Conflicting Attitudes to Conversion in Judaism, Past and Present

Therefore maidens shall love Thee [Song 1:3] this refers to proselytes... R. Berakhiah said: Israel said to God ‘O sovereign of the universe, because Thou bringest light into the world Thy name is magnified in the world. And what is that light? Redemption. For when Thou bringest us light many proselytes come and convert and join us as did Jethro and Rahab...’ R. Haninah said: When God performed the miracle for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah many converts converted as it is written [Isa 29:23-24] ‘When his children see what I have wrought in their midst they will hallow My name; hallowing the Holy One of Jacob and revering the God of Israel. And erring spirits shall gain understanding...’

Evidence suggests that conversion originated during the Babylonian Exile. Around the same time, biological genealogy was gaining popularity, especially among priests whose legitimacy was becoming increasingly defined by ‘pure’ pedigree. When the biological, or ethnic, criterion is extended to the definition of Jewishness, as it seems to have been by Ezra, the possibility of conversion is all but precluded. The Rabbis did not reject the primacy of genealogy, yet were also heirs to a strong pro-conversion tradition. In this book, Isaac Sassoon confronts the tensions and paradoxes apparent in rabbinic discussions of conversion, and argues that they resulted from irresolution between the two conflicting traditions. He also contends that attitudes to conversion can impact, not only one’s conception of Judaism, but also one’s faith, as seems to be demonstrated by authors cited in the book whose espousal of a narrowly ethnic view of Judaism allows for a nepotistic theology.

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ISAAC SASSOON
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Unless stated otherwise, Hebrew and Aramaic texts were translated into English by the author borrowing selectively from various standard translations; for the Bible mainly JPS and NEB. Citations from Josephus are, with a few exceptions, taken from William Whiston. Translations from German are the author’s.
Glossary

Aggadah  non halakhic material in rabbinic literature; a single aggadic text (pl. aggadoth)
Amora a talmudic sage of the post-mishnaic period (pl. amoraim)
Asmakhtah lightly rated, non-binding derashah (pl. asmakhtoth)
‘Avon transgression, sin
Bahereth a dermatological affliction (see Lev 13:2, 4, 19 etc.)
Bamah lit. a high place (pl. bamoth). After the centralization of the cult, bamoth became a pejorative by which the Deuteronomistic histories refer to all cult centres outside the chosen site. The rabbis used the term also to denote legitimate pre-centralization shrines.
Baraitha tannaic materials not included in the Mishnah (such as the Tosefta)
Bavli the Babylonian Talmud developed in the Mesopotamian academies third-sixth centuries CE
Berakhah blessing
Beriyyoth God’s creatures, esp. humans; humanity as a whole (sing. beriah)
Berith covenant
Beth din rabbinic court of law (pl. baté din)
Dayyan judge, esp. of a beth din (pl. dayyanim)
Derash midrashic interpretation (as opposed to peshat)
Derashah rabbinic exegesis to a specific text; a sermon
De-oraitha derived from scripture
Glossary

De-rabbanan derived from the rabbis
‘Erub Tabshilin food prepared for sabbath in advance of a festival that falls on a Friday
Ezra native; often contrasted with ger
Geburah power; in Kabbalah it denotes the sefirah that symbolizes power
Gemara Talmud; esp. its post-mishnaic parts that elaborate on the Mishnah (q.v.) and make up the majority of its text
Ger sedeq righteous convert (pl. geré sedeq)
Ger toshab resident alien
Get bill of divorce
Gezerah shavah analogy based on congruous wording (see Enc. Jud. 8:367)
Giyyur abstract noun denoting conversion or converting (its rarer synonym is geruth)
Haber associate, friend; historically, a member of a commensality that observed ritual purity (pl. haberim)
Halakhah an individual rabbinic ruling (pl. halakhoth); the corpus of rabbinic law
Halisah the shoe-loosing ceremony enjoined at Dt 25:7–10
Haqhel public reading of the Torah on Sukkoth in the year of [or in the year following] shemittah (see Dt 31:10–13; M. Sot. 7:8)
Hazal the Sages
Hashem God, the Lord (see Dt 28:58)
Hesed love, lovingkindness, covenant-fidelity
Kareth excision, cutting off
Kibyakhol as if; so to speak (used to indicate the language’s inadequacy when speaking of God; see M. San. 6:5)
Mamzeruth illegitimacy, bastardy (hence, a mamzer/mamzereth)
Maqom lit. place, location; also God (within whose embrace and grasp the world has its being; see Gen. Rab. 68:10)
Midrash rabbinic exegesis; such exegesis as a literary genre
Miqveh a gathering of waters, a pool (see Gen 1:10; Lev 11:36); a ritual bath (var. miqvah)
Mishnah the compendium of rabbinic law that constitutes the oldest component of the Talmud (early third century); also, a mishnaic passage (pl. mishnayoth). Cf. gemara
Mishpat  law, justice, a court of law
Misvah  commandment, benevolent act; pl. misvoth
Nathin  a Gibeonite [in talmudic usage] (pl. nethinim)
Nebelah  carriion; meat from an animal not slaughtered by the kosher method
Ona’ah  oppression, wronging, cheating
Pagum/pegumah  tainted (mostly used in reference to genealogy)
Parush  separate, set apart; a Pharisee
Peshat  the plain, self-explanatory meaning of the text (as opposed to derash)
Pilpul  talmudic argumentation; casuistry
Poseq  a decisor of, or ruler on, halakhah (pl. posqim)
Qal vahomer  a minori ad majus argument
Qiddush [ha-yom]  sanctification; especially the sanctification blessing recited over wine on sabbath and festivals
Rishon  medieval halakhist (pl. rishonim)
Sappath  a dermatological affliction (see Lev 13:2)
Setham  anonymous; opinions presented anonymously in the gemara and thought to be redactional; the Talmud’s [final] redactors (also spelt: stam)
Shehitah  ritual slaughter of sacrificial or profane animals
Shema’  credal or liturgical recitation of Dt 6:4 (whose incipit is shema’ = hear)
Sugya  a unit of talmudic discussion (pl. sugyoth)
Tarahah  purity (moral or ritual)
Talmidé-hakhamim  lit. students of the wise, but mostly denoting torah scholars in general
Tanna  sage of the mishnaic era, esp. as contrasted with amora (pl. tannaim; adjectives: tannaic, tannaitic)
Targum  Aramaic paraphrase of Scripture (pl. targumim)
Tebilah  immersion in a ritual bath
Terumah  a heave offering; in rabbinic usage the firstfruits of grain, wine and oil given to the priests (see Num 18:12 and Dt 18:4)
Torah she-be’al pé  the oral torah (as distinct from the written)
Tosefta  collection of tannaic material more or less contemporary with, but not included in, the Mishnah (var. tosifta)
Glossary

Tum’ah  impurity, defilement (moral or ritual)
Yerushalmi  the Jerusalem Talmud (a.k.a. the Palestinian Talmud) developed in the Holy Land third-fifth centuries CE
Yihhus  genealogy, pedigree, bloodline; a system that uses all or any of these to rank people socio-religiously
Abbreviations

Bible

Gen  Genesis
Ex   Exodus
Lev  Leviticus
Num  Numbers
Dt   Deuteronomy
Jos  Joshua
Jud  Judges
1Sam 1 Samuel
2Sam 2 Samuel
1Kgs 1 Kings
2Kgs 2 Kings
Isa  Isaiah
Jer  Jeremiah
Ezek Ezekiel
Hos  Hosea
Jon  Jonah
Hab  Habakkuk
Zeph Zephaniah
Zech Zechariah
Mal  Malachi
Ps   Psalms
Prv  Proverbs

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List of Abbreviations

Song     Song of Songs
Dan      Daniel
Neh      Nehemiah
1Chr     1 Chronicles
2Chr     2 Chronicles

Rabbinic Texts

M. Ber.   Mishnah Berakhoth
M. Dem.   Mishnah Demai
M. Bik.   Mishnah Bikkurim
M. Erub.  Mishnah Erubin
M. Sheq.  Mishnah Sheqalim
M. Yom.   Mishnah Yoma
M. R.H.   Mishnah Rosh Hashanah
M. Suk.   Mishnah Sukkah
M. Ta’an.  Mishnah Ta’anith
M. Hag.   Mishnah Hagigah
M. Yeb.   Mishnah Yeabamoth
M. Ket.   Mishnah Ketuboth
M. Ned.   Mishnah Nedarim
M. Sot.   Mishnah Sotah
M. Git.   Mishnah Gittin
M. Qid.   Mishnah Qiddushin
M. B.Q.   Mishnah Baba Qamma
M. San.   Mishnah Sanhedrin
M. Mak.   Mishnah Makkoth
M. Edu.   Mishnah Eduyoth
M. A.Z.   Mishnah Abodah Zarah
M. Hor.   Mishnah Horayoth
M. Hul.   Mishnah Hullin
M. Mid.   Mishnah Middoth
M. Kel.   Mishnah Kelim
M. Neg.   Mishnah Neg’a’im
M. Makh.  Mishnah Makhshirin
T. Dem.   Tosefta Demai
T. Pes.   Tosefta Pesahim
T. Kip.   Tosefta Kippurim (Yoma)
List of Abbreviations

T. Hag. Tosefta Hagigah
T. Yeb. Tosefta Yebamoth
T. Sot. Tosefta Sotah
T. Qid. Tosefta Qiddushin
T. San. Tosefta Sanhedrin
T. A.Z. Tosefta Abodah Zarah
T. Hor. Tosefta Horayoth
T. Qor. Tosefta Qorbanoth (Zebahim)
Ber. Berakhoth
Shab. Shabbath
Pes. Pesahim
Yom. Yoma
Bes. Besah
R.H. Rosh Hashanah
Meg. Megillah
Hag. Hagigah
Yeb. Yebamoth
Ket. Kethuboth
Ned. Nedarim
Naz. Nazir
Sot. Sotah
Git. Gittin
Qid. Qiddushin
B.Q. Baba Qama
B.M. Baba Mesi’a
B.B. Baba Bathra
San. Sanhedrin
Mak. Makkoth
Shebu Shebu’oth
A.Z. Abodah Zarah
Hor. Horayoth
Men. Menahoth
Hul. Hullin
Bekh. Bekhoroth
Arakh. Arakhin
Ker. Kerithoth
Nid. Niddah
Y. Ber. Yerusalmi Berakhoth
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General

BCE   Before Common Era
CE    Common Era
Esp.  especially
S.v.  *sub verbo* (under the word or heading)