselytism and because of the tremendous hatred which the Jews experienced from Gentiles in reaction to previous Jewish success in winning converts in the preceding centuries and which drove the Jews into isolation. Moreover, they look upon Judaism as "declining" precisely to the extent that Christianity rose. This view has been contested by Simon\(^1\), but no one has made a systematic study of the evidence to be found in imperial laws, Church councils, the writings of Church Fathers, the Talmudic corpus, and inscriptions. Over forty years have elapsed since Simon's own study, which must now be corrected and supplemented in view of further evidence, particularly epigraphic, the most important being the newly discovered inscriptions at Aphrodisias in the Asia Minor. Furthermore, we must distinguish more carefully among the nuances involved in organized, active missionary activities by Jews, readiness by Jews to accept converts but without active measures to do so, grudging acceptance of converts, adoption of certain practices of Judaism without actual conversion, and merely favorable disposition of

Gentiles to Jews and Judaism\(^2\)). Indeed, as Wilken\(^3\) has remarked, a thorough critical study of Jewish proselytism during this period does not exist.

The third century is one of the great turning points in world history\(^4\), it being the century of tremendous decline in the Roman Empire and the one just before the shift from imperial paganism to Christianity. Unfortunately, our chief source for the political events of this period is the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, which, as Syme\(^5\) has conclusively shown, is a partly historical romance by a fraudulent author.

We are here concerned with the following issues in particular: 1) To what extent were the Jews active missionaries during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries? 2) To what degree did Jews continue to win proselytes during these centuries though without actively seeking them out? 3) To what extent did Judaism withdraw into itself\(^6\)


\(^3\) Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983) 91, n. 9. As Wilken notes, though the books by Bernard J. Bamberger (*Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1939]) and William G. Braude (*Jewish Proselyting in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era: The Age of the Tannaism and Amoraim* [Providence: Brown University, 1940]) deal extensively with the attitude toward proselytism during this period, their conclusions are drawn almost exclusively from the statements of the rabbis and disregard almost completely the other sources as noted above. Cf. the critique of Braude's book on these grounds by Gedalaihu Alon, *Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple, the Mishna and the Talmud*, vol. 2 [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1958) 278-284. To Alon's criticism we may add that Bamberger and Braude make almost no attempt to differentiate between the attitudes of the rabbis in the various centuries of the Talmudic period, let alone to consider the impact of the changes in the Roman Empire and of the rise and triumph of Christianity upon the proselytizing movement.


\(^6\) Cf., e.g., Alfredo Mordecai Rabello, "The Legal Condition of the Jews in the Roman Empire," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.13 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 745: "Under the Christian Emperors, Judaism, unable to acquire converts, was compelled to withdraw into itself." So also Louis M. O. Duchesne, *Histoire ancienne de l’Église*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (Paris: de Boccard, 1910) 568, English trans. by Claude Jenkins, *Early History of the Christian Church, from Its Foundations to the End of the Fifth Century* (London: Murray, 1908) 412: "The religious life now became very narrow. The day of liberal Jews, who courted with hellenism and with the government, was past and gone for good. There is no longer any desire