

AN INQUIRY ON THE PHARISEES’ SEARCH FOR PROSELYTES (MT 23:15)

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SUMMARY: I. *Proselyte*. 1. Extra-biblical usage. 2. OT usage. 3. NT usage. 4. Evaluation. II. *Survey and evaluation of information on Jewish missionary activity in the early first century A.D.* III. *Survey and evaluation of available information on Pharisees and membership.* IV. *Synthesis and evaluation.*

The gospel according to Matthew depicts Jesus as criticizing the Pharisees in many ways,¹ often regarding their way of observing the Mosaic Law, calling them ‘hypocrites’. However, among these cases Matt 23:15 calls attention because it does not criticize the Pharisees’ manner of legal observance *per se*, but rather the search for proselytes that they purportedly carry out.²

A query then comes to mind: what does this activity refer to? Is it recruiting members to their group? Or is it a more general Jewish missionary activity, bringing gentiles to the practice of the Jewish religion?

Whether this activity is more specifically for the Pharisees’ group³ or more generally for the Jews would have its consequences: if it is only for the Pharisees,

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¹ Cfr. Mt 5:20; 9:11-12, 14-15; 12:2ff, 24ff, 38ff; 15:1ff; 16:1ff; 19:3ff; 22:15ff, 41; 23. Second to Matthew in extent would be Luke (cfr. Lk 5:21-22, 30ff; 6:2ff; 7:39ff; 11:37ff; 12:1; 14:1ff; 15:2ff; 16:14-15; 18:10ff), while John and Mark would have much less reference to this issue (cfr. Jn 8:3ff, 13ff; 9:40-41; Mk 8:15).

² It is important to note from the start that the exact terminology employed here is ‘to make one proselyte’, and not using the verb ‘proselytize’ or the concept ‘proselytism’, both of which are not attested in the Bible.

³ The text actually says ‘scribes and Pharisees’; it is interesting how several known English translations (e.g., NABRE, NRSV, NJB, ESV) always write ‘scribe’ in lowercase, but ‘Pharisee’ in uppercase, tending to imply that the status of Pharisee is more institutional, whereas the role of the scribe is more generic. This ‘generic’ aspect of the scribes can also be gleaned from the NT as scribes are mentioned either on their own (Mt 7:29; 8:19; 9:3; 13:52; 17:10; Mk 1:22; 2:6; 3:22; 9:11, 14; 12:32, 35, 38) or usually grouped along with any combination of elders, chief priests and Pharisees (but surprisingly, never with the Sadducees). What could be more interesting for the study is that in the NT scribes are paired with the Pharisees more frequently in Matthew 23 (vv. 2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29), precisely where our text in question belongs. In this study I would tend to understand these specific scribes in Mt 23:15 as adherents to the Pharisees’ group, as can be understood from Mk 2:16 (οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων, “the scribes of the Pharisees”),

then it would lead one to think that the Pharisees would just be propagating their teachings –hypocritical or not– to the future members of their group, which would affect only a fraction among Jews. However, if it were a more general Jewish proselytism, it would indeed be mordant to say that a person who converts to Judaism (in general, but through the Pharisees) would be called a ‘child of Gehenna’, and even ‘twice as much’.⁴

In the attempt to gather available bibliography, one could notice scarcity in academic sources that meticulously address the issues related to this verse with respect to its historical context,⁵ and biblical commentaries only provide relatively brief information regarding this verse.⁶ This study, then, would be a reassessment of recent contextual information available for addressing issues regarding the Pharisees’ zeal for seeking proselytes, as seemingly reported in Mt 23:15.

I. PROSELYTE

We now try to address the key word in this study. Though *prosēlytos* mainly means ‘stranger, sojourner’,⁷ in the context of Mt 23:15 it might probably mean a convert to Judaism which is its other possible, more technical meaning⁸ (though this must still be verified in the course of the study). It can be argued that one does not ‘make’ a sojourner –a sojourner is what he is– and on the other hand one needs to have some formal recognition as a convert to Judaism; however this

Lk 5:30 (οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν, “the Pharisees and their scribes”) and Acts 23:9 (τινὲς τῶν γραμματέων τοῦ μέρους τῶν Φαρισαίων, “some of the scribes belonging to the group of the Pharisees”). Cfr. also the discussion in M. PICKUP, *Matthew’s and Mark’s Pharisees*, in J. NEUSNER, B. CHILTON (eds.), *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, Baylor University Press, Waco 2007, 93-95.

⁴ Though Hagner advises: “This statement (esp ‘twice as much’), without denying its seriousness, is hyperbolic rhetoric that need not be taken literally” (D.A. HAGNER, *Matthew 1–13*, in Word Biblical Commentary [henceforth cited as WBC], Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2000, 668-669).

⁵ In 1992 Will and Orrieux published a book (E. WILL, C. ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif? Histoire d’une Erreur*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2004²) which also included a detailed study of this verse, but in the function of its wider, more historical object of study. In hindsight, our present research has a more specific inquiry; it also provides a more updated bibliography, for although the book had a second edition in 2004, the sources cited do not go beyond 1990 (more concretely, their sources are mainly between the late 1800’s and around the 1980’s).

⁶ Even Ulrich Luz’s monumental three-volume Hermeneia commentary on Matthew just had a few paragraphs to say regarding the issues involved in Mt 23:15.

⁷ “προσηλύτευσις”, in H.G. LIDDELL, R. SCOTT, P.G.W. GLARE, H. STUART JONES, R. MCKENZIE, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996⁹ (henceforth cited as LSJ), 1513.

⁸ *Ibidem*. Cfr. also “προσηλύτος”, in F.W. DANKER (ed.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2000³ (henceforth cited as BDAG), 880.

comparison might still be incomplete, since one could not be a sojourner *if the community does not welcome him* as part of their society: meaning that there must be some form of requirement in order for a stranger to be 'at home' in a foreign community.⁹ In the case of OT Israel, as we shall see shortly, a prerequisite would at least be the non-opposition of the Jewish social norms and religious practices, which is not necessarily tantamount to conversion.

1. *Extra-biblical usage*

Based on the BDAG and LSJ, there seems to be no other Greek source outside the Jewish context contemporary or before the LXX/NT that employs the term *prosēlutos*. BDAG claims that the noun clause *μετοίκους καὶ προσήλυτους* can be found in the works of Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd cent. B.C.);¹⁰ however, Allen specified that the term appeared in a later *commentary* on Apollonius (*Schol. ad Apoll. Rhod.*, citing Thayer's lexicon),¹¹ and therefore not in an actual text of Apollonius. In any case, as it did not provide further context BDAG might have overstepped its bounds in using this simple clause¹² as further proof for the ancient existence of the technical definition of 'gentile convert to Judaism'.

Even the BDAG's mention of Philo to further support the meaning of 'gentile convert' should be taken in context.¹³ The focus of Philo in that statement seems more to be the desire of *nobleness of conduct* (through a new and Godfearing constitution), which does not automatically imply conversion to Judaism (similarly as today's non-baptized could admire and practice the values and social

⁹ Somehow also reflected in Hebrew vocabulary. The Hb. *gēr* connotes something more than *nokri* (which has the Greek counterpart *ξένος*): while *nokri* is used to designate a foreigner or stranger in general (or even with negative connotations, cfr. A.H. KONKEL, "נִכְרִי", in W.A. VAN GEMEREN (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1997 [henceforth cited as NIDOTTE], 3:108-109), *gēr* is a foreigner who is welcome among the people. "The sojourner is distinguished from the foreigner in that he has settled in the land for some time and is recognized as having a special status" (*ibidem*, 1:822).

¹⁰ Cfr. "προσήλυτος", BDAG, 880.

¹¹ Cfr. W.C. ALLEN, *On the Meaning of ΠΡΟΣΗΛΥΤΟΣ in the Septuagint*, «Expositor» 4 (1894) 264.

¹² Including, e.g. the very simple clause *Σάρρα προσήλυτος*, supposedly found in *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten* (1915), n. 1742.

¹³ The phrase cited in BDAG emphasized: "approving of the one body because they have not defaced their nobility of birth, and of the other because they have thought fit to alter their lives so as to come over to nobleness of conduct. *And these last he calls proselytes (proselytous), from the fact of their having come over (proselelythenai) to a new and Godfearing constitution, learning to disregard the fabulous inventions of other nations, and cling to unalloyed truth*" (Laws 1:51).

customs espoused by Christianity, an attitude that does not necessarily imply converting).¹⁴

In 2013, D. Moffitt and C.J. Butera published an article to review and assess the debate regarding the origin and meaning of *prosēlutos* through *P.Duk. inv. 727r*,¹⁵ a papyrus they recently studied that likely dates from mid- to late third century B.C. This provides a relevant ancient text outside of Jewish circles that employs the term *prosēlutos*. After their detailed analysis, Moffitt and Butera concluded that the term was probably already in use in Egypt, outside Jewish circles, and roughly contemporary with the initial LXX translations, to mean something like ‘newcomer’ or ‘resident alien’.¹⁶

Therefore, it seems that *prosēlutos* was not widely used outside of the LXX and the NT during their corresponding historical periods. Regarding the extra-biblical use of the Greek term, it is only Moffitt and Butera that provide us with the most recent information, understanding the extra-biblical usage of the Gk. *prosēlutos* to be ‘newcomer’ or ‘resident alien’, as a suitable LXX translation for the Hb. *gēr*.¹⁷

2. OT usage

In the LXX, *prosēlutos* is used 84 times with the more common meaning of ‘guest’ or ‘sojourner’,¹⁸ like the very few instances of extra-biblical usage. An

¹⁴ The other uses of προσήλυτος in Philo (Cher 108, 109; Dreams 2:273; Laws 1:308) are taken/inspired from OT verses. 1QEx 2:2 contains an allegory describing the moral steadfastness of the Israelites using the context of their sojourn in Egypt.

¹⁵ Cfr. D.M. MOFFITT, C.J. BUTERA, *P.Duk. inv. 727r: New Evidence for the Meaning and Provenance of the Word Προσήλυτος*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 132 (2013) 159-178. The technical analysis of the papyrus can be found in IDEM, *P.Duk.inv. 727: A Dispute with ‘Proselytes’ in Egypt*, «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» 177 (2011) 201-206. The ‘Duk.’ in the papyrus’ name comes from “Duke University” (Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library).

¹⁶ Cfr. IDEM, *P.Duk. inv. 727r: New Evidence*, 178.

¹⁷ The Hebrew term *gēr* also appears in several mss of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), mainly the Damascus document and its fragments (excluding extrapolations, we have CD 14:4, 6; 4Q267 f9v:10) as well as 11Q19 (40:6). The main context is their rank in residence or interrogation/social order, akin to the uses of the term in the OT, not necessarily associated with conversion.

¹⁸ Except the case of Deut 12:18, where the *o prosēlutos* of the LXX corresponds to *hallēwī* of the Masoretic text (instead of the usual *haggēr*); however, contrast with Deut 16:11, 14; or also 26:11-13, which means that these two terms should be duly distinguished.

“It is likely that προσήλυτος implied an acceptance of Israelite religion, though it would be going too far to say that in the LXX the term already meant ‘convert’, or what we mean by *proselyte*” (cfr. M. SILVA [ed.], *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2014² [henceforth cited as NIDNTTE], 4:148). Cfr. also

article by Overman, much older than the recent findings of Moffitt and Butera, similarly understands the LXX use of the term to refer to a resident alien who is in some way involved in the Jewish community and sympathetic to Jewish religious worship and practice.¹⁹

Luz,²⁰ and more recently Fletcher²¹ are of a contrary opinion, stating that the use of the term in the LXX is already the 'technical' one, i.e., a gentile convert to Judaism. However, the majority of uses of *prosēlutos* in the LXX simply does not correspond to these statements. Viewing the use of the term in context, one could notice that in the LXX *prosēlutos* is usually further described by participial forms of *proskheimai* (Lev 16:29; 17:3, 8, 10, 12-13; 22:18; Num 15:15-16, 26, 29; 19:10; Josh 20:9),²² *proserchomai* (Ex 12:48-49; Lev 19:33; Num 9:14; Isa 54:15),²³ *prosginomai* (Lev 18:26; 20:2; Num 15:14),²⁴ *paroikeō* (Ex 20:10; Deut 5:14; 2 Chr 15:9; Ezek 47:22)²⁵ or *prosporeuomai* (Lev 19:34; Josh 8:35),²⁶ to principally describe basic socio-cultural coexistence and *not necessarily* religious affiliation.

J.A. OVERMAN, *The God-fearers: Some Neglected Features*, «Journal for the Study of the New Testament» 32 (1988), 19.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ U. LUZ, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; vol. 3: Matt 21-28), Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2001-2005, 118.

²¹ J. FLETCHER, *Proselytism*, «Ecumenica» 7 (2014) 67 (“used in the Septuagint to name Gentile converts to Judaism”), but without further explanation.

²² Used to translate the Hb בְּתוֹךְ + suffix, simply meaning “in (your/their) midst”, which has no necessary religious connotation. The MT of Lev 17:3 does not mention the proselyte, and Num 15:15 has no modifier. In Lev 22:18 the Hebrew simply says הַגֵּר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, simply “the sojourner *in Israel*”, and Num 15:16 has הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם, “the sojourner *with you*”, still without necessary religious connotation.

²³ In Ex 12:48 and Num 9:14 the first condition is כִּי יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵר, “if a sojourner *dwells with you*”, and v.49 repeats the form בְּתוֹךְ + suffix as before (“in your/their midst”), also translated with *proskheimai*. Lev 19:33 has a similar condition as Ex 12:48, כִּי יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאֶרֶצְכֶם, “if a sojourner *dwells with you in your land*”. Isa 54:15 uses different forms of the verb גִּיר, which translations from Hebrew take it not as the verb ‘to sojourn’, but ‘to attack/provoke’ (both having the same root).

²⁴ Lev 18:26 again uses בְּתוֹךְ + suffix, which had the previous translations of *proskheimai* and *proserchomai*. Lev 20:2 has הַגֵּר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, same as Lev 22:18 above, which was translated with *proskheimai*. Num 15:14 has כִּי יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵר, the same as the conditions in Ex 12:48 and Num 9:14 above but translated with *proserchomai*.

²⁵ Ex 20:10 and Deut 5:14 have גֵּר אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ, “your sojourner/guest *who is within your gates*”, simply describing a residential status. 2 Chr 15:9 has הַגֵּרִים עִמָּהֶם, “the sojourners (who are) *with them*”, a description of simple association. Ezek 47:22 has the combination בְּתוֹךְ + suffix already seen before, translated to either *proskheimai*, *proserchomai* and *prosginomai*, and now has this fourth possibility.

²⁶ Lev 19:34 has הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם, “the sojourner *with you*”, same as Num 15:16 and was translated as *proskheimai*. Josh 8:35 has הַגֵּר הֹלֵךְ בְּקִרְבָּם, “the sojourner *walking in their midst*” a simple description of social integration.

The Hebrew clauses behind these translations are simple descriptions of association (mainly: ‘with you’, ‘in your midst’, ‘inside your walls’); the varied Greek translations of these few basic Hebrew clauses –especially various translations for the *same* clause– could probably be more due to stylistic reasons rather than hermeneutical. More importantly, the issues in most of the texts are concerned *not* mainly with cult,²⁷ but rather with labor, social justice and especially conformance to the laws of ritual purity; the uses of the term in Deuteronomy, the Psalms and the prophetic books are very descriptive of this. Furthermore, with the more recent extra-biblical information it is more plausible to conclude that the technical use of the term was consolidated at a later period.²⁸

Therefore, it would be more objective to treat the concepts ‘proselyte’ and ‘convert’ in the OT as distinct, related only by contingency and not necessity. The LXX uses *prosēlutos* mainly to refer to a foreigner²⁹ who in principle does not object to the Jewish way of life;³⁰ it is only in *some* cases that a *prosēlutos* might formally convert to Judaism, but that means requiring something more than the mere fact of being a *prosēlutos*.

3. NT usage

Regarding the single use of this term in Matthew, Overman comments that it “seems to carry the more technical meaning as understood in later rabbinic literature”.³¹ In any case, it seems that Overman’s statement would express the

²⁷ There are only five concrete instances of this: Ex 12:48; Lev 17:8; 22:18; Num 9:14; 15:14.

²⁸ Cfr. the tracing of the historical development of the term’s meaning in P.F. STUEHRENBURG, *Proselyte*, in D.N. FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.), Doubleday, London 1992 (henceforth cited as ABD), 5:503, as well as J.R. ROSENBLOOM, *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati 1978, 18-22.

²⁹ For a recent in-depth study which reached the same conclusion, cfr. M. THIESSEN, *Revisiting the προσήλυτος in “the LXX”*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 132 (2013) 333-350. Furthermore, if ‘gentile convert to Judaism’ were already the *principal* LXX meaning of *prosēlutos*, it would be absurd to address Israel as such: “You shall not oppress or afflict a *gentile convert to Judaism*, for *you* were once *gentile converts to Judaism* in the land of Egypt” (Ex 22:20; also Ex 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19), as well as “The land shall not be sold irrevocably; for the land is mine, and *you* are but *gentile converts to Judaism* and under my authority” (Lev 25:23). It would be especially absurd to consider Israel as ‘gentile converts to Judaism in the land of Egypt’ when during that time the foundations of the Jewish religion weren’t even established yet.

³⁰ Without having to form part of some official group of ‘sympathizers’ either, as was thought to be regarding the so-called ‘God-fearers’ in Acts (cfr. A.T. KRAABEL, *The Disappearance of the ‘God-fearers’*, «Numen» 28 [1981] 113-126).

³¹ OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 19 (cfr. also NIDNTTE 4:149). This would imply that the term’s meaning is already from a historical timeframe posterior to that of Jesus’ time, which is supposedly

more plausible proposal as a starting point, because it might seem absurd to imagine Pharisees going out of their way to gain foreigners who would simply be open to Judaism, when probably there would already be many of these in Jerusalem; it would understandably take much more effort to convince one to shift from sympathizer to convert.

Aside from Mt 23:15, there are only three other uses of the word in the NT, and all of them are in Acts (2:11; 6:5; 13:43). Overman affirms that, contrary to Mt, the use of the term in Acts carries the more general meaning;³² that is to say, someone who does not formally belong to Judaism, albeit being sympathetic to it. We could analyze all three uses in Acts here in more detail, first trying to build upon Overman's point of view and then contrasting it with others, and later see how this could help understand Mt 23:15.

a) Acts 13:43

In Acts 13, after Paul had preached in the synagogue and the congregation had dispersed, the text narrates that "many of the Jews and worshiping proselytes" followed Paul and Barnabas, who urged them to remain in the grace of God. It seems clear in the context that these worshiping proselytes are already part of the synagogue, practicing Judaism. But the question here is regarding the further description of *sebomenoi* ('worshiping') for the proselytes. If a proselyte *per se* would already mean convert to Judaism, then to describe them as 'worshiping' would be superfluous; or is it because there are proselytes who are *not worshiping*?

There seemed to be a need to further qualify these proselytes. Or on the contrary, if 'proselyte' already meant 'convert', then why are the proselytes the only ones labeled as *sebomenoi* if both Jews and proselytes supposedly belong to the same religion? That would seem to put into question the religious authenticity of the ethnic Jews, and this does not seem to be the case. The case would be, rather, that these are converts not because of the simple fact of being *prosēlutoi*, but because they are *sebomenoi prosēlutoi*, which is a further distinction.³³

the context of Matthew. I think this is important to note as we delve further in our study, as this detail could give us further insight regarding the context of Matthew's redaction.

³² Cfr. OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 20.

³³ Kraabel also insists that the term *sebomenos* is not an official title for 'God-fearers', gentile sympathizers who have not yet converted to Judaism (cfr. KRAABEL, *The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers'*, 114-116); and better that way, for those who espouse that *prosēlutos* should already mean convert: because if not, *sebomenoi prosēlutoi* would have an absurd meaning: a 'not-yet-convert' convert.

It would also go to show that with Acts 13:43 those who espouse that *sebomenos* is a title for 'God-fearers' would be forced to deny that *prosēlutos* means 'convert to Judaism', and vice versa.

b) Acts 2:11

Acts 2:11 mentions ‘Jews and proselytes’,³⁴ but it would help to take the wider context into account. This chapter in Acts narrates the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Soon after that event, Acts 2:5-6 narrates that “there were *Jews* staying in Jerusalem, *pious men* from every nation under heaven. At this sound, *the crowd* came and gathered together, because each one of them heard them speaking in their own language”. Therefore, the people that gathered soon after the apostles were speaking in tongues wasn’t just any crowd: it was formed by devout Jews coming from different nations, who were in Jerusalem most probably for Pentecost.³⁵

The provenance of these ‘Jews and pious men’ is international, but interestingly it is only the contingent from Rome that has the further qualifier of being composed of ‘both Jews and proselytes’.³⁶ The ethnic Jews from the other nations could have also brought some of their proselytes along to Jerusalem, but Rome seems to have some special consideration in this list.³⁷ In any case, the central question is the *characteristic* of these proselytes. It could be understood from the context that these proselytes were already practicing Jewish religious custom, having come along with the group of ethnic Jews from Rome to Jerusalem for Pentecost. But if we follow the logic from Acts 13:43, we could better understand that these proselytes are practicing Judaism not by the mere fact of being proselytes. They practice Judaism because they are part of the group that was described as *eulabeis* (devout, pious) as early as Acts 2:5, an integral part of the context;³⁸ meaning that they are not just proselytes, but *devout proselytes*, which

³⁴ Avoiding the usual translation ‘gentile converts’ and maintaining the word which reflects the Greek original.

³⁵ Cfr. also R.I. PERVO, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia), Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2009, 65-66. As for the Christian transformation of the meaning of Pentecost, cfr. D. PETERSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [henceforth cited as PNTC], Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2009, 134-135; also KRAABEL, *The Disappearance of the ‘God-fearers’*, 120.

³⁶ Overman pointed out: “Acts 2.10 (*sic*) and 13.43 mention προσήλυτοι together with Ἰουδαῖοι. Though together, each forms a distinct group” (OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 20). However, it would be more understandable if Acts 2:10 were considered with 2:11 (especially in the light of Acts 2:5) in order to further understand who these ‘Jews and proselytes’ were in 2:11, meaning that the clause should be ‘travelers from Rome, both Jews and proselytes’; besides, taken on their own it makes little sense encountering the word pair ‘Jews and proselytes’ as distinct components in a list of *local provenances* (cfr. also PERVO, *Acts*, 66).

³⁷ “Luke is interested in Rome because it is the goal toward which his narrative is moving”. (F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [henceforth cited as NICNT], Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1988, 57).

³⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*, 53-54.

is a further qualifier:³⁹ again, emphasizing the fact that being a *prosēlutos* in itself is not enough to suppose that such a person had already converted to Judaism.

c) Acts 6:5

Acts 6:5 mentions a certain Nicholas, described as 'proselyte, Antiochean', one of the seven selected by the Apostles to resolve the conflict regarding the Hellenist widows. It could also be understood that Nicholas was labeled as *prosēlutos* not principally because he was a convert to Judaism, but more due to the simpler fact that he was a *foreigner*: concretely from *Antioch*, as the text says (*Nikolaon prosēluton Antiochea*).

Nevertheless, Nicholas does seem to have been a convert to Judaism, especially because he was 'at the same level', *filled with the Spirit and wisdom*, as the other six who were chosen with him: Jews in the first place, and later baptized into faith in Jesus.⁴⁰ But that does not prevent the distinction from remaining firm: We can understand Nicholas to be a gentile convert to Judaism not because he was called *prosēlutos* –that status would be mainly due to his Antiochean origin–, but rather due to the context provided: his rapport with the Apostles and the other first Christians (all of Jewish origin, at that point), allowing him to be one of the seven candidates.

d) Mt 23:15

Perhaps this previous consideration would give us some more insight regarding the *prosēlutos* in Mt 23:15. It would be difficult to think of this proselyte as simply a resident alien, which he would already be. If we try and take it from Overman's point of view, it would help to try and detect an additional context that further qualifies such proselyte; and it is here that the analysis from Acts 6:5 could help.

In a more positive tone, in Acts 6:5 Nicholas the proselyte went beyond his basic status of 'resident foreigner' and so converted to Judaism, which later allowed him the privilege to be one of the first to receive the Gospel message and later qualify as one of the seven exemplary Christians chosen to attend to the Hellenist widows. A similar analogy could be employed for the context of Mt 23:15; though

³⁹ "The word used here is *enlabeis*, which means *pious* and in Luke-Acts is always used of Jews, never of Gentiles (cf. Luke 2:25; Acts 8:2; 22:12)" (J.B. POLHILL, *Acts*, New American Commentary, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville 1992, 101).

⁴⁰ Probably so, because the clearer identification of the first Christian converts from the gentiles is not until after Stephen's martyrdom (cfr. also PERVO, *Acts*, 152; PETERSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 134-135; KRAABEL, *The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers'*, 120).

in a negative light, this one proselyte gained by the Pharisees is *later* made ‘twice as much’ as the Pharisees in being a ‘child of Gehenna’.

What could be noteworthy here is the two-fold process in the verse’s syntax: the first mention of *poieō* is in aorist infinitive, referring to the punctiliar act of finding a proselyte. Then there is a second *poieō*, this time in present indicative, which is a continuous subsequent action –with the condition *kai otan genētai*, when the first *poieō* would have already been carried out– this time to progressively make this proselyte like (and in the end ‘worse than’) the Pharisees. Therefore, it is this later placement of the proselyte at the same level as the Pharisees which could provide the context of further qualification: beyond being simply a resident foreigner, this proselyte converts to Judaism and gets further training in its ways, perhaps more specifically in the Pharisaic school.

After having considered the NT verses in this light, Overman’s point of view does seem logical, in the sense that *prosēlutos* on its own is not enough to warrant having the technical sense of ‘gentile convert to Judaism’; it is the further qualifying context to this word that gives more information regarding whether a proselyte was a convert or not. Therefore, generally speaking⁴¹ Overman has a point in observing that the meaning of *prosēlutos* in Acts is still akin to that of the LXX and even ancient extra-biblical usage: but we would opt to include Mt 23:15 as well, which Overman said had the technical meaning.

Nevertheless the entry in NIDOTTE is seemingly on the contrary: “The NT uses the word προσήλυτος (G4670) in the full technical sense, but none of these have any direct relation to LXX usage (Matt 23:15; Acts 2:11; 6:5; 13:43)”.⁴² It is worth insisting upon that it is not just a matter of a single word,⁴³ but the context: all the instances of *prosēlutos* in the NT most likely refer to converts to Judaism, but not due to the mere presence of the word *prosēlutos*, but rather to the context wherein it is used. The NIDOTTE entry could be better understood if we properly distinguish the *meaning* of the word from its *use* (i.e., the context wherein the word is used in concrete sentences); and from there we could understand that the NIDOTTE seems to focus on the *use*.

⁴¹ As we recall, one of his arguments was that in Acts 2:10 the *Ioudaioi* and the *prosēlutoi* should form distinct groups, to highlight the difference between the two (cfr. OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 20): however, the wider narrative should be considered, and from there it could be better seen that these *prosēlutoi* do come along with the *Ioudaioi*; but both are further qualified with *eulabeis* from Acts 2:5, putting these proselytes in their specific context.

⁴² KONKEL, “גוֹרֵי”, in NIDOTTE, 1:823.

⁴³ Overman also seems to focus on the individual word.

4. *Evaluation*

a) Regarding the term *prosēlutos*

Being a 'gentile convert to Judaism' is already a status beyond that of the basic *prosēlutos*. The context of *prosēlutos* in the NT is for describing proselytes who also happened to be converts;⁴⁴ on the other hand, the common context of *prosēlutos* in the LXX is for describing proselytes *per se*, foreigners who simply sojourn peacefully with the Israelites. Of course, very few verses in the OT *might* already refer to converts (perhaps those which have more to do with cult, i.e., Ex 12:48; Lev 17:8; 22:18; Num 9:14; 15:14) but, as always, this is all about context and not the mere appearance of the word.⁴⁵

Overman pointed out that both simple and technical meanings could have already been present during the time of redaction of Mt and Lk/Acts.⁴⁶ However, this might not necessarily be the case; after our observations we are more inclined to point out that the *term* always has the simple meaning of foreigner, and it just so happens that its four appearances in the NT are always in the *context* of a foreigner who converted to Judaism. In other words, the NT talks about proselytes who also happened to be converts, but from there it does not necessarily follow that all proselytes are converts.

The main source of the 'technical' meaning of *prosēlutos* seems to be rabbinic literature.⁴⁷ The historical placement of these texts is not easy to evaluate,⁴⁸ and

⁴⁴ "Witherington 1998, 344, considers that the term 'proselyte' may on occasion be used by Luke in this technical sense, but concludes that 'we cannot be sure, especially in light of the LXX use of the term and the influence of the Greek OT on Luke'. In the LXX the term is used for resident aliens (e.g. Ex. 20:10; 23:12; Nu. 15:13-16). Cfr. S. McKnight, 'Proselytism and Godfearers', DNTB, 835-47" (PETERSON, *The Acts*, 164, note 30).

⁴⁵ "In all the passages where the *ger* is seen as equal with the *ezech*, it is inaccurate to translate the word as 'sojourner' or 'stranger'. The only appropriate translation is 'proselyte' or 'convert'. In this way the *ger* in these circumstances is seen for what he is, an equal participant in the Jewish polity and religion who for the time being is recognized as one who joined himself and/or his family to the Jewish group" (ROSENBLOOM, *Conversion to Judaism*, 22; emphasis mine). Though he considers 'proselyte' to be synonymous to 'convert', his statement nevertheless also implies that not all contexts of *gēr/prosēlutos* call for a translation to 'convert', as some dictionaries would impose (cfr. Rosenbloom's take on the evolution of the use of *gēr* in the OT, *ibidem*, 18-22).

⁴⁶ Cfr. OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 20. He was of the position that, while the meaning in Acts is still akin to the LXX, 'sojourner', he thinks that in Mt it is already the technical one, 'convert'.

⁴⁷ As literature it is already much later than the NT writings, but as a movement it was just slightly prior (cfr. H. LAPIN, *Rabbi/Rabboni*, in ABD, 5:600-601).

⁴⁸ Cfr. J. NEUSNER, *The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before 70* (3 vols.), Brill, Leiden 1971, 1:1. "The continuity and variations in Jewish and early Christian traditions must be traced by using dated texts and traditions which can be demonstrated by internal criteria to be early. The

its use for interpreting the NT⁴⁹ has been eyed with caution.⁵⁰ In any case, if the technical understanding of ‘gentile convert to Judaism’ did come from later rabbinic tradition, the shift in meaning would occur mainly in the *Hebrew/Aramaic* term, and not the *Greek*. Meaning to say, it was the term *gēr* that changed to the technical meaning:⁵¹ it is not enough to simply assume that the Greek word *prosēlutos* also transformed along with the rabbinic/technical understanding of *gēr*, especially considering that there are no Greek translations of rabbinic literature (let alone rabbinic literature originally in Greek), and that –at least in the meantime– there are no extant extra-biblical Greek texts contemporary or previous to the NT that employ the term *prosēlutos* to clearly mean ‘gentile convert to Judaism’.

It is thus undisputable that the LXX is the text that most frequently employs the Greek term *prosēlutos* during the time of writing the NT books (Mt and Acts in particular): as the NT writer used *prosēlutos*, it would be safe to conjecture that the contemporary readers of the NT would have the LXX as the main textual basis for its meaning. But even then, up to now there are still two diverse opinions regarding the LXX meaning of *prosēlutos*; to try and account for such polarity of opinions between the ‘simple’ and ‘technical’ meanings, it would be useful to identify and evaluate the arguments behind such reasoning.

The important point is that most of the uses of *prosēlutos* in the LXX can very well stand without referring to converts,⁵² and in fact many translations of the LXX/MT simply render *prosēlutos/gēr* as ‘alien (+residing/who resides)’ or ‘guest’;⁵³ and so taking *prosēlutos* to mean ‘gentile convert’ in all (or most) of

extensive and repeated redaction of rabbinic materials makes form-critical and redactional dating of texts extremely difficult” (A.J. SALDARINI, *Rabbinic Literature and the NT*, in ABD, 5:603).

⁴⁹ A tendency common, e.g., in Evans’ commentary on Mt 23:15 (cfr. C.A. EVANS, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge University Press, New York 2012, 393-394).

⁵⁰ “The use of rabbinic literature [...] as a resource for interpreting the NT has been questioned increasingly in recent years for several reasons. The vision of a coherent and continuous normative Judaism implied by the rabbinic sources and presented by Moore has been shown to be anachronistic for the 1st century. Prior to the destruction of the temple (70 C.E.), Judaism comprised many social groups ... The rabbinic way of life and thought had yet to be articulated and certainly was not dominant” (SALDARINI, *Rabbinic Literature*, 602).

⁵¹ Which can be problematic: around that point when *gēr* referred more specifically to the sojourner who converts, then how should one call the sojourner who does *not* convert, who was also previously addressed as *gēr*? These ‘ex-*gēr*’ couldn’t just suddenly be ‘nameless’ from then on, and neither can they be just labeled as *nokri* because this term has a different nuance.

⁵² Along with the curious fact that in the entire LXX there is not even one proselyte involved in a narrative (i.e., similar to the three instances in Acts), which can perhaps give us a better understanding.

⁵³ In the Vulgate: *advena, peregrinus, colonus*; in Italian: *forestiero, straniero (+dimorante)*; in Spanish: *extranjero (+residente)*, etc.

those 84 instances in the LXX could very well be a product of external bias or even anachronism.

With this point of reference, the typical arguments are unable to stand firmly: one cannot have an underlying reason "because the NT *always* uses *prosēlutos* to refer to a gentile convert, then it is the same for the LXX". This is uncalled for because the issue is more objectively judged by *context*, and most of the contexts of *prosēlutos* in the LXX do not necessarily demand a reference to converts. A more balanced reasoning would be "because the NT *always* uses *prosēlutos* in contexts involving gentile converts, then such a context might also be found in the LXX". And this is entirely true: but this context could be more clearly inferred in only around 5 instances (ca. 6%) in the LXX,⁵⁴ and so to assign 'gentile convert to Judaism' to be the 'LXX meaning' of *prosēlutos* would be forcing the issue. And it also forces the issue to assign 'gentile convert to Judaism' as the 'NT meaning' of *prosēlutos*, because conversion is an *additional and contingent context* for a proselyte; it just so happens that the very few instances in the NT have this specific context, which doesn't necessarily warrant the extrapolation that *all* uses of *prosēlutos* are always in this context, alleging a shift of meaning.

And more obviously neither can one say, "in the LXX *prosēlutos* mainly means 'gentile convert to Judaism', therefore this is also reflected in the NT". Our analysis would have to conclude that the premise is false. In the LXX a proselyte is not necessarily nor usually a convert.⁵⁵

There might also be an underlying reasoning to propose disjunction between the two, something like "regardless of its use in the LXX, *prosēlutos* in the NT treads a different path and would take to mean 'gentile convert to Judaism'". This statement would be more difficult to support. On the one hand, if the NT *prosēlutos* is disjoint from the LXX *prosēlutos* then there is no identifiable source for this shift in meaning in the Greek, and the influence of rabbinic literature on *Greek* terminology would remain simply conjectural. As already mentioned earlier, it was rabbinic tradition that later shifted the meaning of *gēr* from the basic to the technical meaning; but a corresponding shift in its past usual Greek translation *prosēlutos* is still unaccounted for and should not just be assumed and taken for granted, and the burden of proof rests on those who would espouse this theory.⁵⁶ In the meantime, what is clear is that in the NT *prosēlutos* is used in

⁵⁴ Again, mainly those which already involve cultic offerings, i.e., Ex 12:48; Lev 17:8; 22:18; Num 9:14; 15:14.

⁵⁵ Obviously the LXX does not exclude the possibility that a proselyte could also convert to Judaism, but this is already *something more than being a proselyte* and requires further context to identify the situation properly.

⁵⁶ This linguistic/philological inquiry would already go beyond our scope, but there is enough room to at least indicate a possible starting point: An article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*

contexts that refer to gentile converts to Judaism, not that the word *prosēlutos* by itself *means* ‘gentile convert to Judaism’.

b) Regarding the proselytes sought by the Pharisees in Mt 23:15

And just a final note, regarding the message of Mt 23:15 in the wider context: as the biblical text would nevertheless be the principal source regarding the term *prosēlutos*, we cannot have any further lead regarding what it means in Mt 23:15, and so in the meantime we let it stay as is, according to the information gathered thus far: in the first place, foreigner; and then convert, besides.

Nevertheless, there is one important point that can be concluded through biblical information: even within the context of Mt 23:15 it is not Judaism nor conversion to Judaism that is being condemned. Otherwise, what Paul and Barnabas did in Acts 13:43 would make no sense: They urged the Jews and worshipping proselytes *to continue in the grace of God*. Or even without looking too far, earlier in Mt 23 we also read: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, *so do and observe whatever they tell you*” (Mt 23:2-3).⁵⁷

We should look for clues elsewhere, especially from studies on specific aspects regarding Pharisees as well as ‘Jewish missionary activity’ in the early first century, though it would already include a period beyond that of Jesus’ time, the historical background of Mt 23:15.

II. SURVEY AND EVALUATION OF INFORMATION ON JEWISH MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN THE EARLY FIRST CENTURY A.D.

We start with the following definition of ‘missionary activity’ based on Köstenberger and O’Brien, which we deem fair enough: “*a conscious, deliberate, organized*

(H.A. FISCHER, *Greek and Latin Languages, Rabbinical Knowledge of*, in F. SKOLNIK and M. BERENBAUM (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition* [22 vols.], Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem 2007, 8:57-59), which has the following relevant statements: “Insufficient use has been made so far of the discipline of modern linguistics in solving this task” (*ibidem*, 57); and after a long outline of some linguistic observations, it had to conclude: “All these observations, however, do not yet give any information regarding the rabbinic knowledge of written Greek sources” (cfr. *ibidem*, 58). And as part of the concluding note to the article, “Perhaps the true question is not whether the rabbis knew Greek slightly or in depth (even the rhetors used various aid books), but whether they knew it adequately for their purpose. Only additional finds, such as actual Greek literature or more Greek halakhic documents, will throw further light on these problems” (*ibidem*, 59).

⁵⁷ But with the warning, “but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (Mt 23:3).

and extensive effort to convert others to one's religion by way of evangelization or proselytization".⁵⁸

However, the term 'proselytism' (or 'proselytization', as mentioned above) would be more properly assigned to a *modern* setting. The study by Will and Orrieux affirms –convincingly, from the historical and linguistic perspectives– that the notion of proselytism as an *active* 'missionary zeal' is a later conception; other ancient Greek words (both late and rarely used) that stem from *prosēlutos* (e.g., *prosēluteuein*, *prosēluteusis*) always refer to *the person who converted*,⁵⁹ and not the 'missionary', coupled with the fact that the term *prosēlutismos* –the word that would more specifically correspond to 'proselytism'– is not attested in ancient Greek.⁶⁰ And as 'evangelization' is more specifically related to Christian practice, perhaps we could consider just the first part of the aforementioned definition, to more properly apply it to the historical period in question, settling with "a conscious, deliberate, organized and extensive effort to convert others to one's religion". We invite the reader to keep these defined characteristics in mind each time the term is mentioned.

Taking the text by face value, Mt 23:15 might imply that Jewish missionary activity existed, at least among the Pharisees. But even then, we encounter a seemingly divergent opinion; for example, from Goodman: "The missionary hero in search for converts to Judaism is a phenomenon first approved by the Jews *well after the start of the Christian mission, not before it*. There is no good reason to suppose that any Jew would have seen value in seeking proselytes in the first century with an enthusiasm like that of the Christian apostles. The origins

⁵⁸ Cfr. A.J. KÖSTENBERGER, P.T. O'BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission. New Studies in Biblical Theology*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove 2001, 57, agreeing to the assessment in McKnight's and Goodman's studies.

⁵⁹ Or even a more neutral meaning, which has nothing to do with conversion: in the LSJ the only definition of *prosēluteuein* is "live in a place as a stranger", and for *prosēluteusis* "residence as a stranger" (cfr. "προσηλυτεύσεις" and "προσηλυτεύω", LSJ, 1513; neither term is found in BDAG) citing only Jewish and Christian sources, corroborating Will and Orrieux's observations. The only appearance of *prosēluteuein* in the LXX is in Ezek 14:7, which is taken to mean 'to reside/sojourn', referring to the *prosēlutos*, a direct translation of the Hebrew הגר אשר יגור.

⁶⁰ "Or, à nous en tenir aux sources anciennes, la question de savoir ce que devrait signifier prosélytisme dans le contexte antique est sans objet: pour concevable qu'il soit, le mot *prosēlytismos* n'est pas attesté en grec ancien, ni en transcription latine. Le grec ne connaît que *prosēlytos* et, d'emplois rares et tardifs, les dérivés *prosēlyteuein* (être prosélyte, c'est-à-dire venir se joindre, se convertir) et *prosēlyteusis*. Prosélytisme, avec son sens banal de zèle convertisseur, d'ardeur missionnaire, est un mot moderne, évidemment né dans des conditions modernes particulières". (WILL, ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif?, Histoire d'une Erreur*, 26).

of the proselytizing within the church should be sought elsewhere”.⁶¹ Following these lines we also find Köstenberger, O’Brien and Bird.⁶²

Such an opinion does not necessarily deny Jewish missionary activity; the question is rather *when* the activity started to express its defining characteristics. The point of view of these authors is that if ever Jews did engage in missionary activity, it was already in reaction to the missionary activity of the first Christians.⁶³ This could also lead one to think that Mt 23:15, if it does refer to Jewish missionary activity (following the definition above), is already reflecting a later situation in the Church⁶⁴ and not exactly that of Jesus’ time (i.e., still before the apostolic mandate by the resurrected Christ⁶⁵ and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost).⁶⁶

This issue might be like that of Christians being ‘expelled from the synagogues’ as we encounter in John’s gospel (9:22; 12:42; still expressed as a prophecy in 16:2). Commentaries consider the possibility that during Jesus’ time such a practice was simply sporadic and not institutionally organized,⁶⁷ and I am inclined to agree

⁶¹ M. GOODMAN, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994, 90; emphasis mine.

⁶² And so Köstenberger and O’Brien: “If that were the case, the early church’s mission would have operated within the parameters already established by Judaism. ... This is not contradicted by Matthew 23:15, where Jesus censures the Pharisees for their misguided zeal in proselytization”. (KÖSTENBERGER, O’BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 254). Bird had also noted at the start of his book, after providing a concise recap of available literature: “It is in this background of scholarship that I intend to argue that the Christian Gentile missions, however indebted to their Jewish background, are not directly attributed to an ongoing Jewish mission” (M.F. BIRD, *Crossing Over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period*, Hendrickson, Peabody 2010, 12).

⁶³ From what can be understood from the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles, the initial Jewish activity in reaction to the Christian mission was rather in the *insistence that Christians—whether of Jewish or gentile origin—abide by Mosaic Law*, and not the more general activity of winning people over to Judaism.

⁶⁴ Something akin to linking the NT’s *prosēlutos* to the *later* consolidated rabbinic technical understanding of *gēr*.

⁶⁵ Cfr. Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47.

⁶⁶ Some sources which address the topic of ‘Jewish proselytism’ are already based on historical contexts later than the redaction of Matthew’s gospel, and thus of little use for our scope of study, e.g., B.J. BAMBERGER, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati 1939; L.H. FELDMAN, *Proselytism by Jews in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Centuries*, «Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period» 24 (1993) 1-58.

⁶⁷ “More likely, ‘put out of synagogue’ refers to some form of temporary exclusion in effect already in Jesus’ day [...], enforced only as local synagogues saw fit. Jesus himself, after all, was allowed to speak freely in the synagogue at Capernaum (see 6:59)” (cfr. J. RAMSEY MICHAELS, *John* [NICNT], Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2010, 556-559). Or similarly, cfr. C.G. KRUSE, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2003, 224; G.R. BEASLEY-MURRAY, *John* (WBC), Zondervan, Grand Rapids

(i.e., that it is not a flat-out anachronism as some would suppose).⁶⁸ A similar logic might be applicable for our object of study: to consider that Mt 23:15 might also refer to something that started as sporadic and not institutionally organized during Jesus' time, which only later can be more concretely characterized as missionary activity.

The issues above also make the term 'Jewish missionary activity in the 'early first century'⁶⁹ ambiguous, since this period encompasses the periods *before, during and after* Jesus' public ministry and that of the first Christians after Pentecost (as well as the beginnings of a possible Jewish reaction to the Christian *modus operandi*). That is why concreteness is advised regarding the discussion of such timeframes: if Jewish missionary activity already existed in a more clearly independent way during the 'early first century', then its origin should have been *before the spread of Christianity*: and such an origin is what Goodman and others negate.

The relevant studies seem to mainly suggest that the Jews in the first century –before or after Christianity– were *not* so intent on an organized missionary activity to win the world over to Judaism.⁷⁰ But of course, we shall also consider varying opinions; but as a forewarning, what we have noted was rather a *scarcity* of varying opinions.

Regarding this issue, Luz's commentary on Matthew took its side: "The question of what extent ancient Judaism was engaged in actively recruiting converts is unresolved⁷¹ [...] Since *direct* evidence for actual missionary journeys are scarce, I am skeptical".⁷² And this is not far-fetched, as Mt 23:15 seems to be the only ancient text that possibly alleges such an activity. Given that this could not easily be taken literally, Luz had to resolve the description of 'travelling across sea and land', and comments: "There is no evidence that scribes or Pharisees of that day went on long missionary journeys like the early Christian apostles, and certainly not for the sake of a single proselyte".⁷³

1999, 153-154. A more systematic exposition regarding the issues involved here can be found in D.A. CARSON, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1991, 369-372.

⁶⁸ In any case, what is clear is that an across-the-board exclusion of Christians from the synagogues would be from an era where the identity of Christianity was developed and defined enough to be pronounced as different from Judaism: and this certainly did not occur during Jesus' time.

⁶⁹ Or even the usual differentiation between 'pre-70 C.E.' and 'post-70 C.E.' Judaism, because Judaism had certainly crossed paths with Christianity many times in both pre- and post- 70 C.E.

⁷⁰ Will and Orrieux proffer this textual observation: "Car le texte ne dit pas *pour faire des prosélytes*, mais bien *pour faire un prosélyte*. Les traductions négligent parfois l'insistance introduite par le numéral *benā*" (cfr. WILL, ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif ?*, *Histoire d'une Erreur*, 116).

⁷¹ He cites the works of Goodman, McKnight, and Feldman.

⁷² LUZ, *Matthew*, 117, note 45.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 117-118. This rhetorical understanding is also seconded by BIRD, *Crossing Over Sea and Land*, 67-68; KÖSTENBERGER, O'BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 63. "Et, si nous

Several authors make similar appraisals, in considering Jewish missionary activity and ‘Pharisaic proselytism’ as improbable⁷⁴ which, along with Luz’s considerations, I think are more balanced and objective in their appraisal of the information currently available. Bird went so far as to evaluate Mt 23:15 in this light;⁷⁵ and neither is this far-fetched, considering the definition that we have specified at the start of this section.

Köstenberger and O’Brien also caution against the indiscriminate use of statistics of growing numbers of Jewish population (ethnic or otherwise)⁷⁶ in the defense of the existence of organized Jewish missionary activity in the early first century, and such a position seems adequately defended.⁷⁷

tenons compte de l’insistance ironique qu’implique le numéral *bena*, *un seul prosélyte, rien qu’un prosélyte*, le cas n’était peut-être pas d’une extrême fréquence” (WILL, ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif? Histoire d’une erreur*, 123).

⁷⁴ “The question becomes not merely whether or not the Jewish religion was successful in attracting converts or proselytes –for this is beyond dispute– but whether this was the result of intentional Jewish missionary efforts or not. For it has been argued already on the basis of the term ‘proselyte’ itself (προσῆλυτος, from προσέρχομαι, ‘to approach, to come to’) that *the initiative lay, not with the religious group itself, but with the person interested in joining it*, in the present case with Gentiles desiring to join Judaism” (KÖSTENBERGER, O’BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 57; emphasis mine; also *ibidem*, 64-65). “It is my assessment that Jewish proselytizing activity was sporadic, and there was no concerted effort to convert Gentiles to Judaism on a wide scale” (BIRD, *Crossing Over Sea and Land*, 12). Cfr. S. MCKNIGHT, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1991, 102; L.H. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993, 298. Evans preferred to stay sitting on the fence: “How active Jews were in evangelization in late antiquity is very much an open question” (EVANS, *Matthew*, 393).

⁷⁵ “It appears that despite comprising ‘the only ancient source that explicitly ascribes a missionary policy to a Jewish group’, *Matt 23:15 does not demonstrate the existence of Jewish missionary activity*” (BIRD, *Crossing Over Sea and Land*, 70 [his citation was from S.J.D. COHEN, *Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?*, in M. MOR (ed.), *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation and Accommodation*, University Press of America, Lanham 1992, 14-23, 18]; emphasis mine). Cfr. also A.T. KRAABEL, R.S. MACLENNAN, *The God-fearers: A Literary and Theological Invention*, «Biblical Archaeology Review» 12 (1986) 53.

⁷⁶ Among the proponents of Jewish mission as the cause of an increase in the Jewish population in the ancient world, cfr. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 293, 555-556 (note 20) and ROSENBLUM, *Conversion to Judaism*, 35-39.

⁷⁷ “Apart from the fact that demographic estimates vary significantly, the data say nothing about the *cause(s)* for an increase in the Jewish population. A Jewish mission is merely one of several possible inferences [...] a certain amount of weight should be given to the lack of information concerning the names of any Jewish missionaries as well as concerning the mode and methods of Jewish outreach. If the Jews were in fact engaged in active evangelism, we know virtually nothing about who carried it out and how. While there is some evidence regarding conversions, it is

Both authors also consider that Jewish theological reasons counsel against the notion of organized missionary activity, referring to the inherent blessing of the nations all the way back from the Abramic promise as well as the inclusion of the nations in the OT prophecies, and that Jewish activity outside of Israel was mainly directed towards Jews.⁷⁸ Along these lines, from the biblical perspective it is also of note that in the *Tanakh* there is practically no 'apostolic/missionary mandate' to preach, teach and convert the gentiles as it exists later in the NT.⁷⁹ And there doesn't appear to be any tradition or chronicles among Jews to commemorate their 'missionaries' as Christians would commemorate and emulate theirs from all over the world (e.g. James, Paul, Thomas, Cyril and Methodius, Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface, Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Isaac Jogues, Jean de Brébeuf, etc.).

And from the archaeological perspective, Kraabel's work on several Diaspora synagogues⁸⁰ led him to this conclusion, which is difficult to refute: "There is nothing in the excavated buildings to suggest the presence of a kind of Gentile 'penumbra' around the Diaspora synagogue communities. *There is no hint in these data that these Jews are reaching toward their Gentile neighbors with any sort of religious message.* If interested Gentiles in some numbers had been an accepted part of Diaspora synagogue life, something should have shown up in the excavations. To this date, nothing has".⁸¹ Though archaeology is only one facet of the study, the scarcity of textual testimonies also corroborates this argument.

unclear whether such conversions were in fact the result of intentional missionary activity or not" (KÖSTENBERGER, O'BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 57-58).

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 67. Cfr. until p.68, as well as p.65 for further considerations. Feldman also pointed out that the principal reason for the LXX translation was not for proselytistic purposes, but for the use of the diaspora Jews (cfr. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 311-312). "Les *sheliabim/apostoloi* juifs n'étaient pas des *missionnaires* au sens que la mission chrétienne a fixé sur apostolos, mais au sens d'agents d'une *mission intérieure* de consolidation de l'orthodoxie et de l'orthopraxie des communautés lointaines, de sauvegarde de la cohésion judaïque de par le monde" (WILL, ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif?*, *Histoire d'une Erreur*, 122).

Cfr. also the discussion in ROSENBLOOM, *Conversion to Judaism*, 28-31.

⁷⁹ μαθητεύω (Mt 28:19; Acts 14:21) is not found in the LXX; διδάσκω and εὐαγγελίζω referring to teaching/evangelizing the gentiles (in the sense of Mt 28:20; Acts 11:20, 26; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 18:11, etc.) are not found in the LXX either. The only notable case is κηρύσσω (in the sense of Mt 24:14; 26:13; Mk 13:10; 14:9; 16:15) referring to Jonah's concrete case of preaching to Nineveh (Jon 1:2; 3:2, 4), and how later on Jesus uses the 'sign of Jonah' to refer to himself; aside from Jonah no one else in the OT was specifically instructed to preach to the gentiles, let alone preach *Judaism* to them.

⁸⁰ From the 1st cent. B.C.-4th cent. A.D., in the areas of Syria, Asia Minor, the Aegean Sea, Macedonia and Italy. The analysis also included over 100 inscriptions.

⁸¹ KRAABEL, *The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers'*, 117; emphasis mine.

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* is of a seemingly contrary opinion. The opening statement of the article on proselytes asserts that “there is ample evidence of a widespread conversion to Judaism during the period of the Second Temple, especially the latter part of the period...”⁸² But perhaps this mention of ‘especially the latter period’ implies that there is not much to mention regarding the earlier periods – which we are more concerned about, as the Second Temple’s history spans all the way to 70 A.D. (already after the context of Matthew’s gospel); in fact only the *first two and a half paragraphs* of the article cover the *Second Temple period all the way to the NT*, and the great majority of the article already refers to the era of published rabbinic literature and all the way to the 20th century. It would also be important to note that it is ‘widespread conversion’ that is asserted, and not that there was a ‘widespread Jewish missionary activity’.⁸³

As a closing note, a rather descriptive title of an Israeli news article in March 2018 might aptly express the current interest of this complex issue: “‘Jews Are Not Missionaries,’ Rabbis Attack Israeli Plan to Reach Out to Tens of Millions of ‘Potential Jews’”.⁸⁴

It is logical that these sources do not negate that Jews would at times go out of their way to bring people over to their religion, but what the sources tend to affirm almost unanimously is that such an activity *was not institutionally organized at any level*. If there were some sign of Jews going out of their way to convert people to Judaism (as seems to be in Mt 23:15), it would be rather due to individual initiative and circumstances.

We try to relate this to our object of study: since the Pharisees are a subset of first-century Judaism, to what extent do these findings apply to their case? We now try to move on to more specific studies regarding the Pharisees and their activity, to try and shed more light regarding their ‘search for one proselyte’ as we find in Mt 23:15.

⁸² Cfr. D.M. EICHHORN, *Proselytes*, in SKOLNIK, BERENBAUM (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16:587.

⁸³ Though it also did mention that “proselytism was widespread among the ordinary people” (*ibidem*), but with Mt 23:15 as the only example from the ancient period. It also cited Josephus’ description of the zeal that the inhabitants of Greek and barbarian cities of his time had for Judaism (cfr. *ibidem*, citing Contra Ap. 2.39 [2.40 in the English translations]), but this reference does not say anything about the zeal of ‘Jewish missionaries’.

⁸⁴ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/jews-are-not-missionaries-israeli-rabbis-slam-outreach-to-non-jews-1.5956472>, consulted on 30 January 2019, at 18:40 (UTC+01:00); the related articles might also be worth looking into.

III. SURVEY AND EVALUATION OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION ON PHARISEES AND MEMBERSHIP

This specific slant in the research topic made us aware of this difficulty: though there are many sources that deal separately with the topics of Pharisees and Jewish missionary activity, there are very few concrete studies that tackle the combination of these two concepts, to address the issue of “the Pharisees’ search for proselytes”. And as the Bible does not mention further details regarding their missionary activity, we are obliged to look straight to extra-biblical sources.

Unfortunately, there are very few affirmations regarding this activity of the Pharisees; Talbert asserts that “there was also a strong proselytizing movement in Pharisaic Judaism to win Gentiles to Judaism in antiquity, an impetus largely lacking in the modern heirs of the Pharisees”.⁸⁵ However, with the results from the previous section it would seem that this ‘lack of impetus’ was there from the very beginning.⁸⁶ At least, what we can gather from Talbert’s statement is that the term he used was ‘winning Gentiles to *Judaism*’, without any sort of specifier (while he specified that such a movement was present in *Pharisaic Judaism*).⁸⁷

Regarding Pharisaic missionary activity within the wider scope of Jewish missionary activity, some have made further proposals regarding the meaning of ‘proselyte’ in the context of Mt 23:15. Levinskaya –in agreement with Goodman– proposes a sort of ‘second non-technical sense’ *prosēlutos* in this verse,⁸⁸ referring not to a sojourner, but one who is already a Jew (whether foreigner or not)

⁸⁵ C.H. TALBERT, *Paul on the Covenant*, «Review and Expositor» 84 (1987) 308. Cfr. also B.Z. BOKSER, *Witness and Mission in Judaism*, in H.B. CRONER, L. KLENICKI (eds.), *Issues in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jewish Perspectives on Covenant, Mission and Witness*, Paulist Press, New York 1979, 95-97.

⁸⁶ There is also no specification of *when exactly* is this ‘antiquity’ which Talbert refers to, because from the point of view of the 20th-21st centuries, the years *before* and *slightly after* the beginnings of the Christian era are both ‘antiquity’, and yet these two eras definitely mark a dividing point especially in determining the roots of ‘strong proselytizing movement in Pharisaic Judaism’ (as Talbert put it), if there ever was.

⁸⁷ If with the simple term ‘Judaism’ he was referring to Pharisaic or even Rabbinic Judaism without clarification, it would then be biased. Besides, it is also unsure how ‘Pharisaic Judaism’ should be understood as the ‘Pharisees’ that we are attempting to study here. Regarding the purported links between Pharisees and rabbis, Goodman prudently warns: “Rabbinic Judaism had some connection to Pharisaism, but modern ignorance of the latter precludes too accurate a description of the relationship” (GOODMAN, *Mission and Conversion*, 109); cfr. also A.Y. REED, *When did Rabbis become Pharisees?*, in R.S. BOUSTAN, K. HERRMANN, R. LEICHT, A. RAMOS, P. SCHAFER, G. VELTRI, A.Y. REED (eds.), *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, II, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2013, 860-861.

⁸⁸ Summing up, there would be one ‘technical’ meaning and two ‘non-technical’, which makes three: we recall Overman opining that there were “at least two different understandings of the

whom the Pharisees would want to bring over to their side,⁸⁹ perhaps more specifically the *ʿam hāʾāreṣ*, Jews who do not belong to any specific affiliation within Judaism.⁹⁰ In Goodman’s terms, this second non-technical sense to *prosēlutos* as applied to Pharisees in their rapport with fellow Jews can be described thus: “It is reasonable to suppose that they might wish as many Jews as possible to ‘become Pharisees’, although precisely how such a conversion would be marked (other than by the self-description of the convert) is unclear”.⁹¹

Our appraisal is that all of this is overly specific to Mt 23:15, and as there are no other ancient sources that corroborate such an interpretation, the argument is difficult to support, thus remaining at the conjectural level.

It is difficult to define and describe the Pharisees’ search for ‘their’ proselytes. Matthew only describes ‘crossing over sea and land’.⁹² Apparently, neither is there any clear extra-biblical record of the process in which one becomes a Pharisee, or how the Pharisees gained new followers. Flavius Josephus, contemporary of the NT writings, does not touch on this topic. Neusner, in his appraisal of rabbinic sources, notes that “a wide range of issues important in the traditions concerning other groups, and of other groups concerning the Pharisees, is either entirely absent or strikingly subordinated in the rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees. Questions to which we find *no answers in the rabbinic materials* include the following: ... *What was the inner institutional structure of the Pharisaic party?*

term προσήλυτος operative at the time of Luke and Matthew” (OVERMAN, *The God-fearers*, 20), which makes more sense with this additional proposal.

⁸⁹ Jewish scholars have also commented similarly regarding Matt 23:15, “Here the concern is Pharisees attempting to convince other Jews to follow their teaching” (A-J. LEVINE, M.Z. BRETTLER (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017² [henceforth cited as JANT], 53).

⁹⁰ Not excluding the possibility of gentiles; cfr. BIRD, *Crossing Over Sea and Land*, 68. For Levinskaya’s arguments, cfr. I. LEVINSKAYA, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1996, 38-39. Köstenberger and O’Brien also concur (cfr. KÖSTENBERGER, O’BRIEN, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 64).

⁹¹ GOODMAN, *Mission and Conversion*, 71. It is to note that Goodman observes that there is very little information regarding *exactly how* (and even *from whom*) Pharisees gained new members for their group.

⁹² The hendiadys ‘*thalassa + xēra*’ is also found in 1Macc 8:23, 32; Jon 1:9; Hag 2:6, 21, mainly to indicate the totality of places. “The pair of opposites inspired by Gn 1, θάλασσα/ξηρά, is not Greek but biblical” (LUZ, *Matthew*, 117, note 40). Regarding its context in Mt 23:15, “the readers would have been aware of the rhetorical exaggeration and thus will also have understood the biblical expression ‘sea and land’ as a rhetorically heightened image for an enormous effort. Thus what is meant is: ‘they move heaven and earth’ for the sake of a single proselyte” (*ibidem*, note 45).

How were people admitted and expelled?"⁹³ Schiffman, after studying the DSS regarding the Pharisees and their traditions, was not able to derive information regarding Pharisee membership.⁹⁴

It thus appears that from this concrete point of view in our study, we are unfortunately left in the dark. It is also agreed to that the study of the ancient sources available regarding the Pharisees (Josephus, NT, rabbinic literature and DSS) is not exempt of difficulties regarding the precision and extent of the information they provide.⁹⁵ We may very well submit to what Cook concluded, as a stark reassessment of the *status quaestionis*; even from the point of view of his study (of which ours is a subset) he had to conclude: "The recognition that these obstacles exist may serve as a valuable methodological corrective to many of the earlier studies on this problem. The inferences drawn may prove frustrating; I also find them sobering and justified. *The truth of the matter may be that we*

⁹³ Cfr. J. NEUSNER, *Two Pictures of the Pharisees: Philosophical Circle or Eating Club*, «Anglican Theological Review» 64 (1982) 531; emphasis mine. Regarding the information found in rabbinic literature, an earlier comprehensive study by Neusner also emphasizes: "The focus of interest of the rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees is the internal affairs of the Pharisaic party itself... In all, the traditions give the impression of intense concentration on the inner life of the party" (cfr. NEUSNER, *The Rabbinic Traditions*, 3:240, 248), meaning that not even these sources could shed light on details regarding those who are still 'outside' and want to form part of the Pharisees' group.

⁹⁴ At least there was some glimmer of hope in his introductory statements: "Indeed, we will see that elements of the picture of the Pharisees that emerges from Josephus, the New Testament and rabbinic sources are confirmed by evidence in the scrolls, and new information is being learned as well" (L.H. SCHIFFMAN, *The Pharisees and Their Legal Traditions According to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, «Dead Sea Discoveries» 8 [2001] 262).

⁹⁵ Cfr., e.g., COOK, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 449-454; E. REGEV, *The Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Sacred: Meaning and Ideology in the Halakhic Controversies Between the Sadducees and Pharisees*, «The Review of Rabbinic Judaism» 9 (2006) 126-127; D. LÜHRMANN, *Paul and the Pharisaic Tradition*, «Journal for the Study of the New Testament» 36 (1989) 76; RIVKIN, *Defining the Pharisees*, 205. "Rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees are cited as though we knew how they were shaped and handed on, to what degree they may be relied upon for accurate historical information, where and when they were given the form in which we now have them. But *we do not have that information*" (cfr. NEUSNER, *The Rabbinic Traditions*, 1:1; emphasis mine). "We *cannot* recover from the rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees a considerable amount of information on the historical Pharisees and their place in Jewish Palestine" (*ibidem*, 3:248; emphasis mine). "Because we have no surviving text written by a committed Pharisee and no archaeological finds that mention Pharisees, the reconstruction of their aims and views must depend on the writings of the third parties mentioned. Because none of these outsiders was primarily interested in explaining who the Pharisees were, we must be careful to interpret their evidence against their motives and larger contexts" (S. MASON, *Pharisees*, in C.A. EVANS, S.E. PORTER [eds.], *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2000, 783).

cannot know the truth of the matter”.⁹⁶ Sievers, in a study more recent than that of Cook, also had to tersely declare: “After two decades of research, there is at least one assured result: *we know considerably less about the Pharisees than an earlier generation ‘knew’*”.⁹⁷ Neither was the article on Pharisees in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*⁹⁸ able to provide any further information to our inquiry.

IV. SYNTHESIS AND EVALUATION

The first part of the study (on the term *prosēlutos*) proposes that in both the LXX and the NT it would principally mean ‘sojourner’ among Israelites. Not all *prosēlutoi* are converts; the mere presence of the term *prosēlutos* does not warrant its translation to ‘gentile convert to Judaism’, and the additional status of ‘convert’ is determined by further context. The very few mentions of *prosēlutos* in the NT refer only to the context of gentile converts; but in the LXX, which mentions *prosēlutos* many more times, this is not the most represented context.⁹⁹ Insistence in taking *prosēlutos* in the NT/LXX to mainly mean ‘gentile convert to Judaism’ would be anachronistic.

The results from the second part of the study (on Jewish missionary activity) seem to point out that there is no convincing historical basis for such an activity¹⁰⁰ before the spread of Christianity; this only corroborates the scarcity of information regarding *Pharisaic* missionary activity, highlighting that even *general* information regarding the Pharisees is scarce.

This could also mean that missionary activity would be more originally Christian (therefore advising caution in ‘projecting’ the Christian *modus operandi* on Judaism), and the notion of ‘proselytism’ –perhaps especially in its negative sense– would already be of post-biblical origin, having little to do with *prosēlutos* either in the LXX or NT; nowhere is it said nor implied in the LXX/NT that the converted proselytes were won over by deliberate, organized and insistent

⁹⁶ COOK, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 458; emphasis mine.

⁹⁷ J. SIEVERS, *Who Were the Pharisees?*, in J.W. CHARLESWORTH, L.L. JOHNS (eds.), *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1997, 138; emphasis mine. Cfr. also the concurrent statements by Grabbe (cfr. L.L. GRABBE, *Sadducees and Pharisees*, in J. NEUSNER and A.J. AVERY-PECK [eds.], *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, II, Brill, Leiden 2001, 35, 55, 59).

⁹⁸ D. SOLOMON, *Pharisees*, in SKOLNIK, BERENBAUM (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16:30-32.

⁹⁹ What is rather being mainly described is the basic socio-cultural coexistence of these sojourners within the Jewish community.

¹⁰⁰ According to the definition proposed in the corresponding section.

zealous activity, and neither do we find in the NT that converts to *Christianity* were called proselytes.¹⁰¹

And finally, regarding the verse being studied: judging by the results, a more rhetorical hermeneutic would be suggested for Mt 23:15. However, it is important to note that the interpretation of 'travelling by sea and land' as hyperbole is not some form of scapegoat for insisting on the absence of a so-called 'proselytistic zeal of the Pharisees'. Despite having several main sources and numerous studies on the Pharisees, none have ever talked about their 'proselytism' in enough detail: rather, *there are no details at all*. This is no longer the typical argument from silence because this is a notable absence in *all* the studies,¹⁰² which leads to think that this aspect of the Pharisees' life and practice probably never existed as something institutional.¹⁰³ 'Travelling by sea and land' might be more of a rhetorical device to bring a message more convincingly across: the focus is not on describing organizational traditions or practices, but stressing the importance of evaluating interior motives and their consequences.

Luz's comment regarding the rhetorical/figurative understanding of 'crossing sea and land' helps us understand better this recent proposal by Simmonds regarding Mt 23, providing an interesting insight. Near the end of his article, Simmonds stated: "The traditional interpretation that the Matthean woes are an embarrassing overdose of hateful invective reflects a lack of appreciation for rhetorical methods of the first century and the culture in which Jesus lived and taught".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Understanding Nicholas' case in Acts: he was called proselyte not because of his new status as a Christian, but because of his previous ties with the Jewish community.

¹⁰² Feldman argued that the silence in the ancient sources could be due to a need to 'lay low', so as not to call the attention of the more powerful authorities (cfr. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 437-438). This seems untenable, since the repeated Jewish revolts in the past are a historical confirmation that the Jews do not care to 'lay low' when it comes to defending their values, culture, and faith.

¹⁰³ And not even generally national: "il n'attribue pas l'intention *missionnaire* à Israël en général, mais aux *scribes et pharisiens*, c'est-à-dire à un groupe distinct" (WILL and ORRIEUX, *Prosélytisme Juif?*, *Histoire d'une Erreur*, 116).

¹⁰⁴ SIMMONDS, A.R., *Woe to You ... Hypocrites! Re-reading Matthew 23:13-36*, «*Bibliotheca Sacra*» 166 (2009) 346. "Jesus' seemingly extraordinarily harsh vituperation is 'from a society in which controversy was not viewed as negative and hostile but as didactic and as an art form'. And saying that Jesus was just doing what others in the Greco-Roman world did is insufficient. The woes are a much more narrow set than Greco-Roman or Jewish invective generally. Jesus was the unrivalled master of verbal duels, whose extraordinary prowess against the best competition demonstrated that He is indeed the Messiah" (*ibidem*, 347). Swidler, in discussing the Memorandum issued by the Christian-Jewish Coordinating Committee of Vienna in 1968, highlighted this point, among others: "Polemic is a literary genre. We can correctly interpret the harsh anti-Jewish passages in the New Testament only when we understand their literary style. Our reasoning would cease to be within the meaning of the Scriptures, were we to see such statements as having

It is interesting how he then sees the Pharisees from this perspective: “At the same time the objects of this rhetorical invective are to be considered literarily. The Pharisees’ role is as the foil for Jesus’ unmatched rhetorical skills. They earned this role because they were known as otherwise unmatched rhetoricians, because of their merits, not because of their faults. Much as in a prize fight or any other competition, they were there because they were the most *worthy* opponents against which Jesus demonstrated His vocal pugilistic skills”.¹⁰⁵

Seen in this way, it would be easier to understand that the invectives against the Pharisees –and the description and negative evaluation of their activities– in Mt 23 could not possibly be directed to the *entire* group of the Pharisees *ipso facto*,¹⁰⁶ as if the mere fact of being a Pharisee is already ‘a ticket to Gehenna’.¹⁰⁷ There are many positive points to be said regarding the Pharisees,¹⁰⁸ and the fact that the Pharisees in Jesus’ time have been comfortably present in Jewish society –only goes to show that Pharisaism *per se* does not contain such intrinsic roots of hypocrisy so as to deserve condemnation *en masse*. Otherwise, the Jews themselves should have done away with the Pharisees –deriding them for their ‘conventional hairsplitting’ and hypocrisy, treating them at least at the same level as ‘publicans and sinners’– well before Matthew did.

From these considerations we are further led to think that the concrete case of Mt 23:15 would be better understood from the moral-theological rather than the

absolute value instead of setting them against the polemical situation in which they were uttered” (SWIDLER, *The Pharisees in Recent Catholic Writing*, 275). Cfr. also L.T. JOHNSON, *The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 108 (1989) 419-442.

¹⁰⁵ SIMMONDS, A.R., Woe to You ... Hypocrites! *Re-reading Matthew 23:13–36*, 348.

¹⁰⁶ Sievers also wanted to ensure these lines of prudence in the treatment of the Pharisees in his research: “Although a prosopographical approach can teach us a little about Pharisaic teaching and observance, we do get glimpses not of *the* Pharisees but of *some* Pharisees” (SIEVERS, *Who Were the Pharisees?*, 154).

¹⁰⁷ Although the JANT did understand similarly: “for Matthew, to follow Pharisees is to be damned” (cfr. JANT, 53). The respect of the Jewish authors is noteworthy in saying ‘Matthew’ and not ‘Jesus’. Feldman also noted something similar: “The passage in Matthew may well be tendentious and, because it is not found in other gospels, may reflect his special interests” (FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 298).

¹⁰⁸ A deeper discussion of this topic already brings us away from our object of study. Nevertheless, cfr., e.g., L.M. ABRAMI, *Were all the Pharisees hypocrites?*, «Journal of Ecumenical Studies» 47 (2012) 430-431, 434; J.T. CARROLL, *Luke’s Portrayal of the Pharisees*, «Catholic Biblical Quarterly» 50 (1988) 606; COOK, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 454; A. RUNESSON, *Behind the Gospel of Matthew: Radical Pharisees in Post-war Galilee?*, «Currents in Theology and Mission» 37 (2010) 468; L. SWIDLER, *The Pharisees in Recent Catholic Writing*, «Horizons» 10 (1983) 267-287 (the entire article); RABBINOWITZ, *Matthew 23:2–4*, 447; R.C. TANNEHILL, *Should We Love Simon the Pharisee? Hermeneutical Reflections on the Pharisees in Luke*, «Currents in Theology and Mission» 21 (1994) 424-433 (the entire article).

historical-cultural perspective, i.e., that it has a rhetorical, argumentative focus regarding right principles of religious activity rather than a 'historical report of institutional/organized practice among Pharisees'. The Pharisees as an 'institution' might probably not have organized missionary activity, but that would not hinder *some* Pharisees from looking for disciples/converts, spurred by personal initiative for whichever motive (and it is the *hypocritical* motive that Mt 23:15 warns us about).

In any case it would be imprecise to think that the Pharisees *per se* were historically a religious and cultural menace; it would be more reasonable, on the other hand, to consider the *real evils of hypocrisy*: into which *some* Pharisees had fallen into, even as *some* of the early Christians¹⁰⁹ (and unfortunately it remains a formidable threat even today). And so, some Pharisees in Matthew's time might have had that commendable zeal to go far and wide to win people over to Judaism (or perhaps Pharisaism, more specifically); but if they instill in these people a hypocritical and shallow understanding of fulfilling God's commandments, then they are in fact leading these people away from God whom they claim to worship: quite a tragic and 'worse than futile' end for such a noteworthy personal effort.¹¹⁰

The proposal above is simply a sufficiently grounded possibility, as providing a 'definitive answer' to our inquiry would be too ambitious and was not the main goal to begin with. The main goal is rather this: With an updated survey and evaluation of available sources in the recent years, it is our hope that the results gathered would provide further awareness regarding the complexity of the issues underlying the single verse which is Mt 23:15. At the very least, we can better understand that a balanced interpretation of this text is not as easy and obvious as one could first suppose.

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to reassess some issues involved in the interpretation of Mt 23:15, first by focusing on the biblical connotations involved in the use of the term 'proselyte', and then by evaluating presently available sources regarding the Pharisees' supposed search for proselytes with respect to the wider context of Jewish missionary activity and the spread of Christianity.

¹⁰⁹ For example, Ananias and his wife (cfr. Acts 5:1-11) as a case in point.

¹¹⁰ Or, as Will and Orrieux asserted, after a syntactical analysis of Mt 23:15, "Ce n'est pas parce qu'ils font du prosélytisme que les scribes et les pharisiens encouront la malédiction, mais parce qu'ils font des prosélytes des fils de la géhenne" (WILL, ORRIEUX, Prosélytisme Juif ? *Histoire d'une erreur*, 131).