

## Gentile Believers & Pesach in the Pre-Destruction Era

---

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2010

### *Introduction*

The question that underlies the purpose of this short study is quite simple: how did Gentile believers in Yeshua (non-proselytes) celebrate Pesach in the era leading up to the destruction of the Temple? This same question could be asked of the so-called “Godfearers” or “Sympathizers,” Gentiles in the Jewish synagogue who, though desiring to worship the God of Israel, had not yet become full converts or proselytes.<sup>1</sup> But the question must have had particularly significance to the emerging synagogues of The Way, for within a short period of time following the Shavuot of Acts 2, thousands of Gentile believers in Yeshua were flooding the synagogues. Clearly the convening of the council in Acts 15 was necessary because the influx of Gentiles had raised new issues, primarily in what manner the believing Gentiles within the synagogues of The Way could be fully integrated into the life of Yeshua’s *ekklesia*. One has to imagine that something as central as the celebration of Pesach must have highlighted this question all the more. For the celebration of Pesach involved a sacrifice—the sacrifice of the Pesach lamb as a special peace offering which, after being roasted, was eaten as part of the festival meal.

But the Torah gives specific regulations regarding who may and who may not eat the meat of the Pesach offering. More specifically, the Torah prohibits any uncircumcised male from eating meat from the Pesach lamb. Given the fact that the Jerusalem Council was convened to determine whether Gentile believers should be required to become proselytes, i.e., be circumcised, we may presume that many of the men had not yet received circumcision. This in turn meant that they would not be able to participate fully in the Pesach seder with which the festival celebration began.

This, of course, raises another question: what about the Gentile women who had come to faith in Yeshua? Were they allowed to participate fully in the celebration of Pesach, including partaking of the meat from the Pesach sacrifice? Obviously, the Torah requirements that no uncircumcised male may eat of the sacrifice did not apply to women. But this raises another issue: within the wider Jewish community, would Gentile God-fearing women have been excluded from eating the Pesach sacrifice on the grounds that all Gentiles were considered ceremonially unclean? If so, this would have excluded them from eating the meat of the Pesach sacrifice as well.

The ancient Jewish and rabbinic sources do not give us clear and direct answers to these questions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scholars debate whether a recognized “class” of such Gentiles actually existed among the 1st Century CE synagogue communities. But regardless of whether they were recognized as such, the data support the fact that there were “semi-proselytes” in the synagogues of the 1st Century CE, that is, Gentiles who worshipped within the Jewish community and took upon themselves some of the social and religious activities by which Jews were characterized. See Louis H. Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 342ff; Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles* (Baylor Univ Press, 2007), pp. 469–82; George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, 3 vols (Harvard Univ Press, 1927 / Reprint: Hendrickson, 1997), 1.325ff; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?* (KTAV, 1985), pp. 36–38; Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 6 vols. (T & T Clark, 1890), II.ii.311ff; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Univ of Calif, 1999), p. 150ff; Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting*, vol. 5 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 51–126.

Yet given what we do know from the ancient sources, we might be able to offer some reasonable suggestions about Gentile participation in the festival of Pesach in the pre-destruction era.

### *Could Gentiles Offer Sacrifices at the Temple?*

The question of whether Gentiles could offer sacrifices at the Temple has been much debated in recent scholarly literature. Daniel Schwartz, for instance, takes the position that Gentiles simply could not have offered sacrifices at the Temple, and seeks to show that scholars who have answered this question in the affirmative have misinterpreted the data.<sup>2</sup> While he has no doubt that Gentiles brought votive offerings, he finds no support in the Tanach or in the rabbinic literature that sacrifices were offered *by* Gentiles. In critiquing the work of Schürer,<sup>3</sup> Schwartz writes:

Now while I have no doubts about the acceptance of votive offerings from gentiles, and difficulty with only some of the details of Schürer's account of Jewish sacrifices for foreign rulers, my reading of the evidence regarding sacrifices *by* Gentiles is quite different. Namely, while Schürer finds it posited by the Hebrew Bible, the rabbis, and especially by Josephus, I would say that it is not contemplated by the Hebrew Bible, that the rabbis posit it in a way much more restricted than Schürer would admit, and that Josephus' evidence is to be taken with several grains of salt in light of his apologetic tendency to present Judaism as a religion as universalist as he can. References to Josephus account for almost all of Schürer's evidence for the Jerusalem Temple being cosmopolitan, and while that is certainly the impression Josephus wished to give, it is doubtful that it can be squared with the facts.<sup>4</sup>

Other scholars, however, affirm that Gentiles did bring sacrifices to the Temple. For instance, Shmuel Safrai writes:

It was no exaggeration when the high priest, Jesus of Gamala, said to the Edomites, during the siege, that the Temple in Jerusalem was a house of prayer for all nations of the world (Josephus, *War*, iv.262). In chapter four we noted the various pieces of evidence pointing to pilgrimages by Gentiles from outside of Palestine. Even the impurity which Jews imputed to their heathenism and the injunctions against their partaking of food did not deter Gentiles from making the pilgrimage to the Temple or from having sacrifices offered there. Tradition and practice rendered Gentile sacrifices acceptable; often, particularly on feast-days, Gentiles could be seen in the Temple. They came to prostrate themselves before God, to hear the Torah and to bring their offerings.<sup>5</sup>

The Mishnah notes that Gentiles did send sacrifices (burnt offerings) to the Temple:

Said R. Simeon, "Seven rules did the court ordain, and this is one of them. A gentile who sent his burnt of-

---

<sup>2</sup> Daniel R. Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (Mohr, 1992), pp. 102ff.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 6 vols. (T & T Clark, 1890); revised by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman, eds. in 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity*, pp. 102-3.

<sup>5</sup> S. Safrai, "The Temple" in Safrai and Stern, eds. *The Jewish People in the First Century*, CRINT (Van Gorcum, 1987), p. 878.

fering from overseas and sent drink offerings with it—they are offered from what he has sent. But if not, they are offered from public funds. (m.*Sheqalim* 7.6)

The Mishnah also references “holy things” belonging to Gentiles (קִדְּשֵׁי נְגִרִים<sup>6</sup>), which refers to sacrifices set apart (“holy”) for the altar. While these are definitely put in a different class than sacrifices offered by Jews, the ruling only makes sense if Gentiles actually were bringing sacrifices.<sup>7</sup>

Holy things of gentiles—they are not liable on their account because of [transgression of the laws of] refuse, remnant, and uncleanness. And he who slaughters them outside [the courtyard] is free of liability, the words of R. Meir (m. *Zevachim* 4.5)

Note also the following notices from the Mishnah:

There are [meal offerings which] require oil and frankincense, oil but not frankincense, frankincense but not oil, neither oil nor frankincense. And these are they which require oil and frankincense: (1) the meal offering of fine flour [Lev. 2:1, 6:8], and (2) the meal offering prepared in the baking pan [Lev. 2:5], and (3) the meal offering prepared in the frying pan [Lev. 2:7], and (4) the meal offering of the cakes, and (5) of the wafers [Lev. 2:4], (6) the meal offering of the priests, and (7) the meal offering of the anointed priest [Lev. 6:20ff.], (8) the meal offering of gentiles, and (9) the meal offering of women, and (10) the meal offering of the omer (Lev. 2:14-15, 23:9-14). (m.*Zevachim* 5.3)

These [are offerings] which require waving but do not require bringing near: (1) the meal offering of fine flour, and (2) the meal offering prepared in the baking pan, and (3) the meal offering prepared in the frying pan [Lev. 2:81, and (4) the meal offering of cakes, and (5) the meal offering of wafers, and (6) the meal offering of priests, and (7) the meal offering of an anointed priest, and (8) the meal offering of gentiles, and (9) the meal offering of women, and (10) the meal offering of a sinner. (m.*Zevachim* 5.5)

These are meal offerings [from which] the handful is taken, and the residue of which belongs to the priests [Lev. 6:7-9]: (1) the meal offering of fine flour [Lev. 2:21, and (2) [the meal offering prepared in] a baking pan [Lev. 2:9, 6:8], and (3) [the meal offering prepared in] a frying pan, and (4) the loaves, and (5) the wafers [Lev. 2:9-10], and (6) the meal offering of gentiles, and (7) the meal offering of women, and (8) the meal offering of the omer [Lev. 2:16], and (9) the meal offering of a sinner [Lev. 5:12], and (10) the meal offering of a woman accused of adultery [Num. 5:26]. (m.*Zevachim* 6.1)

Josephus, in describing the siege upon the Temple, describes how any who came to sacrifice there were slain:

for those darts that were thrown by the engines came with that force, that they went all over the buildings, and reached as far as the altar, and the temple itself, and fell upon the priests, and those that were about the

---

<sup>6</sup> So in the Kaufman manuscript. In the Kehati *Mishnah*, the text is קִדְּשֵׁי גֵוִים. (R. Pinhas Kehati, trans., *Mishna* 22 vols. [Eliner Library, 1994], 14.46.)

<sup>7</sup> It is true that the Mishnah’s description of sacrifices and the *halachah* attaching to them may reflect 2nd Century CE theory rather than actual practice in the pre-destruction era. But when corroborated by other sources (such as Philo and Josephus), the Mishnah’s descriptions of Temple worship and practice may be significant. See E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief*, p. 104.

sacred offices; insomuch that in any persons who came thither with great zeal from the ends of the earth, to offer sacrifices at this celebrated place, which was esteemed holy by all mankind, fell down before their own sacrifices themselves, and sprinkled that altar which was venerable among all men, both Greeks and Barbarians, with their own blood; till the dead bodies of strangers were mingled together with those of their own country, and those of profane persons with those of the priests, and the blood of all sorts of dead carcases stood in lakes in the holy courts themselves. (*War*, 5.16–17)

Schürer, after noting the times in Josephus' writings that indicate the acceptance of Gentile offerings (particularly those of foreign Monarchs), makes this conclusion:

Nor are we to suppose that it is merely proselytes that are in view when Josephus describes the altar of Jerusalem as “the altar venerated by all Greeks and barbarians,” and says of the place on which the temple stood, that it “is adored by the whole world, and for its renown is honoured among strangers at the ends of the earth” (*War* iv.3 [4.262]).<sup>8</sup>

Given these data, it would seem very probable, then, that Gentiles (non-proselytes) did come to the Temple and did offer some sacrifices, including whole burnt, meal or grain, drink, votive, and free-will offerings. Whether they could offer peace offerings (also called “thank offerings”) depends upon whether a Gentile (non-proselyte) could be reckoned as ceremonially clean, or if they existed in a state of perpetual uncleanness (cf. Lev 7:20–21; we will investigate this below). But when it came to the Pesach sacrifice, itself a kind of peace offering, the Torah is clear: no uncircumcised male could eat the meat of this offering.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it; but every man's slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it. A sojourner or a hired servant shall not eat of it. (Ex 12:43–45)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן זֹאת חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח כָּל־בְּנוֹנֵיכֶם לֹא־יֹאכְלֻ בוֹ: וְכֹל־עֶבֶד אִישׁ מִקְנֵת־כֶּסֶף וּמִלֶּחֶם אֲתוֹ אִזּוֹ יֹאכְלֻ בוֹ: תוֹשָׁב וְשָׂכִיר לֹא־יֹאכְלֻ בוֹ:

But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you.” (Ex 12:48–49)

וְכִי־יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵר וַעֲשֵׂה פֶסַח לַיהוָה הַמּוֹל לּוֹ כָּל־זֶכֶר וְאִזּוֹ יִקְרַב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וְהָיָה כְּאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ וְכֹל־עֶרְלֵי לֹא־יֹאכְלֻ בוֹ: תוֹרָה אַחַת יְהִיָּה לָאֶזְרַח וְלַגֵּר הֹלֵךְ בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

Note that in these texts various terms are used to designate foreigners: בְּנוֹנֵיכֶם (*ben neichar*), תוֹשָׁב (*toshav*), שָׂכִיר (*sachir*), and גֵּר (*ger*). *Neichar* can simply mean “a foreigner,” but it is often used of peo-

<sup>8</sup> Schürer, *Op. cit.*, II.i.302.

ple who are known idolators or to describe pagan gods.<sup>9</sup> *Toshav* simply means “one who dwells,” and is usually translated in our English texts by a phrase like “resident alien.” In rabbinic parlance, a proselyte is called a גֵּר צְדִיק (*ger tzadiq*, “righteous alien”) as opposed to a גֵּר תּוֹשָׁב (*ger toshav*), the designation for a foreigner who dwelt with Israel but never became a proselyte. *Sachir* means “one who is purchased” and in this context refers to a “hired laborer” or “hired servant.” *Ger* simply means “foreigner” and in many contexts, the rabbis consider the *ger* to be a proselyte.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, it is clear that all of the foreigners spoken of in this passage are uncircumcised: וְכָל-עֶרְלָל לֹא-יֵאָכֵל בוֹ, “...and every uncircumcised one shall not eat of it.” This text therefore presents a good example of the fact that the various designations for foreigners found in the Tanach must be interpreted by means of the context in which they are found. For though the rabbinic interpretation often considers the *ger* to be a proselyte (e.g., in Num 15), here the *ger* is clearly not a proselyte because he is uncircumcised.

But the point that this text makes for our study is quite clear: a male who was uncircumcised could not eat from the Pesach sacrifice. This meant that a Godfearer, or a Gentile believer in Yeshua, if he were to celebrate the Pesach festival with others of his synagogue, would not have been privileged to eat the meat at the Pesach seder. But could he have eaten all other foods at the seder except the meat from the sacrificed lamb? Yes, apparently so, and a notice in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* might indicate that this was something that occurred in the pre-destruction era:

[Thus] Scripture states [here] “bound” and “hired” (Ex 12:44) [and it teaches elsewhere] “bound” and “hired” (Lev 22:10) [in order to provide the opportunity] for a *gezerah shaveh*. Just as “bound” and “hired” stated in regard to the paschal offering [mean that] the uncircumcised person is prohibited from eating it, likewise “bound” and “hired” stated in regard to *terumah* [mean that] the uncircumcised person is prohibited from eating it. [No (bound or hired laborer) shall eat of it” (Ex 12:45):] Of it he shall not eat, but he may eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier in this same text, the question is raised if an uncircumcised foreigner would invalidate the entire group who gathered to eat the Pesach seder:

One might think that he [i.e., the uncircumcised foreigner who gathers with the others for the seder] would invalidate the [entire] group [offering the sacrifice] with him. Scripture states, [however,] “...This (is the law of the passover offering)” (Ex 12:43). He does not invalidate the group [offering] with him. “No (foreigner) shall eat of it” (Ex 12:43): He does not eat it, but he does eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs.<sup>12</sup>

From this we may surmise the scenario that uncircumcised foreigners were allowed to participate in the Pesach seder by eating all of the foods except the meat from the offering. Such would have also be the

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Gen 35:2–4; Deut 31:16; 32:12; Josh 24:20, 23; Judges 10:16; 1Sam 7:3; Jer 5:10; Mal 2:11; Ps 81:10.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on these and other terms used in the Tanach for foreigners who had association with Israel, see my book, *FellowHeirs* (FFOZ, 2003), pp. 1–16.

<sup>11</sup> W. David Nelson, trans., *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* (JPS, 2006), p. 62. Note the same statement in b.*Pesachim* 28b. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* is a compilation of rabbinic midrashim on Exodus, most of which dates from 70–200 CE (Ibid., p. xi).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

case among the people of The Way. Gentile believers who were part of these synagogues could have participated in the seder meal but refrained from eating the meat of the Pesach sacrifice.

But this offers another obvious scenario that must have obtained in the pre-destruction era: the requirement of circumcision in order to have full participation in the Pesach celebration would have presented a strong incentive for male Gentile believers to be circumcised according to the Torah commandment. This in turn raises a very intriguing question: in the pre-destruction era, could a Gentile believer be circumcised simply out of obedience to the Torah without engaging in the full proselyte ritual? Or to ask the question another way: if a Gentile believer was circumcised without any intention of acquiring legal status as a Jew, i.e., without becoming a recognized proselyte, would he have been allowed to eat the meat of the Pesach offering during the seder? Would his circumcision have been considered valid?

Interestingly, it is very probable that in the pre-destruction era, a man could have become circumcised without intending to gain the legal status as a Jew. In fact, according to Shaye Cohen, the rabbinic idea that a valid circumcision required a proper intention to acquire legal Jewish status is not earlier than the 2nd Century CE. We find it first in the statement of R. Judah in the Tosefta<sup>13</sup> (3rd Century CE), that “a Samaritan may not circumcise an Israelite, because he performs the act of circumcision for the sake of Mount Gerizim.” Interestingly, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, the midrash on Exodus parallel to *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* (referenced above), shows the same tendency to make intentionality necessary for a circumcision to be valid. R. Isaac is referenced, who was a Tanna of the early post-Hadrianic period (2nd Century CE). He was a disciple of Ishmael but associated also with the disciples of Akiva. He also had association with the yeshiva of Shimon bar Yohai.<sup>14</sup>

R. Isaac says: “A sojourner and a hired servant shall not eat thereof” [Ex 12:45]. Why is this said? Has it not already been said: “There shall no alien eat thereof?” [Ex 12:43]. Answer: From the latter I might understand that a circumcised Arabian or a circumcised Gibeonite is qualified to partake of the paschal lamb. Therefore Scriptures says: “A sojourner and a hired servant shall not eat thereof.”<sup>15</sup>

In the perspective R. Isaac, intentionality qualifies or disqualifies circumcision. Even though the Arab and Gibeonite are circumcised, they are not allowed to eat of the Pesach offering because they were not circumcised with the intention of converting to Judaism. Their circumcision is therefore invalid.

Further evidence that this requirement of intentionality is a later teaching of the rabbis may be seen from the fact that the first explicit description of the conversion ceremony is found in the Bavli<sup>16</sup> and in the post-talmudic tractate *Gerim*.<sup>17</sup> Surely “all tannaitic texts that even incidentally refer to the requirements of conversion take circumcision for granted as a (or *the*) vehicle for conversion.”<sup>18</sup> Thus any male who wished to convert and be given legal status as a Jew would have been required to be circumcised.

---

<sup>13</sup> t.*Avodah Zarah* 3.13.

<sup>14</sup> See Jacob Neusner, ed., *Dictionary of Ancient Rabbis* (Hendrickson, 2003), p. 448.

<sup>15</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Pisha, 60–63 (1.122 in the Lauterbach edition).

<sup>16</sup> b.*Yevamot* 47a-b.

<sup>17</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness* (Univ of Calif, 1999), p. 198.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

But from this it does not follow that the circumcision of a male who simply wanted to obey the Torah commandment was considered invalid, at least in the pre-destruction era. The conception that “intentionality renders circumcision valid or invalid” was not formulated until after 70 CE. According to Cohen,

In pre-rabbinic times (i.e., before the second century C. E.) conversion to Judaism was an entirely private affair. Conversions were not supervised or overseen by anyone, and there was no conversion ceremony. Circumcisions could be performed by anyone in any manner....<sup>19</sup>

The Bavli records a discussion of whether a Gentile can perform a valid circumcision. The more ancient *halalchah* (introduced by “it has been taught”) allowed this, but in the discussions of the later rabbis, it was considered invalid. This shows the transition in the post-destruction era to the *halachah* that intentionality on both the part of the circumciser and the one circumcised determined validity.

Is this a general principle? But take the case of circumcision. This is permitted to be performed by a gentile, for it has been taught: In a town where there is no Israelite physician but there is a Cuthean physician as well as a gentile one, circumcision should be performed by the gentile but not by the Cuthean. This is the opinion of R. Meir. But R. Judah said, It should be performed by the Cuthean but not by the gentile. And yet when performed by an Israelite a blessing must be pronounced, for a Master has said, He that performs the circumcision must say, ‘Blessed ... who hast sanctified us by thy commandments, and hast given us command concerning the circumcision!’ — This question [by R. Hisda] concerns Rab, does it not? Surely Rab declares it invalid! For it has been stated: Whence do we know that circumcision performed by a gentile is invalid? Daru b. Papa said in the name of Rab, From the verse, And as for thee, thou shalt keep my covenant. R. Johanan said, From the words, Must needs be circumcised, that is, he who is circumcised shall circumcise. (b.*Menachot* 42a)<sup>20</sup>

Another indication that the circumcision performed by a Gentile was valid may be seen in Josephus.<sup>21</sup> In the story of Izates<sup>22</sup> who desired to become a proselyte, he has himself circumcised by the court physician who obviously was not Jewish.

On the basis of these and other data, Cohen concludes:

During the second-temple period circumcision was deemed efficacious no matter how, under what circumstances, or by whom it was performed. It was a surgical procedure, a physical operation on a piece of skin. The circumciser did not even have to be a Jew, let alone a priest or a sage. Intention was irrelevant; involuntary circumcision was fine too .... This position is well articulated by R. Yosi in a statement that is transmitted in three different versions: “where have we seen circumcision that is not for the sake of the covenant?” or “where have we seen that the Torah requires circumcision to be for the sake (of the covenant)?” or “Where have we found in the Torah that circumcision requires (proper) intent?”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> See also t.*Avodah Zarah* 3.12–13.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 20.46.

<sup>22</sup> Izates (1–55 CE) was the son of Queen Helena of Adiabene. He became King of the Parthian kingdom of Adiabene and became a convert to Judaism.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 226. The rabbinic references are: t.*Avodah Zarah* 3.13; b.*Avodah Zarah* 27a; y.*Yevamot* 8.1 9a.

Cohen goes on to show that by the mid-second century CE, a contrary position had arisen. Merely being circumcised was not sufficient. Ritual circumcision had to be administered by a Jew and the one being circumcised had to show his intent to be subservient to the God of the Jews and His commandments as interpreted and defined by rabbinic *halachah*. If a circumcised Gentile wanted to gain legal Jewish status, a drop of blood had to be drawn from his circumcised member, so that his circumcision could be considered a covenant. Apparently R. Judah,<sup>24</sup> a contemporary of R. Yosi, was the primary authority behind this new understanding.

Given these data, it seems quite probable that Gentile believers in Yeshua during the pre-destruction era could have been circumcised without any intention of gaining the legal status of a Jew. What is more, their circumcision would have been considered valid, even by those outside of the Yeshua-believing community (even if this would not have given them full social acceptance), and would have given them the right to eat meat from the Pesach lamb in their celebration of the festival without fear of being charged with desecrating the sanctity of the sacrifice.

On the other hand, male Gentile believers who had not yet become circumcised would have been welcomed to the Pesach seder within a Yeshua-believing community. They would have been restricted from eating the meat from the Pesach offering in accordance with the Torah, but their participation would not have invalidated the Pesach offering for those who did eat from it.

This scenario, however, raises another obvious question: were Gentiles generally considered as ceremonially unclean? If so, does it not seem clear that they would have been excluded from any participation in the Pesach festival (including the seder) for fear that they would render others unclean? And this raises a subsidiary question: was it possible for non-proselyte Gentiles to achieve ceremonial purity?

### *Gentiles and Ceremonial Purity*

The question of Gentiles (non-proselytes) and ceremonial purity has received a great deal of attention in recent scholarly writings,<sup>25</sup> with debates surrounding whether Gentiles were considered essentially unclean or not. The rabbinic materials do not give an entirely harmonious answer to that question primarily because the general perspective of the Sages was that the purity laws of the Torah do not apply to Gentiles.

Several rabbinic texts may illustrate the early debates over whether purity laws applied to Gentiles. In *m.Negaim* 3.1, it is ruled that Gentiles and resident aliens cannot contract uncleanness from the signs of skin-disease. *M.Negaim* 11.1 likewise rules that Gentiles' clothing cannot contract uncleanness from the signs of mildew, and 12.1 indicates that Gentiles' houses cannot contract uncleanness from signs of mildew. These notices would indicate that in this section of the Mishnah, purity laws do not apply to

---

<sup>24</sup> In *t.Avodah Zarah* 3.13.

<sup>25</sup> For example, note these works and the references they supply: E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE–66CE* (Trinity, 1992), pp. 72–76; E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Trinity, 1990), pp. 258ff; Hannah Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis* (Scholars, 1993); Gary Porton, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah-Tosefta* (Scholars, 1988); Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Magnes Press, 1977), pp. 146–89.

Gentiles.<sup>26</sup>

Yet there also appears indications in the Mishnah that Gentiles were ceremonially unclean. For instance, in the often cited passage from m.*Pesachim* 8.8, we hear the dispute between the Houses regarding the impurity of a convert:

A proselyte who converted on the eve of Passover [the fourteenth of Nisan]—the House of Shammai say, “He immerses and eats his Passover offering in the evening.” And the House of Hillel say, “He who takes his leave of the foreskin is as if he took his leave of the grave [and must be sprinkled on the third and seventh day after circumcision as if he had suffered corpse uncleanness].”<sup>27</sup>

The House of Shammai considers that the uncleanness of the Gentile was very light, equivalent to Jewish semen impurity, which was removed by immersion and sunset. Thus, a Gentile could convert, immerse, and eat the Pesach offering after sunset. The House of Hillel, however, considered Gentile impurity to be on the level of corpse impurity, the most serious level, which required the application of purification waters (ashes of the Red Heifer) over a seven day period.

Whether Gentile impurity was communicable to others, however, is not entirely stated. Moreover, exactly why Gentiles were considered ceremonially unclean is also left to speculation. Sanders is convinced that the issue was that of idolatry: “I am sure that idolatry was the basic problem.... Nevertheless, on the particular issue at hand, I am content to say that an exclusion that *functioned like* a purity law *was* a purity law.”<sup>28</sup> Alon agrees:

Basically this Halakha, which regards Gentiles as impure, is embedded in the Halakhic tradition that ascribes levitical uncleanness to the idol itself and to its attendants. The defilement of non-Jews is therefore an extension of the ambit of the uncleanness of the idol itself, incorporating its worshippers.<sup>29</sup>

Yet it is also clear that Gentiles, even if sometimes treated as ceremonially unclean, were not generally treated as unclean at the most severe level, that is, of corpse impurity. This is obvious from the fact that Gentiles could ascend to the Temple, congregate in the outer porticoes and in the Court of the Gentiles, going as far as the *soreg*, the wall that separated the court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Women. Yet a Jewish menstruant, who only passed on a low grade of impurity to other people (Lev 15:19–23), was not allowed even to approach the Temple complex.<sup>30</sup>

If there were a general view that Gentiles communicated impurity, they would have been kept farther away from the sanctuary than the outer court. If they could buy in the shops outside the temple, walk up the steps, and stand in the Court of the Gentiles and gawk at the porticoes, they might touch a Jew on his or her way past the balustrade. A communicable impurity would have resulted in their being kept away from the tem-

---

<sup>26</sup> See Gary Porton, *Goyim*, Op. cit., pp. 41–2; G. Alon, *Jews, Judaism, and the Classical World* (Magnes, 1977), pp. 145–56.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. t.*Pischa* 7.14; b.*Pesachim* 92a.

<sup>28</sup> Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief*, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Alon, *Jews, Judaism, and the Classical World*, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *War* 5.227.

ple mount and possibly barred from Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup>

All of this would tell us that the legal definition of Gentile impurity had not been explicitly defined in the pre-destruction era. This awaited the later rabbinic legislations of the post-destruction era in which the rabbis sought to define Judaism more precisely *vis-à-vis* other competing religions, particularly Christianity.

Thus, in the pre-destruction era, it seems quite certain that Gentile believers in Yeshua (non-proselytes) would have had no difficulty joining the festival celebrations, even if they were confined in the Temple complex to the Court of the Gentiles. Nor would there have been any compulsion to exclude them from the table-fellowship of the Pesach seder. A Gentile believer (whether male or female) could immerse in a *mikveh* and by doing so, would have been considered clean of common impurities, if in fact such impurities were thought to apply to Gentiles. There is nothing to indicate that in the period preceding the destruction of the Temple, Gentiles were viewed by the Jewish community as having an irreversible ceremonial impurity. If ceremonial purity was possible for Gentiles in general, it would have been all the more true regarding “Godfearers” or “sympathizers,” who had openly denounced idolatry and were welcomed within the Jewish synagogue and community.

#### *Gentile Female Believers in Yeshua and Pesach*

Even though the Torah commandment, that “no uncircumcised male” may eat of the Pesach offering obviously pertains only to men, the rabbinic literature does show evidence that a derived principle from this text was applied to women.

“No foreigner shall eat of it” (Ex 12:43). Why did I need [Scripture to state this]? For hasn’t it already been stated, “No uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Ex 12:48)? Why does Scripture state, “No foreigner shall eat of it” (Ex 12:43)? This [is in reference to] the heretical Israelite who practiced idolatry. I only know that [this refers to the] male [heretic]. How does one know from Scripture [that this includes] the female [heretic]? Scripture states, “No foreigner<sup>32</sup> shall eat of it” (Ex 12:43).<sup>33</sup>

Here we see (as noted above) that in the earlier strata of the midrashic tradition, the Exodus text was interpreted as distinguishing between those who were idolators and those who were not. “Foreigner” (בְּזוּיִן) in Ex 12:43 is interpreted to mean “the Israelite who practiced idolatry.” By extension, this applied to any Israelite who practiced idolatry, male or female.

This “idol pollution” that was presumed to attach to Gentiles was precisely the issue with which the Jerusalem Council dealt, and formed the basis for the four prohibitions (Acts 15:20, 29) given to the Gentile believers, all of which describe common practices in the pagan, idolatrous temples.

In the post-destruction era, however, as rabbinic Judaism was formulated, a Gentile woman, like a

---

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Literally, “child of a foreigner” (בְּלִבְיִן־נֹכְרִי).

<sup>33</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, xvii:I (W. David Nelson, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, p. 59).

Gentile male, would have had to affirm her legal conversion before being allowed to participate in eating the Pesach sacrifice. But in the pre-destruction era, there is no indication that such would have been the case. As long as a female believer in Yeshua had (like her male counterpart) shown a complete break from her former life of idolatry, she could have participated fully in the Pesach meal. The only difference was that she would not have had to undergo something as severe as circumcision to do so. Immersing in a *mikveh* would have made her ready for full participation in the Pesach seder, even in the eyes of the most observant members of The Way.

### *Summary*

In the current study I have sought to answer the question of how Gentile believers in Yeshua would have participated in the pre-destruction celebration of Pesach. The primary issues at hand are 1) the Torah commandment that no uncircumcised male could eat the meat of the Pesach offering, which would therefore have applied to those men who, though fellow believers in Yeshua, remained uncircumcised (for whatever reason), and 2) the question of whether Gentiles (non-proselytes) were considered perpetually and irreversibly unclean. Our investigation into the extant sources has shown that:

1. A man could become circumcised in the pre-destruction era without being required to submit to the formal rabbinic conversion process. It was not until after the destruction of the Temple, and the rise of rabbinic Judaism, that circumcision was considered invalid unless done with the intent to convert. This means that uncircumcised men (whether Jew or Gentile) who had come to faith in Yeshua could have become circumcised purely as an act of obedience and not in order to obtain legal Jewish status.

Paul makes it clear in his epistle to the Galatians that seeking to obtain covenant membership through acquiring legal Jewish status undermines the Gospel, for it proceeds on the false premise that covenant membership is based upon Jewish status rather than on God's elective act resulting in salvation by faith in Yeshua.

Some might conclude that Paul's prohibition against Gentiles becoming proselytes likewise put them into a situation where they could not fully participate in the Pesach seder. Yet the current study has shown that a man could obtain valid circumcision in the pre-destruction era apart from undergoing the ritual of a proselyte, a circumcision that marked his covenant status which he already had by faith in Yeshua. One might well presume that many believing male Gentiles did just that.

2. Even those Gentile men among the communities of The Way who had not yet been circumcised were able to participate in the Pesach seder and celebration of the festival, though they would have abstained from eating the meat of the Pesach offering in accordance with the Torah commandment (Ex 12:43ff). They would not have been reckoned as unclean nor would their presence at the seder in any way invalidate the sanctity of the meal or the Pesach offering around which it was centered. We may presume that there were male Gentile believers who participated in the festival in every way except for eating from the Pesach offering.
3. Gentile women who were believers in Yeshua also had every right to participate in the festival, including the Pesach seder, as full covenant members. Whatever ceremonial uncleanness they may

have contracted was easily removed by the measures prescribed in the Torah, whether of severe (corpse) or minor (menstruation) impurity.

4. The idea that Gentiles were viewed by the Jewish community as being continually and irreversibly impure is not clearly delineated in the extant sources. Some rabbis ruled that the purity laws did not apply to Gentiles whatsoever. Yet the idea that idol impurity attach to Gentiles seems to have been held by some in the pre-destruction era, and this may well inform the decision of the Jerusalem Council regarding the four prohibitions given to the Gentile believers. Once Gentile believers proved that they had completely broken with their former idolatrous religions, whatever lower level of ceremonial impurity they had contracted could be removed in the conventional way, by immersing in a *mikveh* and waiting for sunset (low levels of impurity) or through the application of the waters of impurity, immersing in a *mikveh* on the third and seventh day, and waiting for sunset.

### *Postscript*

Obviously, after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of sacrifices, the issue of the Pesach offering became moot as it pertained to the celebration of Pesach. Moreover, without the ability to be purified from corpse impurity, since the waters of purification (ashes of the Red Heifer) could no longer be administered, ceremonial purity became impossible. But this too was moot, at least in practical measures, since ceremonial purity pertained specifically to participation in the Temple. Without the Temple and a functioning priesthood, there is no necessity to seek ceremonial purity. While there is much benefit in studying the purity laws and considering how they apply in practical ways, the actual performance of obtaining ceremonial purity must await the rebuilding of the Temple.

Our study has shown, however, that even during the Apostolic era when the Temple did stand and when sacrifices were offered, Gentile believers in Yeshua would not have been held back from participating fully in the celebration of Pesach. Gentile believing males who had not yet been circumcised could not have eaten meat from the Pesach offering, but that was the only restriction that applied to them. Gentile believing women would not have had even this restriction. Moreover, it seems likely that many Gentile men received circumcision as strictly an act of obedience and not as a way to obtain some additional covenant status or legal Jewish status.

It may well be that when Paul tells the Gentile believers that they have been circumcised with “a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah” (Col 2:11), he has in mind those who were judging these believers as having no right to celebrate the Pesach festival. But fleshing out this possible interpretation of Paul’s words must await a future essay.