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## Carman Palmer: Converts in the Dead Sea Scroll and Mutable Ethnicity [Book review]

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## Book review of Carmen Palmer, *Converts in the Dead Sea Scrolls*

Jutta Jokiranta

This is a revised dissertation, exploring the meaning of the *ger* in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The starting point is the observation that the *ger* changes at some point its meaning from “resident alien” in the Hebrew Bible to “Gentile convert to Judaism” in rabbinic texts, and the author wishes to explore when this happens and if the Scrolls can shed light on this change. The Introduction sets up the context and provides research history on the *ger* both in the biblical material and in the Scrolls. It also includes theoretical discussion on ethnicity and conversion and explains methodology. Chapter 2 goes through all the Scrolls attestations of the term *ger* by discussing the readings and reconstructions of the texts and the provenance and dating of each text. The texts are presented in four categories: texts that influence D and S traditions, texts correlated to D tradition, texts correlated to S tradition, and texts that cannot certainly be aligned with either D or S tradition. Chapter 3 discusses the same texts again but now more from the content perspective, investigating what kind of rewriting has occurred in the source texts in comparison to earlier traditions. Chapter 4 approaches the question of the *ger* from three perspectives that the author identifies as significant for ethnic membership: kinship, connection to land, and practice, especially that of circumcision. Chapter 5 compares the sectarian movement to Greco-Roman associations.

The study can be complemented for many things. It is up to date on recent scholarship and does not fall into the trap of trying to solve all issues at once. For example, the author goes around the question of the Essene hypothesis and provides an apt characterization of the relevant questions concerning sectarianism. Palmer seeks to accomplish a structured understanding of the changes in the textual evidence by carefully considering the dating issues and possibilities of identifying provenances, and while this may be uncertain and typologies of paleography are being re-evaluated, many texts can still be relatively positioned with each other. The author also discusses each attestation of the term *ger* and not only the sectarian cases, which provides a firm ground to evaluate the full range of meanings. Rather than conceptualizing the issue from the conversion perspective (end-result), the author frames the investigation as that of ethnicity, which allows for a more apt model for this time period and more flexibility in terms of possibilities that change over time.

Instead of investigating the *ger* in terms of degrees of integration into the ethnic category, Palmer insists on using the language of conversion: a person can “convert” to another ethnic group. Conversion is defined as “a change in features that enables a change in membership between ethnic communities,” and ethnicity is “more than notions of kinship, connection to land, or religious practice alone” (4). These starting points are important to understand. The language of conversion for a change in ethnic affiliation seems to me unnecessary and confusing, but others may find it useful for challenging the way we think. However, “conversion” of ancestry stretches the definition in a wrong direction: yes admittedly, a person can become a member of another ethnic group by identifying with that group’s myths, history and customs, but one cannot change one’s own pedigree to be other than what it is (the question of the future offspring is another question as well as change of legal status in marriage or through adoption). For Palmer, “descent,” “ancestry” and “kinship” are all permeable features: a Gentile can convert and change one’s ancestry. Many other scholars would call the process in which one identifies with another ethnic group as adopting *fictive* kinship or ancestry but Palmer rejects this terminology (164–65). If a person adopts the *myth* of common ancestry/descent/kinship, he or she may be integrated by claiming a common remote ancestor, but this to me is another thing than changing ancestry. Nevertheless, I do agree that ancestry/kinship is not *the* defining feature of ethnicity—but there is also evidence that some people in antiquity thought otherwise (cf. Christine H. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*. Oxford: OUP, 2002).

Palmer's main argument is that the Scrolls understand the term *ger* to mean a convert (in the sense that Palmer defines it) and not a resident alien. This argument lies heavily on how Palmer understands both concepts; she seems to understand "resident alien" as equal to "Gentile" (e.g., p. 104). I think the category of *ger*, on the basis of its use in the Hebrew Bible, is not the same as an outside foreigner but rather a needed intermediate category—someone who is known not to be a native Israelite (even though he or she could be born in the land) but yet mostly or partly integrated in the life and practices of the Israelites. Naturally, if *ger* equals "Gentile," then the *ger* cannot be integrated. But if *ger* as "resident alien" is different from "Israelite" and from "Gentile," then *ger* can be partially integrated.

Even though Palmer refers to theories by Charlotte Hempel and others who complicate the neat division between "D" and "S" traditions, she still uses these categories as if they represent homogeneous distinct manuscript categories and connects other manuscripts under them. In her view, in the D tradition, the *ger* is always accepted but in the S tradition rejected, and thus S denied their "supra-Judean" ethnicity from Gentiles. There are many steps in this argument that would deserve to be discussed and evaluated in detail. As an example, one complication that can be suggested is the verb לִוֶּה that Palmer discusses in connection to Peshar Nahum (117–19) and comes to the conclusion that the verb points towards conversion. Yet in 1QS 5:6 where the same verb appears when the members atone for "all those in Aaron who volunteer for holiness and for those in Israel who belong to truth" and וְהַגְּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם לִיְחָד, "those who join them to the yahad," she does not discuss the possibility that this terminology refers to the *ger*, but rather takes this expression of joining as evidence that the members of the S tradition saw *themselves* as "converts to supra-Judaism" (153). However, the sentence as a whole, not only the verb לִוֶּה, suggests that the members (including those in Aaron and Israel) formed a special group within wider Israelite community. Also, some conclusions seem to be hasty. If in 4Q307 the passage on the *ger* resembles Ezra 1:4 on the Israelite, should we draw the conclusion that the *ger* of 4Q307 is an Israelite (122–23)? Should we in general rather think in terms of multiple or layered identities where one person could actually belong to many categories at the same time ("multiple ethnicity" is mentioned on page 195 but was not fully employed elsewhere)? Do the *gerim* who together with (presumably Judean) women enter the third courtyard in the Temple Scroll represent "Judean kin" (132), or rather something in between, a group who joins the ethnic Judean group's worship, although of different kin?

Palmer's argument that the S tradition has a primordial understanding of (supra-Judean) ethnicity (one can only be born to the ethnic group, not convert to it) and thus it denied access for the *ger* could be challenged if we could show that the S tradition did include the *ger* (even without explicit terminology), or if we could show that the S tradition did not have a primordial understanding but rather a constructivist understanding of ethnicity where ancestry is just one dimension and other dimensions are equally important; one can become integrated in ethnicity through other dimensions (such as joining the covenant and following the rules). Neither can be conclusively proven but to me these possibilities remain as alternative ways to interpret the evidence.

All in all, the work brings forward an important attempt to identify multiple voices and nuances in the ways ethnicity is conceptualized in the Late Second Temple Judaism when changes definitely were taking place; such discussion is relevant also for the study of early Jesus movement and Pauline communities and invites further collaboration between different fields.