

We are the God-Fearers

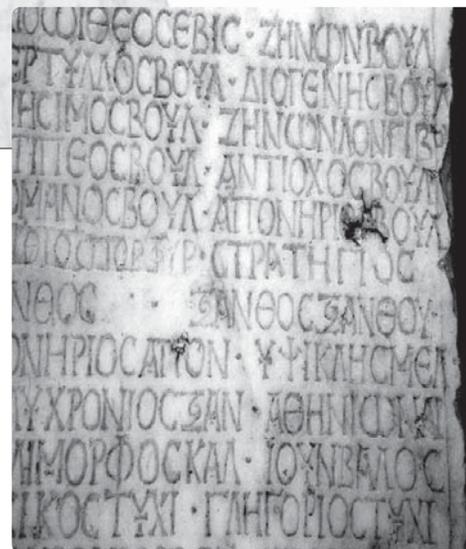
So Peter opened his mouth and said,
“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him and
does what is right is acceptable to him.”

(Acts 10:34–35)

BY TOBY JANICKI

By the first century CE, Israel’s religious life was in full swing. The rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem shone in all its glory, and the Jewish people thrived, both in their homeland and abroad in the Diaspora. Despite Judea’s issues with the Romans (in particular the government), the Judaism of the late Second Temple period attracted many Gentiles who wished to join themselves to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Torah worldview influenced Gentiles in Judea as well as in much of the Diaspora where Judaism became increasingly in vogue. Many Gentiles chose to go through full ritual conversion to Judaism, yet many more wished to take on monotheism in association with the Jewish people without becoming full proselytes. Those who underwent full conversion attained a legal status as Jews. Those who did not become full proselytes still worshipped and fellowshiped with the Jewish community, but they did not enjoy Jewish status, privilege, or responsibility.

First-century Judaism referred to this latter type of semi-converted Gentiles as “God-fearers” (*Yirei HaShem*, יראי השם or *Yirei Shamayim*, יראי שמים). While not a technical term per se, it referred to “non-Jews who adopted certain Jewish practices without actually converting to Judaism;”¹ in essence it was “an umbrella term for Gentiles with varied interests in Judaism.”² The Jewish community expected these God-fearers to hold themselves to the moral Noahide³ laws of the Torah, but many observed additional commandments of Torah on different levels. For example, to various extents, God-fearers kept the Sabbath, the festivals, and the dietary laws. Some even underwent circumcision, particularly in the second generation.⁴ Through their observance of the Torah they expressed their love for the God of Israel.



Synagogue inscription from the Roman city of Aphrodisias containing a list of donors. Jews and so-called “God-fearers” are listed separately.

Some scholars estimate that millions of Gentiles became God-fearers in the first-century Roman world. This group of people can give us a window into the earliest Gentile followers of Yeshua.

They [God-fearers] are Gentiles who have repudiated idolatry and attached themselves to the God of Israel.

The Psalms

While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the relationship of Gentiles to Israel throughout the Tanak, it would behoove us to examine a particular designation for Gentiles in the Psalms that may have provided the basis for the God-fearer status; there we find evidence of the existence of non-Jews worshipping among Israel. Several passages divide up God's people into three categories: Israel, the house of Aaron, and "those who fear the LORD" (*yirei HaShem*).

1. Let **Israel** say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
 2. Let **the house of Aaron** say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
 3. Let **those who fear the LORD** say, "His steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 118:2-4)
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1. O **Israel**, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.
 2. O **house of Aaron**, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.
 3. You **who fear the LORD**, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.

1. He will bless **the house of Israel**;
2. He will bless **the house of Aaron**;
3. He will bless **those who fear the LORD**, both the small and the great. (Psalm 115:9-13)

Some Psalms contain the additional category of the house of Levi:

1. O **house of Israel**, bless the LORD!
- 2a. O **house of Aaron**, bless the LORD!
- 2b. O **house of Levi**, bless the LORD!
3. You **who fear the LORD**, bless the LORD! (Psalm 135:19-20)

The third category, "those who fear the LORD" allude to Gentiles worshipping in the midst of the people of Israel who had joined themselves to the Jewish people, yet retained their identity as being from the nations.⁵ If so, the first-century, God-fearer phenomena has its roots all the way back in the First Temple period.

Ancient Evidence

Writings from the first five centuries CE provide a plethora of literary evidence for the existence of the God-fearers as a recognizable class within Judaism.⁶ They are mentioned by name in rabbinic literature.⁷ For example, in the midrash we read that in the days of Messiah, the people of Israel will identify themselves as members of the nation belonging to the LORD. One will say "I am the LORD's"; another will "call on the name of Jacob"; another will inscribe a sign on his hand saying, "Belonging to the LORD"; and another will "name Israel's name." The sages saw these as four types of people who comprise the eschatological people of God: the righteous, the proselyte, the penitent, and the God-fearer.

Four types of pious ones stand before the Almighty; as it says [in Isaiah 44:5], "One will say, 'I am the LORD's.'" This nation will say,

“I am the LORD’s.” He belongs completely to the Almighty, and has no sinful ways in him. “One will call on the name of Jacob.” This refers to the righteous proselyte [i.e., convert]. “Another shall write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD.’” This refers to the penitents. One “will name Israel’s name with honor.” This refers to the God-fearers [Gentiles]. (Numbers Rabbah 8:2)

According to the midrash, the fourth category of “pious ones” is the God-fearers. They are Gentiles who have repudiated idolatry and attached themselves to the God of Israel. They “name Israel’s name with honor,” a phrase better translated as “name himself by the name of Israel” (Isaiah 44:5, ESV). The God-fearers name themselves by the name of Israel. They are not legally named Israel by the Jewish authorities, but they voluntarily adopt identity within the people without undergoing legal conversion.

Several other examples could be cited. The sages referred to both the Gentile king Lemuel’s father (from the book of Proverbs) and a senator of the Roman emperor as God-fearers.⁸ In another passage in the midrash, the sages ask what merit spares the wicked coastal cities like Antioch, Gaza, and Ashkelon from total destruction. The rabbis believed that HaShem spares such cities from annihilation for the sake of the righteous Gentile God-fearers therein.

Yet for whose sake do they stand? For the sake of one nation and one God-fearing person whom the Holy One, blessed be He, receives from their hands. (Genesis Rabbah 28:5)

The God-fearers even made secular histories. The historian Josephus speaks of “a great many of the Greeks” who are attracted to Judaism in Antioch and in turn join in with Israel.⁹ Epictetus the philosopher (first century AD)

asks the question of certain Gentiles: “Why do you act the part of a Jew when you are a Greek?”¹⁰ He is referring to the God-fearers who are not fully recognized as Jews yet behave and worship like them. Juvenal the Roman poet speaks scathingly of Gentiles who take on Jewish practices:

Some who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine’s flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practice and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses committed to his secret tome, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life. (Juvenal, Satires 14)¹¹

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His description matches perfectly that of the God-fearing Gentile.

God-fearers even appear in ancient inscriptions. For example, a third-century CE inscription found in the Greek city of Aphrodisias contained a list of individuals who had contributed financially to a Jewish community building. The list included both Jews and a separate category of God-fearers (*theosebeis*, θεοσεβεις). Louis Feldman writes:

The thesebeis not only donate to a Jewish community charity, two of them are members of the Jewish association for, among other things, study and prayer, referred to in the introduction of the inscription. It is clear that the thesebeis are gentiles interested in the Jewish religion, and attached, however loosely, to the Jewish community. The word thesebeis is just another version of the "God-fearer." If that is true at Aphrodisias, it is probably true elsewhere, where thesebeis also contributed to Jewish causes ... some God-fearers in Aphrodisias studied the law; many elsewhere observed the Sabbath rest and other customs. The extent to which they obeyed Jewish law seems to have been up to the God-fearers themselves.¹²

Although the Gentile God-fearers have not been given the Torah in the same manner as the Jews, they nevertheless choose to obey it.

This inscription is evidence of the existence of God-fearers not only in Aphrodisias but in other locations as well. Based on this archeological find, Shlomo Pines speculates that "groups of 'God-fearers' were to be found in many countries within the Roman Empire and also beyond its frontiers."¹³ As we shall see, the ubiquitous presence of the God-fearers throughout the Diaspora provided the perfect foundation for the spread of the Gospel among the non-Jewish nations.

The Apostolic Writings

Turning to the Apostolic Writings, in passages such as John 12:20, we find evidence of Gen-

tiles worshipping amongst Jews. Some speculate that Paul refers to God-fearers in Romans 2:14: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law." Although the Gentile God-fearers have not been given the Torah in the same manner as the Jews (i.e., they "do not have the law"), they nevertheless choose to obey it.

The book of Acts contains several clear references to God-fearers. They are referred to by the terms *phoboumenoi* ("those fearing," φοβούμενοι) and *sebomenoi ton theon* ("those reverencing God," σεβόμενοι τον θεον). The first instance occurs in Acts 10:

*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man **who feared God** with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God ... And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and **God-fearing man**, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation." (Acts 10:1-2, 22)*

Cornelius is referred to as a "man who fears God." Reading on, we see that he is "devout," gives alms, and prays at the liturgical times of prayer, which results in his being spoken well of by the Jewish people. No doubt this is only a small sampling of the Torah practices that Cornelius had chosen to take on. The language here suggests that while he had not attained legal-Jewish status, he is closely connected with the people of Israel.

Paul addresses the crowd in Acts 13:26 as "Men of Israel and you who fear God," indicating that he is speaking to both Jews and righteous Gentiles. The title "devout women" and the description of Lydia and Titius Justus as "worshipper[s] of God" have the same connotation as God-fearers.¹⁴

The book of Acts (and other literary evidence) makes it clear that the spread of the

gospel to non-Jews began first with the God-fearers. Pines write:

*The early Christian community was addressed chiefly, and perhaps solely, to these 'God-fearers', and that it had its first successes amongst them.*¹⁵

Because the God-fearing Gentiles were already oriented toward Israel and Judaism, the apostles found them to be the perfect soil in which to begin planting the seeds of Yeshua's message. Unlike the pagan world around them, the God-fearers were already familiar with the Torah and the Prophets, attended synagogue, and functioned within Jewish communities. It was but a small step for them to understand that salvation had come to the world through the Jewish Messiah. Pines points to further clues of the early impact of the gospel upon God-fearers:

*In Pahlavi, Sogdian, and New Persian, the meaning of one of the most popular designations for Christians is 'fearers'... The designation of the Christians by the name tarsākān [fearers] is, consequently, further proof of the strong connections which existed in the Iranian regions (and in the Eastern border-lands of the Roman Empire) between Christianity and of the [God-fearers].*¹⁶

Today, in certain parts of the Middle East, Christians are still known as "fearers," a vestige from the earliest days of Christianity when Gentile believers in Messiah were made up largely of God-fearers.

David Flusser believed it is this God-fearing status that the Jerusalem Council grants to the new Gentile converts in Messiah.¹⁷ Acts 15 looses Gentile believers from obligation to the full weight of the Torah and instead imposes upon them four essentials. As with the God-fearers' minimal adherence to the moral code of the Torah, the four stipulations served only

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as a starting point for Gentiles. The rest of the Torah and Scriptures remained open before them. Flusser states:

*The Noachide precepts were only seen as the minimal condition for Gentiles to be recognized as God-fearers. They were so understood by the God-fearers themselves, who were attracted by the Jewish way of life and accepted many Jewish commandments without becoming full proselytes. This was the attitude of many Christian God-fearers ... many of which wished to observe as many Jewish precepts as they could. It is evident that, while the leadership of the Mother Church decided to lay no burden upon the Gentile believers beyond the Noahide precepts (Acts 15:28–29; see Gal. 2:6), it did not object to their voluntarily observing more.*¹⁸

While many Gentiles would be eager to take on as much Torah as they could, the Apostles ruled against obligating the new Gentile believers to the entire yoke of the Torah. As God-fearers, the Gentiles were able to join in with Israel and participate on a level that still allowed them interaction with their fellow non-believing Gentile friends and relatives.

The Resurrection of the God-Fearer: Spiritual Proselyte

Many Gentile believers in Messiah are returning to the Jewish roots of Christianity and the practice of Torah today. We are resurrecting

the *Yirei Hashem*, the God-fearer of old. Some scholars today refer to God-fearers as “spiritual converts.” That label seems to fit perfectly into the Pauline language about one who is “a Jew is one inwardly” where “circumcision is a matter of the heart.”¹⁹ The ancient God-fearers were Gentiles who did not become legally Jewish but instead had a strong connection and respect for the Jewish people, so much so that they even took upon themselves an identity within the religion of Israel. The believing God-fearer today does the same through Messiah Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel.

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God-fearers were not compelled to keep the Jewish aspects of Torah such as circumcision or Sabbath by decree or law. They did so out of a sincere and intense love for God’s Torah and his ways. They saw the light of Israel and sought to draw themselves close to it, so that they might warm themselves in its glow. As Gentile believers today realize that Messiah has spiritually grafted them into the nation of Israel, they feel drawn to the Jewish people and desire to worship alongside God’s chosen as fellow-heirs of the covenants and promises. Just like the God-fearers of old, we too have cast our lot with Israel. 

Endnotes

- 1 Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 342. It could also be used to refer to Jews at times.
- 2 J. Brian Tucker, “God-Fearers: Literary Foil or Historical Reality in the Book of Acts,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 5:1 (January 2005): 21–39. According to Acts 11:43 it could even at times refer to full proselytes.

- 3 A Noahide is a Gentile who follows a practice in traditional Judaism whereby he is required to observe only seven universal commandments. These include six prohibitions: idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, sexual immorality, theft, and eating meat from a living creature, and the positive commandment to set up courts of justice.
- 4 Shlomo Pines, “The Iranian Name for Christians and the ‘God-Fearers,’” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 143–152.
- 5 Cf. Malachi 3:17 and the LXX version of 1 Chronicles 5:6 “those gathered about them.” See Andrew J. Overman, “The God-fearers: Some Neglected Features,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988): 17–26.
- 6 For a full survey of the literary and archaeological evidence for the God-fearers see Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 342–382, and Louis H. Feldman, “The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12:5 (Sept/Oct 1986): 58–69.
- 7 For a full treatment of God-fearers in rabbinic literature see Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine/ Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1994), 77–90, and Bernard J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1968), 133–140.
- 8 b.*Sanhedrin* 70b; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:24. Cf. y.*Megillah* 2:3.
- 9 Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 7:45. See also Ralph Marcus, “The *Sebomenoi* in Josephus,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14:3 (July 1952): 247–250.
- 10 Arrian, *Dissertationes* 2:19–21. See Feldman, “The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers,” 60.
- 11 The opinion that Juvenal refers to God-fearers is found in Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 347–348, and Louis H. Feldman, “The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers,” 61.
- 12 Robert Tannanbaum, “Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphroditia,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12:5 (Sept/Oct 1986): 54–57.
- 13 Pines, “The Iranian Name For Christians and the ‘God-Fearers,’” 148.
- 14 Acts 13:50, 16:14, 17:17.
- 15 Pines, “The Iranian Name For Christians and the ‘God-Fearers,’” 146–147.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 17 David Flusser, “Jewish-Christian Relations Past and Present,” *Immanuel* 5 (Summer 1975): 74–48.
- 18 David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), 630.
- 19 Romans 2:29.