

## CHAPTER 4

### THE INTER-TESTAMENTAL PERIOD

#### 1. *Diaspora and Proselytism*<sup>1</sup>

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN REMARKED THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT cannot be understood merely in terms of the Old. There is a gap of a few centuries between the conclusion of the Old Testament canon and the beginning of the formulation of the New Testament canon. These centuries were of great importance to the people of Israel in regard both to its part in and its attitude towards the world of nations.

The diaspora greatly altered the people of Israel, and its influence can also be seen in those who escaped it or returned from it to the Holy Land.<sup>2</sup>

Here we can indicate only one of its aspects, viz. the initiation of missionary activity among the Jews during this period. It seems to me that this is underestimated rather than overestimated with regard to its extent and intensity as well as to its significance for the missionary attitude and activity of the Christian Church in the first few centuries of its existence.

After having investigated the proselytizing movement among the Jews later on, Derwacter came to the following conclusion:

We cannot therefore give even an approximate count of the proselytes to Judaism in the Mediterranean world of the New Testament period. They were numerous enough to claim the attention of Philo and Josephus, conspicuous enough for pagan writers such as Tacitus and Horace and Juvenal to see them as a part of the Judaism of their time. They are looked upon as a factor in the great growth of the

Jewish population following the Exile. The rapid development of Christianity into a Gentile religion seems inexplicable without a large proselyte constituency. More than this can hardly be said.<sup>2</sup>

It cannot be said that the diaspora by itself explains Jewish missionary propaganda, but it can be said that the diaspora was its prime mover and that this propaganda was "chiefly, though not exclusively, a diaspora phenomenon".<sup>3</sup>

Several different elements will have to be taken into account here. Bamberger enumerates the following:<sup>4</sup>

- (i) The decay of the Jewish nation led to greater emphasis being laid on the idea that the Jewish group was chiefly a religious entity;
- (ii) The conquest of monotheism in Israel transformed Judaism into a purely universalistic religion;
- (iii) The extension of the diaspora strengthened Jewish self-confidence among the colonists in new places;
- (iv) Contact with other ways of thinking, and in particular with the Hellenistic, must have stimulated the Jews to undertake apologetic activities at first and missionary ones later on;
- (v) The success of the Maccabean rebellion made for increased self-confidence within Palestine of a religious kind.

Long before the diaspora there had been a certain inclination towards missionary activities, as has been described in previous chapters. Accepting foreigners into the Israelitic community can rightly be considered to be a first stage, or rather a stage leading up to the Jewish mission.<sup>5</sup> In this connection it is particularly significant that the Hebrew word for a foreigner who has been accepted in Israel (*gēr*) is as a rule translated as "proselyte" in the Septuagint.<sup>6</sup>

G. Bertram pointed out that the diaspora cannot be completely explained by exile and emigration from the small country of the Jews.<sup>7</sup> Harnack estimated the num-

ber of Jews in the Roman Mediterranean area alone around the time of the birth of Christ at 4-4½ million,<sup>8</sup> that is about 7% of the total population of that area. This can only be satisfactorily explained by accepting the possibility of a propagatory action. Long before the Old Testament eschatologic universalism of salvation had been deepened and extended in a missionary sense by the preaching of Christ and the apostles, the process of this reformation had been set in motion by the Judaism of the diaspora.

Study of Hellenistic Judaic missionary literature has shown how important the missionary activity must have been.<sup>9</sup> It was so extensive and intense that it did not at once disappear after the appearance of the young Christian Church. It is not true that Christianity has not only adopted Judaic missionary activity but has also replaced it. Until the fifth century A.D. Judaism must have continued its proselytizing activities in spite of the difficulties that increased as the Christian Church expanded.<sup>10</sup> And it is not only the missionary effort that must have been great, but also the *result*. In my opinion it is wrong and rather too tendentious to explain Jesus' well-known words in Matt. 23: 15, as meaning that their success must have been slight. In my opinion Bamberger's observations on this text should be considered correct and I agree with his conclusion:

In short, this verse corroborates the testimony of Hellenistic, Roman and Rabbinic sources—that the official leaders of Judaism were eager to make converts and highly successful in achieving their aim. Distinction must be made between the highly coloured style and the actual content of the passage.<sup>11</sup>

More or less general agreement has now been reached with regard to the important result of Judaic missionary effort during the diaspora. The causes are partly those which Bamberger enumerated to prove the proselytizing

activity of the Jews (see above). To these we could add Dalbert's remarks:

- (i) The antisemitic outbursts and martyrdoms which the Jews experienced several times during the diaspora led to the growth of Judaism, just as martyrdom led later on to the growth of Christianity.
- (ii) The great moral strength of Judaism, which made it superior to all pagan religions.
- (iii) The strongly monotheistic tendencies in the Hellenistic world, in which the old town and state cults had often become mere formalities.
- (iv) The readiness of the countries around the Mediterranean to accept spiritual values from the Orient. This orientalism, with its monotheistic tendencies and its ethical tendencies which were anchored in monotheism, gave Judaism an added attraction.
- (v) The shift from Palestine legalism to the spirituality of diaspora Judaism.<sup>12</sup>

The great importance and influence of the Septuagint should be mentioned separately. This Greek translation of the Old Testament became—mainly through St. Paul—the great mission book of the young Christian Church, but long before that it was the Jews' mission book *par excellence*.<sup>13</sup> The great shift from a centripetal to a centrifugal missionary consciousness in the New Testament, which will be dealt with more fully in Chapter 6, can only be properly appreciated when viewed against the background of the translation of the Septuagint, which is much more than a mere translation—it is an exegesis and transformation of the Old Testament. This point of view will now be explained.

## 2. *Septuagint and Proselytism*

The Septuagint originated in the anxiety felt by the Jews in the diaspora that those who were living in foreign

countries were in danger of losing their knowledge of the Hebrew tongue, particularly since Aramaic had taken its place as the spoken language and Hebrew retained its significance only as the language of the Holy Books.<sup>14</sup>

However, as soon as the Greek translation became available, it began to serve the mission. The great importance of the Septuagint certainly lay not only in *what* was in it but also in *how* the text was heard and interpreted.<sup>15</sup> It is certain that the fact that a diaspora had taken place had a great influence on the translation of the Hebrew text. A well-known example is the translation of Isa. 55: 5, which does not show any missionary tendency in the Hebrew text, whereas it does so very clearly in the Greek text—“Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee [Israel] shall run unto thee.” I have already mentioned the translation of foreigner (*gēr*) as a synonym for “proselyte”. We may take it that St. Paul subscribed to a well-known interpretation when in Rom. 10: 20, he interpreted the words of Isa. 65: 1 as referring to the Gentiles, although in the Hebrew text itself no Gentiles are mentioned.<sup>16</sup> A similar shifting of interpretation can be noticed in the Septuagint version of Isa. 54: 15.

The fact that the Septuagint does not speak the literary language of Hellenism but the popular one of the *koine*, also gives this translation great significance from the point of view of social history; it opened the Oriental world to the Occident. According to Bertram its significance from the point of view of the history of religion is even greater.

In the Hebraic Old Testament a number of books is collected, the origin of which is extended over centuries. Therefore they reflect the manifold stages of development in the Israelitic-Judaic religion. The Septuagint comes from a much more unified world of religious ideas; it is a creation of Jewry, which owes its origin to the Persians and its world-wide activity to its Hellenistic rulers. Therefore

one spirit is blowing through the book; its parts fuse. Contradictions and foldings are smoothed out.<sup>17</sup>

An interaction took place; the diaspora developed the missionary consciousness that by implication was present in the testimonies of divine revelations and thus influenced the translation of the Septuagint, while the latter in its turn gave a vigorous impulse to missionary activity. The Jews want to be “to all mortals a guide in life”.<sup>18</sup>

Jewish missionary effort must have been so obvious that a poet like Horace can even produce a *bon mot* about it when he wants to stress an invitation to a friend: “If you won’t come willingly, we shall act like the Jews do and force you to. . . .”<sup>19</sup> Although one should not deduce too much from words like these, they do show that Judaic propaganda was of a particularly insistent nature. This is also evident from the extensive Hellenistic-Judaic missionary literature.<sup>20</sup>

If Jewish missionary consciousness is to be explained by the diaspora, Hellenism and particularly the influence of the Septuagint, one should not overlook the strong tendencies towards universalistic mission in the later parts of the Old Testament. Particularly the great importance of the later wisdom literature should be noted. It is dealt with now instead of in Chapter 2, only because it has a unique place in the canon of the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. *Israelitic Wisdom and Proselytism*

The first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs are without doubt amongst the most enigmatic and at the same time fascinating *chokma* (wisdom) literature in the Old Testament. Since this is only a survey we can discuss them only very briefly. Moreover there is still much uncertainty about the wisdom literature in general and the last word about it has not yet been said.

Israel has always known that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But nowhere else in the Old Testament is wisdom referred to as a *person* who is at one and

the same time princeps and principle of the creation of the world. This personification of wisdom even goes to the length of representing it as a seductive woman.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth noting that wisdom viewed in this way becomes important from the point of view of the history of the world and the history of salvation. Israel is not the only nation to possess wisdom; the world of nations possesses it too. "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth" (Prov. 8: 15, 16).

This should probably be interpreted as meaning, not that Israel's particular role in God's saving activity is denied, but that this divine wisdom is rightly known and recognized only in and by Israel as the first of Yahweh's creatures.<sup>23</sup>

Seen against the background of the way of thinking of the Old Testament, it nevertheless remains a remarkable phenomenon that the share the nations have in divine wisdom is spoken of here without reference to Israel's unique position and significance, at any rate without the election of Israel being directly mentioned and referred to.

In Prov. 8: 35, the normal order of the Old Testament is even reversed. The gods of the nations are idols and non-entities; only Israel's God is the living and life-giving God. Here, however, it is not said that he who finds Yahweh also finds Life, but the other way round; he who finds wisdom, finds life and so Yahweh's favour—"For whoso findeth me (=Wisdom), findeth Life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord". What else does this mean but that wherever there is wisdom, Yahweh is present?

In later days this Wisdom will be identified more particularly with the Torah. This does not deny its universal significance but it does give it a more disguised, Judaic character. One has only to compare Prov. 1-9 with statements regarding the wisdom of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>24</sup> The word that awakens man to

life and salvation is the same as that which God used as a plan when creating the world.<sup>25</sup>

Those curious chapters 1–9 of Proverbs are, as it were, a bridge between Israel and the nations. The way of thinking in these chapters is more or less the same as that in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. That which was meant in the latter as Israel's credo, sounds in the former like an appeal to anyone who is willing to listen, be it within or outside Israel; the salvation of the world lies in the wisdom that was already present when the world began.

This way of thinking reveals a positive attitude towards the world of nations and the fact that this positive attitude was evidently legitimate in Israel and was even sanctioned by the Judaic canon should warn us to be careful when we judge Israel's "exclusivism" or "particularism".

And if Prov. 1–9 came into being in the post-exile period, then it is certainly also thanks to this wisdom literature that Israel became more and more aware of its missionary calling. It is not to be wondered at that in the old Christian Church personified Wisdom was looked upon as a prefiguration of Jesus Christ. Did He not Himself make use of this wisdom if not identify Himself with it when He said, in words borrowed from the *chokma*: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11: 28–30, cf. Eccles. 51: 23–27, 6: 24–30.)

We should certainly not attach too much importance to Prov. 1–9; in careful hermeneutics one should never promote a surprising and rare perspective in the Old Testament to the level of a general and guiding point of view. On the other hand, while searching for the spirit and intention of the Scriptures, one should not neglect this testimony either. It seems to me that so far the wisdom literature has not received the attention it deserves, particularly in missionary science.