



PROJECT MUSE®

Crossing over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period (review)

James C. Miller

Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 411-413 (Review)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400608>

sectarian communities, but he does not explain the nature of other Jewish groups of the time of the Essenes. Lawrence Schiffman (*Qumran and Jerusalem: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the History of Judaism*, Eerdmans, 2010) argues that clues can be found in some of the scrolls related to Pharisaic and Sadducean views. It may be necessary to look at more than the sectarian texts in order to understand the nature of the sectarians.

Even if one explains the origins of the sectarian texts within the collection, this does not explain why the present collection contains so much diversity. Collins seems correct when he says that not all the scrolls were written at Qumran. He suggests that they may have been “brought to Qumran for safekeeping from various Essene settlements” (p. 210). If this is true, how can one explain why such a sect would preserve such a variety of texts? Would that not help explain the nature of the sect?

Stephen A. Reed
Jamestown College
Jamestown, ND 58405
reed@jc.edu

CROSSING OVER SEA AND LAND: JEWISH MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD. By Michael F. Bird. Pp. xvi + 208. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010. Paper, \$24.95.

In this short and crisply written monograph, Michael Bird tackles the difficult issue of whether the early Christian impulse for outreach among non-Jews was a continuation in one form or another of earlier Jewish proselytizing efforts or if it was something altogether new? Answering that question requires grappling with just how “missionary” Judaism was before the rise of the early Christian movement and then determining, if such a missionary impulse existed, what influence that drive had on early Christians.

Bird organizes his analysis into six chapters. As one would expect, Bird’s opening chapter defines the problem addressed, offers a brief history of research, states his thesis and its expected contribution to the debate, and outlines the manner in which he will argue his thesis. Briefly stated, during most of the twentieth century, scholars held that Judaism was a missionary religion and this factor explained the missionary activity of the early Christians. During the 1990s, however, Scot McKnight (*A Light Among the Gentiles* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991]) and Martin Goodman (*Mission and Conversion* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]) challenged this consensus and, in the mind of most scholars, overturned it. Bird agrees with the newer approach, seeking to nuance and update the discussion.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the definition of the key terms “mission” and “conversion.” For Bird, mission within an ancient context indicates any number of organized activities that seek to persuade non-Jews to convert to Judaism. Conversion in this context entails making a commitment to monotheism, adopting the values and behaviors of the Jewish community, and undertaking Jewish ritual and rites, especially male circumcision. The final result would be full social integration into the community.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Jewish missionary activity in Palestine and in the Diaspora respectively. Evidence exists of forced conversions in Palestine through military conquest and resettlement. Bird examines sources from Palestine such as Qumran literature, the Gospel of Matthew, the Maccabean writings, and rabbinic literature. He finds no evidence of missionary activity with the possible exception of the logion from Matthew 23:15 (“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert”), suggesting instead that more evidence of conversions exists from Diaspora literature. Here, relying on Josephus and Philo, Bird finds a consistent openness to Gentiles integrating into Jewish communities, but again, no evidence of deliberate, organized outreach.

Chapter 5 analyzes evidence from early Christian writings, primarily the New Testament. Bird recognizes two overlooked strands of evidence for his subject from these texts. First, Paul’s letters (e.g., Galatians) demonstrate the existence of Jewish Christian proselytizers who sought out Gentile converts and, unlike Paul, demanded that male converts be circumcised. Second, Bird believes the so-called “Colossian heresy” indicates a situation where mystical Jewish groups were attempting to blunt Paul’s missionary activity by recruiting Christian Gentiles into their own tradition. Bird thus believes that Colossians offers some of the best evidence for Jewish missionary work. What is puzzling in this chapter is why Bird does not recognize Paul and his fellow-workers as an example of Jewish missionary action. Bird writes, “Whereas the Jewish Christian proselytizers can legitimately be regarded as a form of Jewish missionary activity albeit with a messianic bent, this cannot be said of Paul and the like-minded associates” (p. 137). Bird’s reason for this judgment is that Paul did not require male Gentile converts to undergo circumcision. But what was the movement Paul spearheaded if it was not Jewish? Bird himself states that “the entire Christian movement at least before 70 C.E.” can be described as “Jewish Christian” (p. 134; I would prefer “Christian Judaism”). Bird’s judgment here reflects a tendency in the book to distinguish something called “Christianity” at this early date from something else called “Judaism.” I believe that distinction to be untenable.

In chapter 6, Bird summarizes his argument by concluding that Second Temple Judaism was not “a missionary religion.” But he insists that this description must be qualified in significant ways. For example, the highly di-

verse, geographically dispersed Judaism of this period means that asking what Jews thought about the role of non-Jews requires first, "Which Jews? In what geographic location? At what time period?" The best we can generalize is to say that Judaism attracted Gentiles and facilitated their conversion. Yet, surviving evidence offers no indication of deliberate, organized recruitment of non-Jews.

In terms of the origins of early Christian missions to Gentiles, Bird draws three major conclusions. First, the emergence of these missions and the disputes among Christian groups it provoked can both be fully explained within a Jewish framework. Early Jewish Christ-followers found a call to the Gentiles in their reading of Israel's traditions, particularly in Isaiah. Disagreements between early Christians over the conditions on which Gentiles were admitted to God's people reflect similar controversies among non-Christian Jewish groups. Second, a distinctive Christian Jewish approach to Gentiles emerged that set it apart from other Jewish perspectives. Characteristics of this approach included: beliefs about a risen and exalted Jesus, a belief that the end of the ages had dawned, and an understanding that those who followed Jesus were the end time elect of God. Thus, finally, the early Christian mission to Gentiles represents a transformation of Jewish views regarding the place of non-Jews in God's salvation.

The book concludes with a helpful twenty page appendix providing central ancient texts typically cited in this debate in both their original language and English translation. Also included are a full bibliography and indices of modern authors, subjects, and ancient sources.

In summary, Bird's succinct overview of primary and secondary literature plus his inclusion of source materials themselves provides the student or scholar seeking an *entrée* into the subject with a useful, up-to-date guide. Whether or not one accepts the significance of Bird's intriguing interpretation of Colossians as evidence for Jewish missionary activity depends on how one interprets the debated "Colossian heresy." Furthermore, I believe Bird's exclusion of Paul's missionary efforts as evidence for Second Temple Jewish missionary activity represents an opportunity missed for defining the subject; Paul should be viewed as a Jew engaged in such an endeavor. Nevertheless, Bird provides readers with a readable, informed overview of the state of the question.

James C. Miller
Asbury Theological Seminary
Orlando, FL 32825
james.miller@asburyseminary.edu