



PROSELYTE

What was a proselyte in the Bible?

The word “proselyte” shows up 4 times in the New Testament: Matthew 23:15, Acts 2:10, Acts 6:5, and Acts 13:43.

The term appears to refer to a “stranger” (Hebrew “ger”) a term the Old Testament writers used to refer to a non-Hebrew person (Gentile) who lived among the Israelites. The term proselyte is specific to those “strangers” who voluntarily became adherents to the Jewish faith.

PROSELYTES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

The Old Testament scriptures don’t spend a lot of time talking about proselytes, which makes sense because the Israelites weren’t commanded to “make disciples” the same way modern Christians are commissioned. That said, there are a few texts which give us some insight into what needed to happen in order for a Gentile to become part of God’s national family, Israel. The best place to start is probably Exodus 12:48-49:

Exo 12:48-49 “If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.”

The Passover was a feast specifically for the Israelites. If a Gentile who lived among the Jews wanted to join in the memorial, all the males in his household had to be circumcised first. The Passover was a memorial and celebration of God’s covenant with Israel and circumcision was the sign of the covenant. Those who wished to participate needed to be symbolically incorporated into the nation through circumcision.

Numbers 15 offers additional details about the unity God intended between the Israelites and the “strangers” who lived among them:

Num 15:14-16 “And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he shall do as you do. For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”

PROSELYTES IN THE RABBINIC TRADITION:

In the years leading up to Jesus’ birth, the Jewish Rabbis (religious teachers) created distinctions between types of proselytes and added rules for becoming a proselyte.

Two Types of Proselytes:

1. **Proselyte of Righteousness (ger tzedek)** - This was a Gentile who submitted to circumcision and kept all of the commands of the Mosaic Law.
2. **Proselyte of the Gates (ger toshav)** - A Gentile who lived among the Israelites and kept the 7 Laws of Noah (Noachian Laws) but was not circumcised or expected to live in complete compliance with the Mosaic Law.

Some of the Rabbis required new converts to be immersed in water, in addition to circumcision.

“If he receives this, circumcise him immediately and wait until he is fully healed, and afterwards, immerse him without a barrier. (Some say that you cut or shave his hair and you cut his fingernails and his toenails before immersion.) And three learned scholars stand at his back and teach him some of the light mitzvot and some of the more stringent mitzvot a second time, and he stands in the water. And if it is a woman, women sit her in the water up to her neck and the beit din is outside and they teach her some of the easy mitzvot and some of the more stringent mitzvot and she sits in the water and afterwards, she immerses before them and they turn their faces and leave in order that they do not see her when she is getting out of the water, and they bless the immersion after she comes out of the water. And once he has immersed, it is as if he is a Jew...” (Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 268).

Understanding the Jewish traditions surrounding proselytizing gives us insight into one of the hottest doctrinal debates of the early Church. If you read the epistles of the New Testament, it won't take long to come across a discussion about circumcision. The Apostle Paul was constantly battling those of the “circumcision party” who insisted Christians needed to be circumcised. They likely held this conviction because circumcision was an essential part of becoming a proselyte to the Jewish religion and they felt it should be carried over to the followers of Christ.

PROSELYTES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

From Acts 2:11 and Acts 6:5 we see that proselytes were part of the early Church. Peter preached to proselytes in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit empowered him to speak on Pentecost. Acts 6:5 tells us one of the 7 men chosen by the Church to care for widows was “Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.”

Although the 1st Century Jews weren't directly instructed to “go out and make disciples” to Judaism, proselytizing was undertaken with vigor by some factions of the Jews. Jesus addressed the zeal of the Pharisees and scribes to make proselytes in Matthew 23:

Mat 23:15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”

Evidently, the Pharisees and scribes went to great lengths to make converts, but they did it for the wrong reasons and had a detrimental effect on those they brought Judaism. They weren't proselytizing for the glory of God and the good of souls, rather for personal pride, to strengthen their Jewish sect, and to receive the praise of men.

