

**Blood, Bread, and Light:  
Female Converts in Early Judaism**

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**Abstract:**

This article looks at evidence for women's conversion to Judaism in antiquity. Literature from the Second Temple Period suggests that Judaism was attractive to women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and patristic evidence suggests that this attraction continued after the rise of Christianity. Examining this literature, as well as some rabbinic material, most notably *Gerim* and *Ruth Rabbah*, this article postulates that gender specific rituals, in particular *niddah* (menstrual purity) observance, may have been one of the reasons that Gentile women converted to Judaism. This suggestion stands against the notion, present in both rabbinic literature and in modern New Testament scholarship, that menstrual purity laws were a burden to Jewish women.

“There was a difference between Jews and Christians that had to do with the body.”  
-Daniel Boyarin

“ ‘And why was the precept of menstruation given to her?’ ‘Because she shed the blood of Adam.’ ... ‘And why was the precept of ‘dough’ given to her?’ ‘Because she corrupted Adam who was the dough of the world.’ ... ‘And why was the precept of the Sabbath lights given to her?’ ‘Because she extinguished the soul of Adam.’ ” – *Genesis Rabbah* 17:8<sup>i</sup>

The above passage from the Midrashic work *Genesis Rabbah* (ca. 400 CE) prescribes a series of atoning rituals which are incumbent upon women because of the primordial woman's transgression.<sup>ii</sup> Women are to observe menstrual purity laws (*niddah*) because Eve “shed the blood of Adam;” they are to tithe *challah* (a portion of bread dough) because Eve “corrupted Adam, who was the dough of the world;” and they are to light (*hadalqah*) Sabbath candles in order to illuminate a world made dark by Eve's “extinguishing the soul of Adam.”

Why these *mitzvot* are presented as “punishments rather than privileges”<sup>iii</sup> is perplexing and it has been suggested that the passage might be a polemical response to the increased role of women in religious life in this period.<sup>iv</sup> Regardless, many New Testament scholars have agreed with the rabbis that *niddah* was essentially a punishment and a burden for women, and, through a problematic reading of Mark 5: 25-32, have argued that Jesus himself released women from this onerous ritual obligation.<sup>v</sup> Yet none of these readings have attempted to account for the ongoing attraction of Christian women to Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era.

In the post-Talmudic tractate *Gerim*, which contains a description of the rabbinic conversion ritual, a woman is informed of these three specific ritual responsibilities: “Just as they say to a man (some of the commandments), thus do they say them to a woman on condition that she be careful (in her observance of), menstruation, bread dough and the lighting of the (Sabbath) lamp” (*Gerim* 1:1: 11).<sup>vi</sup> That these commandments are unfolded to the potential convert immediately prior to the immersion which affects the transition into Judaism suggests that these three rituals are understood as being at the center of a Jewish woman's religious identity.<sup>vii</sup> The rituals themselves

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may have “provided... women with satisfying spiritual avenues for the sanctification of aspects of daily life.”<sup>viii</sup> This article would like to explore the issue of women converts to Judaism in early Judaism in order to suggest that these “atoning” rituals, particularly *niddah* observance, may have been alluring to women, especially Christian women, who looked to participate in gender specific religious rituals. I stress the importance of *niddah* because it is the most gender specific of the three rituals and because it is the only one of the three that can only be performed by a woman. Further, within the rabbinic texts it is *niddah*, of the three rituals, which is “the focal point of rabbinic concern”<sup>ix</sup> and it has continued to be the concern of much of the discussion about the differences, in the early period, between Christian and Jewish women.

This article has a tripartite structure. In the first section I look at some of the evidence from the Second Temple Period that attests to Gentile women’s attraction to Judaism. The second section looks at the *niddah* laws and suggests, in light of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century patristic material that *niddah* may have been one of the Jewish practices that Gentile women were attracted to. Lastly, the paradigmatic convert to Judaism was a woman and was initiated into the religion by another woman. At the end of this article the conversion ceremony described in *Gerim* will be read in light of *Ruth Rabbah*, and the biblical book which inspired it, in order to suggest that the Midrash itself may have drawn women into the Jewish fold and be reflective of their experience. Since the rabbinic material is notoriously difficult to date and even more difficult to glean historical information from, the suggestions made about this literature will, by necessity, remain speculative.

### **The Allure of Judaism to Gentile Women: Evidence from the Pre-Rabbinic Period**

In *Antiquities*, Josephus, the Jewish historian of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, relates the story of an aristocratic Roman matron, Fulvia, who is said to have “come over to the customs of the Jews” (18:82). Fulvia is duped by three unscrupulous Jews into sending elaborate gifts to the Jerusalem temple, gifts which are then kept by the three Jews themselves. Fulvia’s husband brings this deception to attention of the emperor, who responds by expelling the entire Jewish populace from Rome. This expulsion, dated to around 19 CE, is mentioned by three Roman historians. Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.85.5) and Suetonius (*Tib.* 36), both writing in early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, agree with Josephus that practitioners of Judaism and “Egyptian rites” were banished, with many of the exiles being conscripted.<sup>x</sup> Dio Cassius, writing at the beginning of the third century, mentions only the expulsion of the Jews, and is the only one of the four writers to link this expulsion explicitly to Jewish missionary activity.<sup>xi</sup> What is interesting, however, is that in Josephus’ version of the story we have a highborn Roman woman adopting the practices of Judaism, presumably independently of her husband. Elsewhere Josephus attests to a similar phenomenon: Nero’s wife Poppaea is said to fear the Jewish god (*Ant.* 20. 195)<sup>xii</sup>, the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene begins with the women of the household (*Ant.* 20:34-38)<sup>xiii</sup> and, in what must be hyperbole, almost all the women in Damascus at the time of the first Jewish revolt “have gone over to the Jewish religion” (*JW* 2: 560), thus provoking distrust in their husbands.<sup>xiv</sup>

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As with all of Josephus' work, we should be wary of any apologetic aims evident in these passages. Moreover, the susceptibility of women to foreign religions was a common stereotype in the ancient world and Judith Lieu has suggested that Josephus in the story of Fulvia "adopts [this] theme... to explain both incidents," that is the expulsion of the Jews and of Isis worshippers.<sup>xv</sup> However, stereotypes that are not based in reality often lose their resonance and I see no reason to dismiss all accounts of this phenomenon.<sup>xvi</sup> Further, while the apologetic aims of Josephus can be seen in the story of Fulvia (namely, Fulvia is duped, but only by renegade Jews who are despised by their people and their deception is only fiscal; whereas another Roman matron, Paulina, is duped by the priests of Isis and her deception is both fiscal and sexual- thus only the Isis worshippers are really a problem whereas the Jews were punished because of a few bad apples), it is difficult to see what apologetic purpose Josephus has when he ascribes Jewish practices to the women of Damascus or to the women in the royal house of Adiabene.

Whether the women mentioned by Josephus can be understood as full proselytes is a matter of debate and depends on how conversion is defined.<sup>xvii</sup> Certainly, if women were involved in the Jewish religion independently of their husbands they would not be, in Cohen's words, "social converts" who had been fully integrated into Jewish society<sup>xviii</sup> (the women of the royal house of Adiabene being an exception). The earliest rabbinic writings suggest that when a Gentile joined Judaism they, for the most part, severed all ties with their Gentile relatives which suggests that a woman could certainly not become a convert if she was still married to a Gentile husband.<sup>xix</sup> Moreover, at this point there was no ritual which would mark the initiation of women into Judaism, and thus there was no ceremonial way to distinguish between a Gentile woman who adopted some Jewish customs and a full female proselyte.

The question of what motivated women to convert to Judaism, or Christianity for that matter, is problematic as we simply do not have any first person accounts of women's conversion experience.<sup>xx</sup> In his extensive exploration of Jewish proselytism in the ancient world, Louis Feldman has enumerated the reasons why a Gentile may have converted to or become a sympathizer to Judaism.<sup>xxi</sup> These range from the economic to the theological.<sup>xxii</sup> Feldman does not closely examine why Gentile women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would have been particularly drawn to Judaism, except to note that intermarriage was likely not a major factor<sup>xxiii</sup> and that women might have been drawn to "the relatively more elevated and respected position of women in the Jewish community," a claim which is not elaborated or supported.<sup>xxiv</sup> Feldman does not suggest that women may have been drawn to gender specific practices, and indeed it is uncertain how widespread these three rituals were in Diaspora Judaism of the first century, though the proximity of many synagogues to flowing water and the fact that almost all Diaspora synagogues provided water at their entrances suggests that some form of ritual washing was common.<sup>xxv</sup> In Josephus we are intriguingly told that Fulvia has adopted some of the "customs" or "laws" of Judaism, but not what specific practices or laws she observes. There is no way to prove that the customs in question may have included the three gender specific rituals, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. Moreover, Josephus' writing suggests that Judaism in the Second Temple Period was uniquely attractive to women.<sup>xxvi</sup> There is no reason to suppose that this attraction ended with the destruction of the temple

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and the rise of Christianity. In fact, later church fathers such as John Chrysostom and Jerome polemicized against Christian women's problematic attraction to Jewish festivals and practices. In the next section of the paper I will examine both this polemic as well as the possible attractions of *niddah* to both Jewish and non-Jewish women in order to suggest that this may have been part of the allure of Judaism for Gentile women.

**Gender Specific Jewish Rituals: Possible Attractions**

A closer look at the laws surrounding *niddah*<sup>xxvii</sup> may help us to understand what may have drawn women to Judaism. The laws are based on Leviticus 15 which concerns *tum'ah*, ritual impurity, of those with genital discharges. Here there is a parallel drawn between a man who has a seminal emission and a woman who is menstruating. Both are considered ritually impure: the man until evening and the woman for a seven-day period, regardless of the length of her menstruation. The main function of these laws is to restrict those who are impure from coming into contact with the sacred. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes: "The only characteristic of *tum'ah* is contagion; the only misfortune associated with the condition is isolation from the people and alienation from all things holy."<sup>xxviii</sup> Another aspect of menstrual purity in Leviticus is the prohibition of intercourse during a woman's menstruation (Lev. 20: 18).

Within the Torah, a menstruant is not required to ritually immerse after her seven days of impurity have passed. By the time of the Mishnah, however, ritual bathing after menstruation is assumed.<sup>xxix</sup> Both the *niddah* and the ejaculant (as well as the *zav*, a man with an ongoing genital discharge, and the *zava*, a woman with vaginal discharge outside her menstrual cycle) are discussed in Mishnaic order *Toharot* (purities). However, while both Talmudim have Gemara on Tractate Niddah (the Yerushalmi's commentary ends at chapter three), they do not comment on the other tractates concerning genital discharges and impurity. This, along with the fact that m. Niddah and the commentary on it are filled with halakhic anecdotes that are missing in the other purity tractates, suggests that *niddah* was a lived reality in the rabbinic period, whereas the other topics had ceased to be relevant after the destruction of the temple.<sup>xxx</sup>

After this destruction, the realm of the holy moves to the domestic sphere and the sexual prohibition becomes paramount.<sup>xxxi</sup> It is the home, rather than the synagogue, which is the primary locus for ritual activity.<sup>xxxii</sup> Leslie A. Cook has suggested that the menstrual laws were embellished as "part of a strategy to empower the individual Jew as priest in the context of a world without a temple and a priestly system." Through the observance of her body's cycles, the Jewish woman became "the structural equivalent of the priest."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Cook may have overstated her case but it remains that the observance of *niddah*, which the rabbis place such emphasis on, would have allowed women to be active participants in religious life.

Moreover, since a sexual prohibition is at the centre of the rabbinic writing about *niddah*, and that the rabbis had to rely, at least in part, on a woman's word that she was pure or impure, we can imagine that the *niddah* prohibition might have provided a Jewish woman with a measure of sexual autonomy and control perhaps not dissimilar to sexual renunciation in early Christianity.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, unlike in Christianity where sexual control meant forsaking sex altogether, *niddah* provided a means wherein women could

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engage in sexual activity, or refuse it, by relying on their status as *niddah*.<sup>xxxv</sup> This is implied by the following rabbinic anecdote:

Shmu'el wanted to sleep with his wife.  
She said to him: I am impure.  
But the next day she said: I am pure.  
He challenged her: Yesterday you said you are impure  
and today you are pure?  
She answered: Yesterday I did not have enough strength.  
He went and asked Rav.<sup>xxxvi</sup>  
Rav said: Since she gave a reasonable explanation of her  
behavior, she is believed.  
-p. Ket. 2:5; 26c<sup>xxxvii</sup>

There is also evidence that Jewish-Christian women were hesitant to forsake *niddah* observance, which, while not testifying to its appeal to non-Jewish women *per se*, does testify to its enduring value to women who had left Judaism.<sup>xxxviii</sup> From the mid third century in Syria we have an anonymous church letter, the *Didaskalia Apostolorum*, written in Syriac, wherein the author castigates certain women of the community for abstaining from Eucharist, prayer, and church attendance during their menstruation.<sup>xxxix</sup> After engaging in an argument with these women, the author charges the husbands in his community to curtail their wives' superstitious Judaic practices:

And when they have those issues which are according to nature take care, as is right, that you cleave to them, for you know that they are your limbs and love them as yourselves... On this account a woman when she in the way of women.... let [her] assemble without restraint, *without bathing*, for [she is] clean.<sup>xl</sup>

The injunction to engage in intercourse with a menstruant which is implied in the passage is unparalleled in early Christian literature and was indeed censored in the Latin translation.<sup>xli</sup> However, such an extreme statement suggests the threat that this Jewish custom was perceived as being to this Christian community. The insistence that menstruating women not bathe suggests that ritual bathing was pervasively attractive to these Christian women.<sup>xlii</sup>

Fonrobert has suggested that the motives of these women should be understood within the Christian discourse about virginity and transcendence of the body. She builds on the work of Elizabeth Castelli, who maintains that in a society where women are conceived of as primarily as bodies whereas men are associated with mind,<sup>xliii</sup> and are only in their bodies when they are sexually aroused, sexual renunciation, and the negation of the body that such a renunciation implies, has greater implications for women than for men.<sup>xliiv</sup> To spiritually progress a woman needed not only to renounce sex, but also to renounce all vestiges of femininity. This is evidenced in diverse array of early Christian literature: in *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus affirms that Mary is allowed to remain amongst the disciples since "he will make her male" (114), the eponymous heroine of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, cross-dresses and cuts her hair in order to be taken seriously as a missionary

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and, in a vision shortly before her martyrdom, Perpetua (*Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*) actually turns into a man.<sup>xlv</sup> Against this ideal of bodily transcendence the women of the *Didaskalia*, by persisting in their practice of the gender specific ritual of menstrual separation, “have affirmed their embodied lives by endowing the body with [religious] significance.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

These women may well have been the forerunners to women who proved problematic in a Syrian church a century later. In the late fourth century, John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch, made it the responsibility of Christian men to keep women out of the synagogue (*Ad. Jud.* 2.3.3-5; 4.7.3) much as the anonymous author of the *Didaskalia* made it the responsibility of husbands to prevent their wives from observing menstrual purity laws. The attraction of Judaism to Christians in Chrysostom’s community was primarily ritual rather than theological. Christians were drawn to religious festivals, including the Sabbath and New Year’s festivities, and some wanted to tailor the Christian calendar in order to make it accord with the Jewish one.<sup>xlvii</sup> Further, according to Chrysostom, some Antiochene Christians treated the synagogues as though they were “sacred shrines” (*Ad. Jud.* 1.3). Since it is primarily women who are drawn to the synagogue, though there are men as well, we can imagine that some of these women may have been drawn to *niddah* practices. When castigating the cultic practices of the Jews, Chrysostom does briefly make mention of the *niddah* laws. Chrysostom’s ostensible point is that all Judaic cultic practices are no longer valid after the destruction of the temple (*Ad. Jud.* 7.1.3; 7.1.5). The fact that menstrual purity practices are included in this list suggests that they were observed by Jewish women in Antioch. The need to stress the futility of such rites suggests that they may have been attractive to Christian women as well.<sup>xlviii</sup> The allure of Judaic practices to Christian women is also mentioned by Jerome (*On Matthew* 23: 15), which suggests that this attraction was not confined to Chrysostom’s community alone.

It was noted in the previous section that Second Temple Judaism contained no ritual which would induct women into Judaism. Immersion is not mentioned in Second Temple sources or in the Mishnah as a prerequisite for conversion. Cohen has suggested that “[t]he emergence of immersion as a conversion ritual is no doubt to be connected with the emergence of the possibility that women too could convert to Judaism.”<sup>xlix</sup> If women were the reason immersion was included in the conversion ceremony, then it may be suggested that the ritual was deliberately patterned on a ritual already associated with women, namely the post-menstruation *mikveh*.<sup>l</sup> This is suggested by a line in the b. Yevamot, which likely has its origins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (see note vi): “And wherever a menstruant immerses, there a convert and an emancipated slave immerse” (b. Yevamot F2). The fact that one of the central ritual laws incumbent upon women in rabbinic Judaism is used as such suggests the importance of the female-specific ritual within the larger religious framework. Moreover the post-menstruation *mikveh* may have acted as monthly reminder of the initial conversion.<sup>li</sup>

#### **Ruth: The Paradigmatic Convert<sup>lii</sup>**

“All rush to marry a proselytess.”  
-b. Horayoth 13a

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Midrashim, rabbinic elaborations on the Hebrew Bible, are notoriously difficult to locate, nor can we be confident about their precise function. If we confine the Midrashim to a school setting, then one would imagine that few women, much less Gentile ones, would have heard them. However, if we place the Midrashim as preaching tools in the synagogue, then they would have been heard by a wider audience. The question is complicated because few Midrashic passages are specifically located in any setting.<sup>liii</sup> It is possible that in their original oral forms, the Midrashim served more than one purpose. Again, Patristic literature helps to corroborate Jewish practice at this time. Jerome describes the preaching in synagogues to a what seems to be a non-scholarly audience when he notes that within the synagogue, “[t]he preachers make the people believe that the fictions they invent are true and after they have, in theatrical fashion, called forth applause... they arrogantly step forward” (*Ezek.* 34:3). Elsewhere Jerome records that people hasten to hear “this or that Rabbi who expounds the divine law with such marvelous eloquence” (*Ezek.* 33:33).<sup>liv</sup> The rabbis are thus speaking to a popular audience and receiving popular acclaim while interpreting scripture and inventing “fictions,” possibly a reference to the narrative embellishments included in aggadic (narrative) Midrashim. We can compare this to a passage in the *Yerushalmi* in which R. Hanina and R. Hiyya bar Aba witness “all the people... running” in order to hear a sermon by R. Yohanan (p. *Bava Metzia* 2:11). As was discussed above, Christian women in the communities of Jerome and John Chrysostom were drawn to the synagogues in the locales of those two men. It is thus not impossible that Christian women would have heard the Midrashim,<sup>lv</sup> perhaps in their primitive oral forms, though the logistics of this, including issues of language, are uncertain.

*Ruth Rabbah* is an elaboration of the biblical book of Ruth. Declaring that “your people will be my people, and your God my God” (*Ruth* 1:16), the young Moabite widow Ruth in a supreme act of *chesed* (loyalty, loving-kindness) forsakes her ancestral land and beliefs in order to follow Naomi, her widowed Israelite mother-in-law, to Bethlehem. As such, Ruth is the convert *par excellence* of the Hebrew Bible. The retelling of Ruth’s story in *Ruth Rabbah* may have been told for the benefit of gentile women and/or have been reflective of their conversion experience.<sup>lvi</sup> By showing the welcome and eventual exaltation of this female proselyte (after all she is foremother to King David and thus to the Messiah) this document may have provided the impetus for these women to make the move from sympathizer to full convert. Jacob Neusner has commented that the femininity of Ruth is a critical component of the Midrash inasmuch as the story’s main message is “the extraordinary power of the Torah to join the opposites as-Israelite/gentile, messiah/utter outsider- into a single figure, and to accomplish this union of opposites through a woman.”<sup>lvii</sup>

It is perhaps not coincidental that the biblical story of the paradigmatic convert parallels the rabbinic conversion story. In fact the Midrash of Ruth in many ways seems to be a narrative exposition of the conversion ritual.<sup>lviii</sup> Just as Ruth begs not to be parted from Naomi, so does the convert beg to be accepted into the fold. In *Gerim*, it is the proselyte who must take the initiative to be converted (*Gerim* 1:1: 1) at which point those whom he has approached attempt to dissuade him: “Do you not know that this nation is downtrodden and afflicted more than all the other nations” (*Gerim* 1:1: 2-3)? Similarly,

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Naomi warns her daughters-in-law that life with her will be hard, and attempts to convince them not to continue with her (Ruth 1:11-13).

In Ruth, Naomi instructs her daughters-in-law to “Turn back my daughters.... Turn back... go your way” (Ruth 1: 11-12). The rabbis comment on this passage and how it relates to conversion: “Three times it is written here ‘turn back’, corresponding to the three times the proselyte is repulsed” (*Ruth Rabbah* II 16). After being told a third time to turn back, Ruth pleads “Entreat me not to leave thee and to return from following after thee” (Ruth 1: 16). The Midrash interprets this as meaning, “do not turn your misfortunes away from me.”<sup>lix</sup> This is similar to *Gerim* when the convert, after being told of the perils of joining the Jewish people, willingly accepts these perils by saying: “I am not worthy to give my neck into the yoke of the one who spoke and the world was, blessed be He” (*Gerim* 1:1:6).<sup>lx</sup> Yet in both *Ruth Rabbah* and *Gerim*, the attempt to dissuade the convert is somewhat of a ruse. In *Ruth Rabbah*, Ruth’s persistence is eventually rewarded (this will be discussed subsequently), while Ruth’s sister-in-law Orpah, who takes the dissuasion of Naomi seriously, is raped upon leaving.<sup>lxi</sup> In *Gerim* the potential convert who does not say “I am not worthy,” departs for an unknown fate whereas the convert who accepts the hardship of joining the Jewish people discovers immediately subsequent to his immersion that burdens of being a Jew are far out-weighed by the rewards. He is told:

Whom have you joined, O happy one! You have joined  
Him who created the world by mere uttering of words,  
blessed be He. For the world was created only for the sake  
of Israel. There are none called the children of God, except  
Israel. There are none beloved of God, except Israel. All  
that we have spoken to you before your conversion, was  
only to increase your reward.

-*Gerim* 1:1: 12-15

The yoke is not burdensome after all, and the new Jew is welcomed into the community.<sup>lxii</sup>

More similarities can be seen between the two documents. In *Gerim* we are told that “[a] man immerses a man [but does not immerse a woman] a woman immerses a woman but does not immerse a man” (1:4). The practice of women initiating women into Judaism is echoed in *Ruth Rabbah* II 22 which interprets Ruth’s plea to Naomi not to “Entreat me not to leave thee and return from following after thee” (Ruth 1: 16) as meaning that Ruth is unequivocally saying that “I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands that at those of another. When Naomi heard this she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion” (*Ruth Rabbah* II 22).<sup>lxiii</sup> Even the mundane aspects of Naomi’s instruction to Ruth are imbued with religious significance in the Midrash. Thus the biblical passage wherein Naomi tells Ruth to “[w]ash and anoint yourself” (Ruth 3:3) for the ostensible purpose of seducing Boaz, is understood metaphorically as a command to “wash yourself clean of idolatry” (*Ruth Rabbah* V 12), which seems to allude to the purificatory pre-conversion *mikveh*.<sup>lxiv</sup> Thus the Midrash is a narrative exposition on the conversion ritual.



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While Ruth, like the stereotypical convert envisioned in Gerim, petitions Naomi to convert, it bears mentioning that it is Naomi who has led Ruth out of her ancestral land, to the edge of Israel before Ruth makes her petition. They are on the “way” (דרך) to Judah (Ruth 1:6), in the liminal space between the converts’ former state and future status. This may be reflective of rabbinic conversion practices. While not actively pursuing converts, the rabbis may have welcomed interested Gentiles into the synagogues and, once they were in their territory, permitted them to convert if it was of their own initiative.

Finally, the exaltation of Ruth, whose status as a convert is always highlighted, may have been welcoming to Gentile women who were drawn to the synagogue. After all the Midrash clearly states regarding Ruth that “[j]ust as this day holds dominion in the sky, so shall your seed produce one who shall hold dominion and rule over Israel for ever” (*Ruth Rabbah* VII 15).<sup>lxv</sup> While elsewhere in rabbinic literature there is ambivalence towards proselytes,<sup>lxvi</sup> the text here is clear, not only is a Gentile woman welcome, but she has an integral place in the sacred history of Israel.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusions of this paper are necessarily speculative and are less about women’s Judaism than about “women in men’s Judaism”<sup>lxvii</sup> and, for that matter, women in men’s Christianity. Since there is a dearth of female voices in early Judaism and Christianity this is somewhat unavoidable. It remains that our sources from the Second Temple Period suggest that Judaism was attractive to women. Patristic evidence suggests that this attraction continued after the rise of Christianity. This paper has tried to postulate that the gender specific rituals, which often have a negative cast in the rabbinic literature itself, may have been one of the reasons for this attraction. If we understand the Midrash as teaching tools in the synagogue then it is possible that the Gentile women whom Chrysostom and Jerome mentioned might have heard them. The biblical character of Ruth likely served as a prototype for these women, while *Ruth Rabbah* may have simultaneously served as tool for convincing these women to make the final move from Christianity to Judaism and as a reflection of their conversion experience, though because of the nature of the rabbinic material these points are even more speculative than the others.

The point of this article has not been to suggest that rabbinic Judaism was somehow “better” for women than was early Christianity. Rather, in light of the persistent attraction of women to Judaism that is mentioned in Josephus and patristic sources, I have tried to explain this attraction by looking to the different conceptions of gender in early Christianity and Judaism and how these manifested in a ritual sphere. Because of the noted tendency in some Christian exegesis to conceive of these ritual laws as inherently oppressive and of Christianity as a means of liberating Jewish women from them, this seems to be an important hermeneutical task.

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<sup>i</sup> A close parallel to the passage is found in y. Shabbat 2: 6 8b and in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* B 9.

<sup>ii</sup> The earliest rabbinic writings concerning these commandments are found in m. Shabbat 2:6 and here they also have a negative cast: “There are three sins for which women die in childbirth: a lack of care with regard to menstrual separation, the separation of the dough offering, and the lighting of the [Sabbath] candle.” In *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3:2, this statement is repeated and balanced somewhat: “for three transgressions do women die in the time of childbirth... *and for three circumstances do men die*: when dwelling in a dilapidated house, traveling the road alone and sailing on the ocean” (italics mine). The passages may have been a question of theodicy: the rabbis needed to give a theological reason why so many women did die in childbirth (see Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* [Stanford: University Press, 2000], 33).

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 91-92.

<sup>iv</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among the Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 99-100. Boyarin, 92, remarks that the three commandments are given to women because “they belong particularly to the women's sphere as understood by the rabbinic culture, to her body, cooking, and the comfort of the house, just as other commandments, which belong to the ‘male’ spheres of public life and worship, are restricted to men.”

<sup>v</sup> See Marla Selvidge, who has written a monograph on the passage entitled *Women, Cult, and Miracle Recital: A Redactional Critical Investigation on Mark 5:24-34* (London: Bucknell, 1990) in which she argues that “this story was written to free early Christian women from the social bonds of niddah” (Selvidge, *Women*, 30). See also Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Early Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 72; Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), 243; M. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung kultur- und religionsgeschichtlicher Hintergründe* (Altenberge: Telos, 1990), 197-199. Fonrobert, 188-198, has dealt explicitly with this reading of Mark 5 and outlined many of the problematic exegetical and historical assumptions that lie behind it. For further discussion of how the feminists scholars' reconstruction of early Christianity subtly denigrates Judaism see Katharina von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* (Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1994), 57-74.

<sup>vi</sup> Michael Higger, *Seven Minor Treatises: Sefer Torah; Mezuzah; Tefillin; Zizit; Kutim; Gerim and Treatise Soferim II* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1930), 5-6, maintained that the passages in this and the other minor tractates could be traced to Tannaitic times and that their redactor lived before the completion of the Babylonian Talmud. Thus the tractate is among the “first post-Mishnaic compendia regulating specific Jewish practices and usages.” This is likely not a very critical position. These seven minor tractates are not mentioned until the thirteenth century, when they are referenced in Nachmanides' *Torat ha-Adam* (H.L. Strack, G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and the Midrash* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991], 252). Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 238, tentatively dates *Gerim* between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. He maintains that the tractate's description of the ceremony is likely dependent on b. Yevamot, which contains a similar description (Cohen, *Beginnings*, 211). Cohen maintains that there is veracity to the text-internal claim that the b. Yevamot passage has its origins in Palestine of the second or third centuries CE. He bases this on linguistic factors and the fact that the discussion of conversion fits very well with what we know from the Tannaitic period. Against this early date is the fact that the passage is not quoted in any known Palestinian source. Cohen notes that the earlier version of the ceremony bears little resemblance to an initiation ceremony *per se*. That is, there is no mention of God and little reference to any spiritual

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change in the convert. What has changed is the convert's legal status. In *Gerim* some of the more standard features of an initiation ceremony are present. The language is less terse, God is mentioned, and the ceremony concludes with "words of praise and hope for the new Jew" (Cohen, *Beginnings*, 238). The *Gerim* version of the ceremony also makes reference to the three gender specific ritual commandments, whereas the version in b. Yevamot does not.

<sup>vii</sup> Interestingly, in her discussion of women and Jewish ritual, Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998), 221-243, focuses more on rituals from which women were exempt and women's "inability to assist men in the discharge of their ritual obligations" (221) than on the gender specific rituals from which men were excluded and women were included.

<sup>viii</sup> Judith Baskin, "Midrashic Constructions of Women" (In Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery Peck, eds. *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* [Leiden: Brill, 2005]), 984.

<sup>ix</sup> Judith R. Baskin, "She Extinguished the Light of the World" (In Carol Bakhos ed., *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* [Leiden: Brill, 2006], 285-287). It is acceptable for men to perform the other two rituals if a woman is unavailable.

<sup>x</sup> These historians do not mention the story about Fulvia. Suetonius indicates that Judaism and Egyptian practices were banned as part of a general program against foreign cults, though these two are the only specific manifestations mentioned by name: "[Tiberius] abolished foreign cults at Rome, particularly the Egyptian and Jewish." Though women are not mentioned, the edict does have something to do with conversion as the text notes that "all citizens who *had embraced* these superstitious faiths" (italics mine) were forced to "burn their religious vestments and other accessories" (*Tib.* 36). Similarly, Tacitus speaks of people being "tainted with... superstition" (*Ann.* 2.85.5), again implying those who adopted Jewish practices, rather than native born Jews. As Shelly Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford: University Press, 2001), 14, notes "[t]he trouble is not just the practice of foreign rites by foreigners, but the appeal of these practices among the Roman population." (See also the discussion of Steve Mason, "The *Contra Apionem* in Social and Literary Context: An Invitation to Judean Philosophy" [In Leif Vaage, ed. *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Greco-Roman World*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier, 2006], 114).

<sup>xi</sup> Dio Cassius alone links the expulsion to proselytizing but, all three incidents involve conversion in some way (see n. x, above). Both Shelly Matthews, 111 n. 12, and Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 83, draw the conclusion that Dio Cassius likely links the expulsion to proselytizing activity because of Jewish proselytism in his own day.

<sup>xii</sup> The depth of Poppaea's involvement in Judaism is debated. Ludwig Friedländer (*Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire* Vol. 1 [London: Routledge, 1908]), 257, argued that Poppaea was a full proselyte, while E. Mary Smallwood, ("The Alleged Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina" *JTS* 10 [1959]), 333, argues that Poppaea's interest was result of pagan superstition, rather than on any real attachment to Jewish custom. Smallwood doubts that the wife of a Roman emperor could have ever repudiated idolatry. A middle position between these two extremes is advocated by Margaret Williams, "θεοσεβης γαρ ην- The Jewish Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina" (*JTS* 39 [1988]), 106-108, who maintains that Josephus usually uses different vocabulary to describe full converts to Judaism and that θεοσεβης is used when he wants to denote a person who is attached to Judaism in some way without being a full proselyte, which was likely the case of Poppaea. Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: University Press, 1993), 351, concurs, suggesting that Poppaea likely just picked Jewish customs that appealed to her.

<sup>xiii</sup> See the discussion of Mason, 155-158, for a discussion of what the narrative about the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene says about Josephus' attitude towards conversion to Judaism.

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<sup>xiv</sup> The attraction of Gentile women to Judaism is also attested by Dio Cassius who records that in 95 CE the emperor Domitian executed two of his own relatives, Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, because they had adopted Jewish ways (*Hist.* 67. 14. 1-2).

<sup>xv</sup> Judith Lieu, "The 'Attraction of Women' in/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion" *JSNT* 72 [1999], 14.

<sup>xvi</sup> It should also be mentioned that of the seven epitaphs of Jewish proselytes that have been discovered in Rome, five of these involve women (see Harry Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*. [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960], 253-256).

<sup>xvii</sup> A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7, defined conversion as "the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another." This definition owed much to the work of William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: Collier Books, 1958], 160-180) and has been criticized for being too focused on the individual and not on the communal aspects of conversion (Eugene V. Gallagher, "Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity" *JOR* 73: 2 [1993], 1). Nevertheless, this definition, which seems to reflect modern Christianity rather than its ancient manifestations or Judaism, has been influential. See for instance Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 90-101, who maintains that Judaism of the Second Temple Period was not missionary in any meaningful way and ultimately sees conversion in terms of individual belief. By this definition the women mentioned by Josephus could be converts, however, because it neglects the social and ritual aspects of conversion, this definition seems wholly inappropriate to ancient Judaism.

<sup>xviii</sup> Cohen, *Beginnings*, 168. See also 156. Here Cohen maintains that conversion to Judaism entailed practice of Jewish laws, exclusive devotion to the Jewish God, and integration into the Jewish community.

<sup>xix</sup> Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>xx</sup> Lieu, 9. A possible exception would be the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, though only at the oral stage of its development. There is also a dearth of first person conversion accounts in Judaism, though several of the Mishnaic rabbis were said to have proselyte backgrounds (see Feldman, 338).

<sup>xxi</sup> Feldman, 335-337. See chapters 6, 7, 8 on the attractions of Judaism to Gentiles in antiquity.

<sup>xxii</sup> Feldman, 336. In terms of economic attractions, Josephus remarks that the Jews were known and recognized for their charity (*Against Apion* 2. 283). *Gerim* 3.4 remarks that if a proselyte is in economic distress, other Jews were required to help him (cf. Cohen, 205 n. 12). As for theological motives, Feldman suggests that Gentiles would have been attracted to the "imageless monotheism" that characterized Judaism.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Feldman, 337. Feldman notes that even in *Joseph and Aseneth*, in which an Egyptian princess converts prior to her marriage to Joseph, the sincerity of the convert is stressed and the motives of Aseneth are more than marriage (cf. Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* [New Haven: Yale, 1990], 102-103). Of course, it has been suggested that *Joseph and Aseneth* may be a Christian or a Samaritan text, and thus may not be very relevant to the discussion of Second Temple Jewish female converts (see the discussion of Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife Reconsidered*. [Oxford: University Press, 1998], 280-293; cf. James Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian or Other?* [Leiden: Brill, 2005],

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190-195. Gideon Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish temple in Heliopolis* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996] has argued that the work reflects the community of Jews at Leontopolis, where a temple was established by the exiled priest Onias IV in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Feldman, 328. These benefits would only apply to full converts and thus may not be applicable to most of the women mentioned by Josephus.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Anders Runesson, "Water and Worship: Ostia and the Ritual Bath in the Diaspora Synagogue" (In Birger Olsson, Dieter Mitternacht, Olaf Brandt, eds. *The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome*. Stockholm: ActaRom, 2001), 115-129. It must be mentioned that this washing was not the same as full immersion, as required by rabbinic *halakhah*, rather it likely consisted of sprinkling or washing of hands. Josephus, however, notes that a Jewish husband and wife bathe after intercourse, which indicates that he knew of ritual bathing practices (*Contra Apion* 2:203).

<sup>xxvi</sup> In *Contra Apion*, Josephus maintains that a receptivity to converts is embedded in the Torah: "those who wish to come to and live under the same law with us, [Moses] welcomes generously, holding that a community consists not in race alone but also in the selection of a way of life" (2. 209-210). It also bears mentioning that one of the distinct features of the Jewish law, according to Josephus, is that even women are trained in it (*Contra Apion* 2:183).

<sup>xxvii</sup> The debate about the etymological origins of this word is reviewed by Fonrobert, 16-19. The word is linked to two possible verbal roots, either  $\text{נָּדַח}$  which means "depart, flee or wander" or  $\text{נָּדַח}$  an Akkadian cognate that means to "chase away, put aside." The latter seems most likely and is borne out by the fact that Aramaic translations usually render the term with the root  $\text{נָּדַח}$  "to be distant" (Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws" In Rahel R. Wasserfall, ed. *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* [Hanover, NH: Brandeis, 1999], 23). Baruch Levine suggests that "the word does not connote the impurity... itself, but, rather describes the physiological process of blood" (*Leviticus* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 97). Jacob Milgrom agrees but adds that "*niddah* came to refer not just to the menstrual discharge but to the menstruant herself for she too was discharged and excluded from her society" (*Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation* [New York: Doubleday, 1991], 745). Fonrobert disagrees noting "the practice of banning a menstruating woman, except to exclude her from the temple precincts, is not warranted by our textual sources" and points out that to substantiate his claim, Milgrom looks to the practice of menstrual exclusion in other cultures. She concludes that within the Mishnaic literature *niddah* means simply "a woman who menstruates" (Fonrobert, 17).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel" (In Carol Meyers, Murphy O'Connor, eds. *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* [Winona Lake: IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982]), 403.

<sup>xxix</sup> Interestingly, the tractate Niddah does not mention the post menstruation *mikveh*, but the practice is assumed elsewhere in m. Mikvaot 8:5: "A *niddah* who... went down and immersed.... If she put her hair in her mouth, or made a fist, or pursed her lips tightly, it is as if she has not immersed."

<sup>xxx</sup> Hauptman, 149-150.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Fonrobert, 20-29, suggests that the aspect of sexual taboo, rather than ritual impurity, is central in the rabbinic writings about *niddah*. See also Hauptman, 160-162, where it suggested that most of the behaviors that are forbidden to women while they are *niddah* are forbidden because they could lead to the sexual arousal of the *niddah*'s husband and thus to the breaking of the sexual prohibition.

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<sup>xxxii</sup> Leslie Cook, "Body Language: Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and the Mishnah" (In Rahel Wasserfall ed. *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* [Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999]), 43.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Cook, 43.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> This parallel is noted by Fonrobert, 165. The possibility that sexual renunciation may have offered Christian women a measure of autonomy that would have been unavailable to women in conventional marriages has been explored by a number of scholars. See for instance Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981), 240-257; Ross Shepard Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* (1980/81), 298-307.

<sup>xxxv</sup> It is also possible that the *niddah* laws could have been used by women to control their fertility. Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share*, 103-104, suggests that *niddah* could have been "utilized by women seeking relief from pregnancy and childbearing, within the confines of a system both women and men accepted."

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Strack, Stemmerger, 93. Rav, or Abba Arikha, was of the first generation of Babylonian Amoraim. He is said to have studied in Palestine under Rabbi (Judah ha-Nasi). His authority is so great that it is sometimes said that "he counts as a Tanna" (b. Erub 50b) and thus may dispute a Mishnaic decision.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Hauptman, 248.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Both Fonrobert, 167, and Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 71, argue that the text is addressing Jewish converts to Christianity, rather than just Christians with judaizing tendencies.

<sup>xxxix</sup> It should be noted that rabbinic literature around this time did permit a *niddah* to read the Torah and attend the synagogue (t. Ber. 2:13). See Boyarin, 180, and Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred" (In Sarah B. Pomeroy, ed. *Women's History and Ancient History* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991], 283. Fonrobert, 204, thus speculates whether these women came from a strictly rabbinic milieu (or from a rabbinic community which had a more stringent interpretation of the *niddah* laws) or whether they deliberately abstained from synagogue attendance and Torah reading when they were Jews, despite the fact that they had rabbinic permission to do so.

<sup>xl</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *The Didaskalia Apostolorum in Syriac* (Louvain: secretariat du Corpus SCO, 1979), 244-245.

<sup>xli</sup> Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Menstruants," 290. The Latin changes "cleave to them" to "do not consort with them."

<sup>xlii</sup> Also exempted from ritual bathing are others who would have been considered ritually impure by rabbinic law, including man with a genital emission and men and women after intercourse.

<sup>xliii</sup> One thinks here of Philo, the Hellenized Jewish philosopher whose writings were preserved by Christians and ignored by the rabbis, who remarked that "mind corresponds to man, the sense to woman" (*Op. Mund.* 165). See Judith Romney Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women- Hebraic or Hellenic?" (In A.J. Levine, ed. "Women Like This" *New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], 41-66). See also the discussion of Daniel Boyarin, "Gender" (In Mark C. Taylor *Critical Terms For Religious Studies* [Chicago: University Press, 1998], 129) who suggests that the notion that "sexedness is always fallen" is "Philonic-Christian in origins." In contrast, Boyarin argues, the rabbinic mindset saw sexual difference as embedded in creation.

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<sup>xliv</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, “Virginity and its Meaning For Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal for Feminist Studies of Religion* 2 (1986), 86.

<sup>xlv</sup> See the discussion of Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Shall Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity” (In Julia Epstein, Kristina Straub, eds. *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* [New York: Routledge, 1991]), 29-49.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Fonrobert, 207.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Wilken, 76. According to *Adversus Judaeos* 3.2, a group of Christians celebrated the Easter according to the Jewish calendar, that is the Sunday after Passover.

<sup>xlviii</sup> See the discussion of Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share*, 102-103

<sup>xlix</sup> Cohen, *Beginnings*, 223.

<sup>l</sup> Cohen, *Beginnings*, 209.

<sup>li</sup> Though the invention of such a ritual indicates that there were women who wanted to convert to Judaism in this period, it was becoming legally more difficult to do so between the first and fifth centuries CE. After the first Roman war, Domitian persecuted converts. Proselytism and circumcision were outlawed by Hadrian. Whether the prohibition was affected prior to the Bar Kochba revolt (132 CE) or subsequent to it is debated (see the discussion of Segal, 105-106). During the reign of Constantine conversion to Judaism become a punishable offense in the Roman Empire (Robert Goldenberg, “The Place of Other Religions in Ancient Jewish Thought, with Particular Reference to Early Rabbinic Judaism.” In Martin E. Marty, Fredrick E. Greenspahn *Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Pluralistic World* [New York: Crossroad, 1988], 53). In the Byzantine law code of the emperor Theodosius (ca. 438 CE) there are sixty six laws pertaining to Jews, twenty eight of which concern proselytes (Feldman, 386) which suggests that conversion to Judaism continued past Constantine’s prohibition. Feldman maintains that conversion to Judaism was likely able to continue because imperial laws were likely un-enforced; the empire simply did not have the manpower to implement its edicts in all areas of the empire, especially from the third century onward when the barbarian threat was becoming acute (Feldman, 395-397). Likewise, in Canon law the prohibition against conversion to Judaism is reiterated again and again which “suggest[s] the limits of [its] practical effectiveness” (Goldenberg, 53).

<sup>lii</sup> Another female convert whose role is embellished in the Midrashim is the prostitute Rahab. Though she is only briefly mentioned in the biblical book of Joshua, and evidence for her conversion is sparse, the rabbis had a wealth of traditions about her, many of which “emphasize her repentance and her sincerity as a convert” (Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* [Hanover, NH: Brandeis, 2002], 156). Many texts thus stress the lasciviousness of Rahab’s past in order to stress the transformative power of conversion. Rahab is rewarded with marriage to Joshua and many illustrious descendants, details which are not in the biblical account. In their depictions of Rahab the rabbis “reveal a favorable rabbinic attitude towards female converts and testify to a willingness to welcome any sincere proselyte” (Baskin, *Midrashic*, 159).

<sup>liii</sup> Gary Porton, “Rabbinic Midrash: Public or Private?” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5:2 (2002), 149. Porton is arguing against the claim the Midrashim were primarily employed as rabbinic sermons within the synagogue. He writes that “while Midrash probably served many purposes for the rabbi of late antiquity there is no clear reason to assume that it derived *primarily* from the synagogue” (Porton, 153; Italics are the author’s). This is true, but there is no reason to assume the opposite either. The Midrashim may have served many functions, but the difference of the aggadic Midrashim from other forms of Rabbinic literature, for

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instance the detailed halakhic debates of the Mishnah and the Tosefta, suggests that they were used differently than these works, which are less accessible to the non-rabbinic reader (or listener) and may have been more for internal consumption.

<sup>liv</sup> Quoted in Marc Hirshman, “The Preacher and His Public in Third Century Palestine” *JJS* 49: 11 (1990), 109-114. Hirshman maintains that, because elsewhere Jerome betrays grudging admiration for aspects of the Jewish tradition, these passages have some veracity to them.

<sup>lv</sup> Porton, 151, uses the writings of Chrysostom as evidence that the Midrashim were not primarily used as sermons in a synagogue setting. He writes “Chrysostom indicates that gentiles attended the synagogue for numerous reasons, but he does not mention sermons or that rabbis even functioned in this setting.” This argument seems weak for Chrysostom is likely not interested in accurately representing all the synagogue activities in his account. It is debatable how literally we are to take a polemic in which the synagogues are said to be rife with immorality and that within them congregants “dance after demons” (*Ad. Jud.* 2.3.5.). Chrysostom draws analogies between the synagogue and the theatre, the latter which was forbidden to Christians. The rabbis had a similar prohibition as indicated by *Ruth Rabbah* 2:22 when, in the process of instructing Ruth about Judaism, Naomi says that “it is not the custom of the daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theatres and circuses.” However, the analogy that Chrysostom draws between the theater and the synagogue suggests that synagogue service may have been flashier than that of the church and it is not impossible that in *Ruth Rabbah* the rabbis are preaching against this. Even if rabbis were active in the synagogues of this period, and I think they were, it is unlikely that the synagogues were rabbinic institutions *per se*. Thus there may have aspects of the synagogue services that rabbis found objectionable as well. *Ruth Rabbah* 2:22 may testify to this objection.

<sup>lvi</sup> According to L. Rabinowitz, “Ruth Rabbah” (In H. Freedman, Maurice Simon, eds. *The Midrash Rabbah*. Vol. 8 [London: Soncino, 1983]), vii, *Ruth Rabbah* occupies a “an intermediate position” between early Midrashim such as *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Ekhah Rabbati* and later Midrashim such as *Exodus Rabbah* and *Deuteronomy Rabbah*. Some of its material comes from *Ekhah Rabbati* and *Deuteronomy Rabbah* uses it as a source.

<sup>lvii</sup> Jacob Neusner, “Ruth in Ruth Rabbah” (In Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery Peck eds. *Encyclopedia of Midrash* [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 737.

<sup>lviii</sup> Cohen, *Beginnings*, 230. It is of course likely that the author of *Ruth Rabbah* knew the baraita in b. Yevamot or vice versa. Bernard J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (New York: Ktav, 1939), 198-199, remarks that the aggadic material concerning Ruth is marked by a “certain lack of warmth,” though he cautions that this a subjective reading as “[w]herever Ruth is mentioned she is praised.” He notes to support this suspicion that, outside *Ruth Rabbah*, the rabbis tend to mention Rahab or Jethro, rather than Ruth, when discussing converts. Yet it seems that this “subjective feeling” that the rabbis treatment of Ruth “*might well have been fuller and warmer*” (italics are the authors’) is just that and owes more to the author’s own affection for Ruth than to the rabbis treatment of her. Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 66, remarks that all the depictions of Ruth, both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature, portray her as the convert *par excellence*: “Once she has decided to cast her lot with her mother-in-law’s people, she displays no questioning or doubts. She accepts all the duties and requirements with no complaint and expresses her willingness to comply fully.”

<sup>lix</sup> The word for “entreat” פָּנַע has the same root as that for misfortune (Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica Press, 1996], 1135).



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<sup>lx</sup> In the Bavli version the convert's response is similar but abbreviated: "I know and am unworthy" (b. Yevamot A7).

<sup>lxi</sup> *Ruth Rabbah* II 20: "R. Isaac said: The whole of that night when Orpah separated from her mother, a hundred heathens raped her."

<sup>lxii</sup> In these "good words, words of comfort" which are imparted to the convert after the ritual immersion there are linguistic echoes of the book of Ruth. This can be seen in the line: "Whom have you joined (נדבקה), oh happy one." The verb that is used here דבק echoes the biblical book of Ruth (1:14) where it is said that "Ruth clung (דבקה) to [Naomi]." Within the biblical context this verb usually applies to a married couple. The most famous example of such a usage is likely the biblical creation account in Genesis when it said that a man "cleaves (דבק) to his wife and they become one flesh." The fact that it is used here to apply to a convert suggests that the authors of *Gerim* had Ruth in mind when they composed this account.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Interestingly, the practice of a woman immersing another woman has parallels to the *Didaskalia* where we read: "and when she who is being baptized has come up from the water let the deaconess receiver her, and teach and educate her" (Vööbus, 157).

<sup>lxiv</sup> This parallel is also noted by Bronner, 66.

<sup>lxv</sup> For a fuller discussion of the implications of Ruth as the foremother of the messiah see Tamar Frankel, "Ruth and the Messiah" (In Judith A. Kates, Gail Twersky Reimer, eds. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1994]), 321-335.

<sup>lxvi</sup> See the discussion of Feldman, 339-341. Cf. William G. Braude, *Jewish Proselyting In the First Five Centuries of the Common Era The Age of Tannaim and the Amoraim* (Providence: Brown, 1940), 100-107.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xiii.

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