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Source: *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (Jul., 1999), pp. 359-362

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [Harvard Divinity School](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1510132>

Accessed: 22/01/2015 20:37

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The Call to Discipleship and Proselytizing*

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Proselytizing is addressed expressly in only one passage in the New Testament (Matt 23:15). Its appearance there in material unique to the First Gospel and in the negative form of a curse, already has been justifiably criticized by J. Gnilka.¹ My brief essay, however, does not concern itself with such a critique, necessary though it may be. Rather, I argue that a clear indication of early Christian proselytizing is to be found in two of the New Testament “call to discipleship” texts that are generally interpreted positively and with great Christian fervor, namely Mark 10:28–30² and Luke 14:26–27.³ These texts may be distinguished from other passages that speak of a call to discipleship and disciple-like following,⁴ because in them Jesus teaches the leaving of house and home, brother and sister, son and daughter, mother and father, wife and children.

*I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Rick Strelan, who translated the original German version, “Nachfolgeruf und Proselytenmacherei,” into English.

¹ J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium. I. und II. Teil* (HThKNT 1/1–2; Freiburg: Herder, 1986 [= *Matthäus* 1], 1988 [= *Matthäus* 2]): “This kind of curse requires a thorough critique which takes the Sermon on the Mount as its standard.” (“Diese Art der Verwünschung bedarf der Sachkritik, die am Maßstab der Bergpredigt zu nehmen ist.” *Matthäus* 2. 286). Some pages later, he says that this rebuke of the Pharisees (Pharisäerschelte), especially after the horrors of Auschwitz (Grauen von Auschwitz), should no longer be preached. “We can now only read the text as a demand for self-criticism” (“Wir können den Text nurmehr als Aufforderung zur Selbstkritik lesen”) and also “apply it to the church of our day” (“auf die Kirche unserer Tage anwenden.” 2. 294)

² Compare Matt 19:27–29; Luke 18:28–30.

³ Compare Matt 10:37–38; *Gos. Thom.* 55, 101.

⁴ Compare, for example, Matt 4:19–22; 8:19–23; 9:9; 16:24; 19:2; 20:34; Mark 1:18; 6:1; 8:34;

HTR 92:3 (1999) 359–62

Although lexicographical and commentaries that define and interpret the term προσήλυτος (proselyte) in New Testament passages such as Matt 23:15; Acts 2:11; 6:5; and 13:13 often refer to Philo's definition of the term in *Spec. leg.* 1.51–52,⁵ that same definition is never found in comments on the two specific discipleship passages to which I call the reader's attention. The search for any reference to proselytizing in lexicon articles dealing with ἀκολουθέω (to follow) also yields nothing.⁶ The same is true for commentaries, although Gnilka, with his observation on Mark 10:29–30, is close to making the appropriate connection, and thus to making an apt deduction, when he writes: "Philo is particularly relevant to our passage: 'These have left children and parents and siblings, neighbors and friendships in order to find the eternal inheritance in place of the earthly' (*De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 129)."⁷ Philo's statement, however, does not refer to proselytes but rather to the Levites as refugees.⁸

Looking in more detail at Philo's προσήλυτος passage in *De specialibus legibus*, however, it can be seen that he writes there about a "conversion" (μεταβάλλεσθαι) and about the decision "to make the passage to piety" (πρὸς εὐσέβειαν . . . μεθορμίσασθαι).⁹ According to Philo's Moses, such "strangers"

10:21; 10:52; Luke 5:11; 5:27–28; 9:23; 9:57; 9:59; 9:61; 18:22; and John 1:43; 8:12; 12:26; 13:36–37; 21:19–22. These passages have been abundantly discussed, chiefly in term of cross-bearing discipleship and the authority of Jesus. However, not even the extensive studies of E. Bammel in *Jesu Nachfolger: Nachfolgeüberlieferungen in der Zeit des frühen Christentums* (Studia Delitzschiana, 3d Folge, vol.1; Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1988), address the connection between discipleship and proselytization. That Jesus called his own disciples, and gathered around him his own students, can hardly be doubted (compare Michael Lattke, "Neue Aspekte der Frage nach dem historischen Jesus," *Kairos* 21 [1979] 288–99, esp. 299).

⁵Compare K. G. Kuhn, "προσήλυτος," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 727–44, esp. 732 (reference to *De Somniis* 2. 273, does not add a new aspect); H. Kuhli, "προσήλυτος," *EWNT* 3 (1983) 410–13, esp. 412 ("Philo kennt das Wort π. eindeutig als t.t."); I. Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, in B. W. Winter, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 5. 36–49.

⁶Compare G. Kittel, "ἀκολουθέω κτλ.," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 210–15; G. Schneider, "ἀκολουθέω κτλ.," *EWNT* 1 (1980) 117–25.

⁷J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus, 2. Teilband: Mk 8, 27–16, 20* (EKK 2/2; Zürich et al.: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979) 92: "Philo kommt unserer Stelle besonders nahe: 'Diese haben Kinder, Eltern und Geschwister, Nachbarschaft und Freundschaft hinter sich gelassen, um an Stelle des irdischen das ewige Erbe zu finden' (*SacrAC* 129)." The relevant Greek words are τέκνα, γονεῖς, ἀδελφούς, and τὰ οἰκειότατα καὶ φίλτατα. Compare L. Cohn, ed., *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt* (8 vols.; 1962; reprinted Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986) 1. 254.

⁸*Sacr. AC* 128. Compare Cohn et al., eds., *Philo von Alexandria: Die Werke in deutscher Übersetzung* (6 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1962) 3. 261 (see "Leviten," "Flüchtlinge").

⁹Compare Cohn, *Philonis Alexandrini* (1906; reprinted 1962) 5. 12–13; Cohn, *Werke*, 24–

(compare the Hebrew: גר) are called “proselytes” (προσήλυτοι), “because they have joined the new and godly commonwealth.”¹⁰ In a typical paraphrase of texts such as Lev 19:33¹¹ and Deut 10:18–19, placed into the mouth of Moses, Philo continues:

ἀπολελοιπότες πατρίδα καὶ φίλους καὶ συγγενεῖς δι’ ἀρετὴν καὶ ὁσιότητα μὴ ἀμοιρεῖτῶσαν ἐτέρων πόλεων καὶ οἰκείων καὶ φίλων, ἀλλ’ ἔστωσαν ἔφεδροι καταφυγαὶ τοῦς πρὸς εὐσέβειαν αὐτομολοῦσι· φίλτρον γὰρ ἀνυσιμώτατον καὶ δεσμὸς ἄλυτος εὐνοίας ἐνωτικῆς ἢ τοῦ ἐνὸς θεοῦ τιμῆ.

They have left, he says, their country, their kinsfolk and their friends for the sake of virtue and religion. Let them not be denied another citizenship or other ties of family and friendship, and let them find places of shelter standing ready for refugees to the camp of piety. For the most effectual love-charm, the chain which binds indissolubly the goodwill which makes us one is to honour the one God.¹²

This Hellenistic Jewish definition of a proselyte, the content of which seems more important to Philo than the “adoption of circumcision and of the whole Law”¹³ by the full proselyte, is in any case pre-Markan, no matter whether one assumes the date of the composition of Mark to be shortly before 70 CE or very soon thereafter.¹⁴ Awareness of Philo’s definition was certainly not confined to Alexandria. Wherever Mark originated—Rome, Antioch, Galilee, or Asia Minor—the substance of Philo’s definition would have been known.

Philo’s definition of a proselyte has a twofold connection with Mark 10:28–30. On the one hand, there is the leaving of “fatherland, friends, and relatives,”¹⁵ and on the other hand, there is the attainment of “another homeland, other relatives, other friends, protection, and refuge.”¹⁶ What sounds harsh in both traditions is considerably

25; F. H. Colson, *Philo* (1937; LCL; 10 vols.; reprinted Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 7. 126–29.

¹⁰προσεληλυθέναι καινῇ καὶ φιλοθέῳ πολιτείᾳ (*Spec. leg.* 1.51).

¹¹Compare also Lev 24:22.

¹²*Spec. leg.* 51–52.

¹³Gnilka, *Matthäus* 2. 286 (“Übernahme der Beschneidung und des ganzen Gesetzes”). “Daneben gab es die Halbproselyten oder Gottesfürchtigen mit eingeschränkten Rechten und Pflichten.” There is no reason to assume that Philo does not speak of “Ganzproselyten.”

¹⁴U. Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (UTB 1930; reprinted Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994) 238.

¹⁵Compare in Mark: πάντα, οἰκίαν ἢ ἀδελφούς ἢ ἀδελφὰς ἢ μητέρα ἢ πατέρα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἀγρούς, in Matt: πάντα, οἰκίας ἢ ἀδελφούς ἢ ἀδελφὰς ἢ πατέρα ἢ μητέρα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἀγρούς; in Luke: τὰ ἴδια, οἰκίαν ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἀδελφούς ἢ γονεῖς ἢ τέκνα.

¹⁶Compare in Mark: ἐκατονταπλασίονα νῦν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ οἰκίας καὶ ἀδελφούς καὶ ἀδελφὰς καὶ μητέρας καὶ τέκνα καὶ ἀγρούς μετὰ διωγμῶν, καὶ ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ ζῶναι αἰῶνιον; in Matt:

softened and, moreover, eschatologically assured in the somewhat later compilation of the New Testament.

A final point of comparison is offered by the texts themselves. In Philo, the stated motive for leaving (δι' ἀρετὴν καὶ ὁσιότητα) offers a new and, to some degree, distinctive interpretation, when compared to the implied motives found in the Gospel passages.¹⁷ For, in the latter passages, the teaching of Jesus is introduced and provoked by Peter.¹⁸ Moreover, Peter's words seem to reflect a vocabulary of a later period placed back into the life of Jesus. The vocabulary has a twofold *Sitz im Leben*—on the one hand, the call to discipleship of the historical Jesus and the following by the disciples. On the other hand, its *Sitz im Leben* may be that of Jewish-Christian proselytizing, a situation that was subsequently also applied to non-Jews. More subtly, this connection is already reflected in a logion of Q,¹⁹ as well as in *Gos. Thom.* 55 and 101.²⁰ In the *Gospel of Thomas*, however, the emphasis is on the rejection of, and even hatred toward, relatives and on the taking up the cross (*Kreuzesnachfolge*) by disciples and followers.

ἐκατονταπλασίονα . . . καὶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον, in Luke: πολλαπλασίονα ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ καὶ ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

¹⁷Mark: ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ ἕνεκεν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου; Matt: ἕνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματός μου, Luke: ἕνεκεν τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ.

¹⁸Mark: ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι; Matt: ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήσα—μέν σοι; Luke: ἀφέντες τὰ ἴδια ἠκολουθήσαμεν σοι.

¹⁹Luke 14:26–27 = Matt 10:37–38.

²⁰According to Helmut Koester, “the Greek version of this gospel was used in Egypt as early as the second century” (J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3d ed. [Leiden: Brill, 1988] 124). Compare pp. 132, 137 for an English translation by T. O. Lambdin of sayings 55 and 101.