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.

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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 (Pharisaerschelte), 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)

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

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Although lexica 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, 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 ἀκολουθεῖω (to follow) also yields nothing. 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 Abeli et Caini 129).” Philo’s statement, however, does not refer to proselytes but rather to the Levites as refugees.

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 εὐσεβείαν...μεθορμίσασθαι). According to Philo’s Moses, such “strangers”...
(compare the Hebrew: יַ), 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:

άπολεοιπότες πατρίδα καὶ φίλους καὶ συγγενείς δι’ ἄρετήν καὶ ὀσιότητα μὴ αμοιρετούσι μετέρων πόλεων καὶ οἰκείων καὶ φίλων, ἀλλ’ ἐστώσαν ἐφεδροὶ καταφυγαί τοὺς πρὸς ευσέβειαν αὐτομολούσι· φίλτρον γὰρ ἄνυσιμωτάτων καὶ δεσμός ἄλυτος εὐνοίας ἐνωτικής ἢ τοῦ ἐνός θεοῦ τιμή.

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

¹⁰Compare also Lev 24:22.
¹²Spec. 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."
¹⁵Compare in Mark: πάντα, οἰκίαν ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ ἀδελφάς ἢ μητέρα ἢ πατέρα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἁγρόν, in Matt: πάντα, οἰκίας ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ ἀδελφάς ἢ πατέρα ἢ μητέρα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἁγρόν; in Luke: τὰ ἰδία, οἰκίας ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ γονεῖς ἢ τέκνα.
¹⁶Compare in Mark: ἐκατοστοπλασίαν ὅν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ οἰκίας καὶ ἀδελφοῦς καὶ ἀδελφᾶς καὶ μητέρας καὶ ἁγρόν μετὰ διωγμῶν, καὶ ἐν τῷ οἰὼν τιμίρορμον ζωὴν οἰώνιον; 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' ἀρετῆς καὶ ὁσιότητα) offers a new and, to some degree, distinctive interpretation, when compared to the implied motives found in the Gospel passages. For, in the latter passages, the teaching of Jesus is introduced and provoked by Peter. 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, as well as in Gos. Thom. 55 and 101. 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.

17 Mark: ἔνεκεν ἐμὸν καὶ ἔνεκεν τοῦ εὐσεβῶν; Matt: ἔνεκεν τοῦ ὄνωματός μου, Luke: ἔνεκεν τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ.
18 Mark: ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἡκολουθήκαμεν σοι; Matt: ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἡκολουθήσαμεν σοι; Luke: ἀφέντες τὰ ʿḏιὰ ἡκολουθήσαμεν σοι.