

The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers

By Louis H. Feldman
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Reverend MacLennan and Dean Kraabel have performed a real service by questioning the view, so commonly held, that in antiquity there was a large class of gentiles, the so-called God-fearers, who stood somewhere between paganism and Judaism.¹

What we call God-fearers, as MacLennan and Kraabel recognize, actually refers to several Greek terms. In the Book of Acts we find *phoboumenoi* (“those fearing”) and *sebomenoi ton theon* (“those reverencing God”). Elsewhere in classical literature we find such terms as *theosebeis* (“God worshippers”) and *metuentes* (“those who fear”).

That such terms existed is undeniable. For convenience, we may refer collectively to these (and similar) terms as God-fearers.

The variety of terms used contemporaneously for this phenomenon—whatever it is—suggests that the terms are not technical terms—at least, they were not in the first century A.D. If the terms were technical, why would Luke change so abruptly from one to the other?² To this extent, I agree with MacLennan and Kraabel.

The next question is, to what did these terms refer? Did they refer to a group who stood somewhere between paganism and Judaism, so-called semiproselytes, who were sympathetic to Judaism, but who had not taken the final step of formal conversion (which, in the case of males, would include circumcision)?

The fact is that, at least in the first century A.D., these terms were not limited to the “sympathizers” I have described above. These terms also referred to Jews by birth or to full converts.³ This is clear from an inscription found at Miletus in Asia Minor, dating from Roman times, that speaks of the “place of the Jews who are also God-fearers.”⁴ (Acts itself [13:43] mentions “God-fearing proselytes.”) Similarly, at the beginning of the second century, people who are clearly Jewish, named Levi, Benjamin and Joseph, are called *theosebeis*, “God worshippers” in the pseudepigraphic work *Joseph and Asenath*.⁵

The fact that these terms do not necessarily imply the existence of a class or group of “sympathizers,” does not, however, mean that such a class or group did not exist.

The central question is not whether these terms are technical terms or whether they apply only to “half-way” Jews, but whether a significant group of “sympathizers” existed for whom early Christianity might have had a special appeal.

MacLennan and Kraabel are surely right when they declare that we must be cautious in utilizing Acts as a historical source, especially when conclusions from Acts are not independently supported by other evidence. They are likewise right in stating that the other evidence concerning “sympathizers” is almost always explained by scholars with reference to Acts.⁶

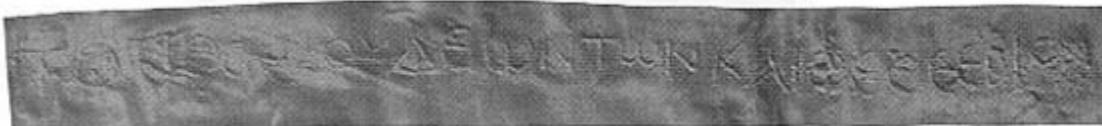
What I propose to do here is to examine this other evidence independently of Acts, to see whether it demonstrates the existence of a substantial group of “sympathizers” or semi-Jews. I believe, contrary to MacLennan and Kraabel, that the evidence does indicate the existence of such “sympathizers” in rather large numbers. Whether such people are called “God-fearers” or “sympathizers” or “semi-Jews” is relatively unimportant. The fact is they existed, and nontechnical terms for God-fearers were applied to them, as well as to natural born Jews and full proselytes.

The evidence is circumstantial, literary and epigraphic.

During the Hellenistic and early Roman period (323 B.C. to 70 A.D.), the Jews were apparently extraordinarily successful in winning converts. Natural increase alone can hardly account for the vast growth in Jewish population, since there is no evidence that the population of the world at large had increased significantly during this period or that health conditions had improved or that Jews had previously been practicing birth control. On the basis of Biblical and archaeological data, Salo Baron⁷ estimates that Judea, which contained the major part of the Jewish population at the time of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C., had no more than 150,000 Jews. By the middle of the first century A.D. he estimates⁸ that the world Jewish population had risen to about eight million. In the Roman empire, he suggests, every tenth inhabitant was a Jew. The most likely explanation of this increase is proselytism, as alluded to by numerous references in Philo, Josephus, the New Testament, Greek and Roman writers and the Talmud.⁹ One may cite as samples the statements that “We are much more numerous, and like the Jews we shall force you to join our throng” (Horace, *Satires* 1.4.142–143), and “The Holy One, blessed be He, sent Israel into exile among the nations only for the purpose of acquiring converts” (Talmud, *Pesahim* 87b).¹⁰

A proselytizing movement of such scope, if we may judge from parallel movements in the growth of Christianity and Islam, for example, would seem necessarily to imply the existence of intermediate classes of those at a half-way point or other sympathizers who tried to effect a syncretism of the old religion with the new one. Examples from earlier periods are to be found in the Bible itself. In [2 Kings 5:15–18](#) we learn about Naaman, a Syrian captain, who, despite his realization that there is no God but Israel’s, continues to bow down in the house of Rimmon with his master, the king of Syria.

Even in periods when Jews were not active missionaries, we hear about “Judaizers,” non-Jews who practiced some Jewish customs or observed some Jewish laws. This charge was made against Albigensians in the 12th century, against Hussites in the 15th century and against Protestants generally in the 16th century because they had adopted certain Jewish practices, such as abstention from certain foods or observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.



Hence, it would seem reasonable to assume on the basis of circumstantial evidence that there were half-way movements between Judaism and other religions 2,000 years ago. But there is other evidence as well. The circumstantial case is fully supported by references in pagan as well as Christian and Jewish literature.

In Plutarch’s life of Cicero¹¹ we hear of a freedman of the first century B.C. who was suspected of Judaizing (*Ioudaizein*). The accused man denounces Verres, the Roman governor, whereupon Cicero is said to have remarked, “What has a Jew to do with Verres?” (*Verres* means “pig,” a forbidden food for Jews.) The phrase “suspected of Judaizing” implies that the accused adhered to some but not all Jewish practices.¹²

In the first century A.D. we find several references to “sympathizers.” For example, Seneca,¹³ after deriding the Jews for their laziness in wasting one-seventh of their lives in idleness through the observance of the Sabbath, declares that “the custom of this most accursed race has gained such influence that it has now been received throughout the world,” presumably by non-Jews who are “sympathizers.” Seneca then adds that whereas “[the Jews] are aware of the origin and meaning of their rites the greater part of the people go through a ritual not knowing why they do so.” The contrast appears to be between those who are Jews in the full sense and non-Jews who adopt the Sabbath.¹⁴ Seneca seems to be attacking the spread of the Sabbath, which was precisely the one aspect of Judaism that was apparently most attractive to the “sympathizers.”

Contemporary with Seneca is a passage in the satirist Petronius¹⁵ declaring that “The Jew may worship his pig-god and clamor in the ears of high heaven, but unless he also cuts back his foreskin with a knife, he shall go forth from the people and emigrate to Greek cities, and shall not tremble at the fasts of Sabbath imposed by the law.” Petronius here distinguishes between those who go part way by observing the dietary laws and the worship of the God “of high heaven” and those who become complete Jews by undergoing circumcision and by observing the Sabbath according to the law. The implication of the phrase “he shall go forth from the people” is that he will not be accepted as a full Jew unless he accepts the entire law, including circumcision. A passage like this, coming from a satirist, has force only if the situation is one that is sufficiently common to be easily recognized by the reader.

Another passage that alludes to “sympathizers” is in Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher of the latter part of the first century A.D. and the early part of the second century.¹⁶ “Why,” asks the philosopher, “do you act the part of a Jew when you are a Greek?” Epictetus then adds: “Whenever we see a man halting between two faiths we are in the habit of saying, ‘He is not a Jew, he is only acting the part.’ But when he adopts the attitude of mind of the man who has been baptized and has made his choice, then he both is a Jew in fact and is called one.” The fact that Epictetus cites this as an example to illustrate a point in a popular exposition of philosophy would seem to indicate that he is describing a frequent occurrence, one which is actually proverbial, as his quotation of a saying indicates. He is clearly pointing out a contrast between the part-Jew and the full Jew, as seen by his adoption of the language of the stage (actors) in contrast to reality.

A similar distinction is implied in Suetonius, who, writing in the early second century,¹⁷ declares that two classes of people were persecuted by the Roman emperor Domitian (who reigned from 81 to 96 A.D.) for evasion of the special tax on Jews, namely those who lived as Jews without acknowledging that faith (*vel inprofessi Iudaicam vivenrunt vitam*) and those who concealed their origin. The first group cannot be Christians, as Menahem Stem has pointed out,¹⁸ since the Roman government was well aware of the difference between Jews and Christians from the time of Nero. Hence the first group would seem to refer to the “sympathizers” (who lived as Jews without acknowledging the faith), in contrast to those who acknowledged full adherence to Judaism.¹⁹

The most significant passage differentiating proselytes from “sympathizers” is to be found in the early second century A.D. satirist Juvenal:²⁰ “Some who have had a father who reveres (*metuentem*) 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.” Juvenal is here clearly speaking of a progression of observance: the first generation, that of the “sympathizers,” observes the Sabbath and the dietary laws, whereas the second generation becomes full-fledged Jews by undergoing circumcision and by disdaining the worship of idols. While it is true,²¹ that the term “revere” (*metuentem*) is not necessarily²² a technical term for “sympathizers” equivalent to the *phoboumenoi* and *sebomenoi ton theon* of Acts, the passage does differentiate between those who observe some practices of Judaism and those who are complete Jews. Moreover, the God-fearers must have been numerous if Roman satirists and popular philosophers could use them as examples, even if Juvenal may exaggerate. The cutting edge of satire, as Thomas Finn has remarked,²³ derives from the cutting edge of reality. Hence, the Sabbath-observing father can hardly be Juvenal’s invention and is surely not an isolated example.

What we find in pagan literature concerning the existence of “sympathizers” is confirmed in Jewish literature.

A clear allusion to “sympathizers” may be found in the work of the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Philo. Commenting on a passage in Exodus,²⁴ Philo says that the term “proselyte” does not refer to proselytes strictly speaking, inasmuch as the Jews did not practice circumcision in Egypt; consequently, he concludes, the proselyte who, according to these verses, is not to be wronged must be one who has not undergone circumcision. Such a proselyte, says Philo, is what we would term a “sympathizer,” since he has chosen to honor the one God. This type of proselyte corresponds to what the rabbis call a *ger toshab*, a semi-convert who

has embraced monotheism but not other commandments.²⁵ Perhaps other Alexandrian Jews might have considered such gentiles to be converts, but Philo insists that they are not.²⁶

A number of passages in the works of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus allude directly or indirectly to “sympathizers.” In his account of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–70 A.D.),²⁷ Josephus tells of the Jewish massacre of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, noting that the Roman Metilius alone saved his life through his promise to turn Jew (*Ioudaisein*) and even to be circumcised (*mechri peritones*). Josephus’s addition of “even to be circumcised” indicates that there is probably a distinction between “turning Jew” (i.e., Judaizing) and becoming a full Jew.

Likewise, commenting on the situation in Syria at the beginning of the war, Josephus remarks²⁸ that each city, though believing that it had rid itself of its Jews, still had its Judaizers (*Ioudaizontes*), who aroused suspicion. Here is an evident distinction between Jews and Judaizers; and Josephus then proceeds to make clear the nature of these Judaizers, describing them as an equivocal (*amphibolon*, “doubtful, ambiguous”) and mixed (*memigmenon*)²⁹ element, whom the Syrians feared as much as proclaimed aliens (*allophylon*). The word “mixed” most likely alludes to the fact that these “sympathizers” mixed Jewish customs with those of the pagans.

Another passage alluding to the “sympathizers” occurs where Josephus declares³⁰ that the Jews of Antioch were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies a large multitude of Greeks and that they had “in some measure [*tropoi tini*] incorporated them with themselves.” The phrase “in some measure” apparently indicates that those whom they had won over had become not proselytes, but “sympathizers,” since they had adopted only some Jewish ways.

A key passage is the one in which Josephus describes³¹ the great wealth of the Temple in Jerusalem, noting that Jews throughout the inhabited world and those who worshipped God (*sebomenon ton theon*), both those from Asia and from Europe, had contributed to it for a very long time.³² The distinction Josephus is drawing is evident.

Josephus’s account³³ of the conversion of Izates, king of Adiabene in Mesopotamia, likewise illuminates the difference between full converts and “sympathizers.” The very fact that, according to Josephus,³⁴ Izates considered that he would not be genuinely (*bebaios*) a Jew unless he was circumcised implies that one might become a Jew in a lesser degree without being circumcised. That this inference is warranted is clear from what follows, since a Jewish merchant named Ananias tries to convince Izates³⁵ that he can worship the Divine (*to theion sebein*) even without being circumcised, “if indeed he had fully (*pantos*) decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism.”³⁶

Josephus refers to the wife of Nero as a worshipper of God (*thosebes*) who pleaded on behalf of the Jews.³⁷ This would appear to differentiate between the worshippers of God and the Jews. Indeed, she acted twice on behalf of Jewish interests, once here in persuading Nero not to tear down the wall which the Jews had built in the Temple area to block King Agrippa II (c. 60 A.D.) from viewing the sacrifices and once³⁸ when Josephus came to Rome to secure the freedom of some priests.³⁹

Two other references to “sympathizers” may be found in Josephus’s apologetic work *Against Apion*. In the first,⁴⁰ Josephus remarks that many of the Jewish customs have now found their way to some cities, and, here and there, have been thought worthy of imitation. The fact that Josephus speaks of many customs that had penetrated the world indicates that we are not talking about conversion, since the convert must undertake to obey all the practices of Judaism.

A second passage,⁴¹ after mentioning that the masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt the Jewish religion, then singles out the abstinence from work on the Sabbath, the observance of the fast days and the lighting of the Sabbath lights as practices that are observed everywhere. That Josephus singles out specific

observances and, above all, that he says that the observance of many of the laws has spread among non-Jews, shows that we are dealing not with full proselytes, who are required to observe all the laws, but with “sympathizers.”

In the Talmud,^a the rabbis do not use the term “God-fearers” as such. Instead they substitute “Heaven” for “God,” as we find also in [Daniel 4:23](#), [1 Maccabees 3:18](#) and in the Gospels (e.g., [Matthew 3:2](#)). The term *yirei shamayim* (Heaven Fearers) is the rabbinic equivalent of God-fearers.⁴² This term, however, does not appear in the earliest rabbinic works—the Mishnah or the Tosefta—which date, in all probability, to the end of the second century.⁴³

In a later rabbinic work, the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 70b), it is said of a certain King Lemuel, “All know that your father was a Heaven-fearing man (*yirei shamayim*), and therefore they will say that you inherit [your sinfulness] from your mother.” King Lemuel’s father was a non-Jew, so the reference here, to one who feared Heaven, while admittedly problematic, may well be to a “sympathizer.” The fact that the text says that “all know” that he was a “sympathizer” would indicate that such “sympathizers” were widely known.

A midrashic^b passage⁴⁴ also uses the phrase *yirei shamayim* (Heaven Fearers) in what appears to be the technical sense of “sympathizers.” It describes by this language a Roman senator who committed suicide in order to delay implementation of an imperial decree that within 30 days no Jew should be left in the Roman empire. We can date the incident to approximately 95 A.D. during the reign of Domitian.⁴⁵ That the term *yirei shamayim*, or Heaven Fearer, does not mean merely “pious” but probably refers to a person on his way to full conversion would seem to be evidenced by the fact that the rabbis lament that the senator had committed suicide before conversion to Judaism, while his wife reveals that actually he had taken the step of full conversion, as she proves by exhibiting his foreskin.

Another Midrash,⁴⁶ containing traditional material from the second century, refers to four categories of true worshippers of God—sinless Israelites, righteous (i.e., full) proselytes, repentant sinners, and “Heaven Fearers.”⁴⁷ The juxtaposition of full proselytes and “Heaven Fearers” indicates that they are related but that they are to be distinguished from each other. Similarly the juxtaposition of sinless Israelites and “Heaven Fearers” indicates that they too are to be distinguished from each other.⁴⁸

That the term *yirei shamayim* (Heaven Fearers) had become a technical term for “sympathizers” by the third century may be deduced from a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud,⁴⁹ which quotes Rabbi Eleazar, a third-century rabbi who lived in Palestine, as saying that only the gentiles who had nothing to do with the Jews during their bitter past will not be permitted to convert to Judaism in the time of the Messiah, but that those “Heaven Fearers” (*yirei shamayim*) who shared the tribulations of Israel would be accepted as full proselytes, with the Emperor Antoninus⁵⁰ at their head.⁵¹

Another passage that indicates a clear distinction between proselytes and “sympathizers” is found in a rabbinic work known as *Genesis Rabbah* (28.5), which quotes the third-century Palestinian rabbi Hanina as saying: “The cities of the sea are deserving of extermination, and by what merit are they delivered? By the merit of a single convert, or a single fearer of Heaven whom they produce each year.” The fact that the fearer of Heaven is paired with the convert and that the context indicates that even the slightest merit will redeem such cities would support the view that the “Heaven Fearer” is not a pious Jew but a gentile “sympathizer.”

Though other examples from Jewish literature could be cited,⁵² let us turn now to Christian writers.

A passage from the mid-second-century writer Justin Martyr⁵³ seems rather clearly to refer to “sympathizers.” There we read the charge of the Jew Trypho that Christians neither keep the feasts or Sabbaths nor practice the rite of circumcision, whereas all God-fearing persons (*phoboumenoi ton theon*) do so. In this context it makes no sense to look upon the God-fearers as Jews, since the point is that Christians should know better than to

disregard the commandments; the most likely interpretation is that since even God-fearers keep these commandments, certainly Christians, who claim to believe in the Scriptures, should do so.

In a late second-century A.D. work by Tertullian,⁵⁴ he attacks pagans who observe Jewish ceremonies, notably the Sabbath and Passover. The third-century Christian Latin poet Commodianus⁵⁵ likewise alludes to Judaizers who seek “to live between both ways”—that is, partaking of both Judaism and Christianity. Commodianus makes the same point⁵⁶ when he exclaims: “What! Are you half a Jew?”

In three Iranian languages—Pahlavi, New Persian and Sogdian—one of the names for Christians is derived from the Iranian root *tars*, which means “to fear.” Moreover, there are no other names for Christians that are derivatives of Iranian roots.⁵⁷ The most likely theory is that advanced by Pines⁵⁸—the Christians were so designated because many of them had themselves formerly been or were the children of God-fearers or bore a similarity to God-fearers in their customs.

Let us now consider the archaeological evidence.

In their article on the disappearance of the God-fearers, MacLennan and Kraabel note that although over 100 synagogue inscriptions have been uncovered, at most only a single one refers to “sympathizers.” However, this one inscription almost certainly does refer to “sympathizers.”

This remarkable inscription discovered by Professor Kenan Erim in 1916 at Aphrodisias is of extraordinary importance for our discussion.⁵⁹ There are two separate lists of names, presumably of donors to the synagogue or other public building; an inscription alongside the first list (in a later hand) refers to *ktistai*, the word usually used for “founders” or “donors” to the building.⁶⁰ The first list is clearly a register of Jews, as names such as Jacob, Manasses, Judas, Joseph and Rueben indicate. Then, after a gap in the inscription, comes the sensational phrase *kai hosoi theosebeis*, “and those who are God-fearers.” The names that follow are all Greek or Greco-Roman—such as Zeno, Diogenes, Antiochos, Polychronios, Chrysippos, Appianos, Eutropios, Valerianos and Athenogoras. The second group starts with the names of nine members of the city council; the professions listed for the rest—such as mason, marble worker, athlete, portrait painter, fuller, tax collector, carpenter—are of a social group that is, for the most part, distinctly higher than that of the Jews in the first group—such as vegetable seller, candymaker, bird seller, and cattle fodder purveyor. If, as Miss Joyce Reynolds, to whom the publication of these inscriptions has been entrusted, believes, they date from the third century, this would seem to confirm that by this time⁶¹ there was a definite and recognizable class of “sympathizers” known by the name of “God-fearers.” It, of course, does not prove that the term was used with that significance in the first century A.D. in the Book of Acts, but it is clearly suggestive. We may still, it is true, ask whether the God-fearers at Aphrodisias are not simply gentiles who befriended Jews and perhaps contributed to the synagogue without adopting any Jewish practices. This question, however, is perhaps answered by an inscription found in the *odeum* (theater) at Aphrodisias with the words “the place of those who are complete Hebrews” (*Hebreon ton teleion*). If, indeed, there is any relationship between the list of synagogue donors and the inscription in the *odeum*, this would seem to establish the existence, at least in Aphrodisias in presumably the third century, of a class of “sympathizers,” in contrast to complete Jews.

Another inscription found at Aphrodisias alongside the lists of names mentioned above contains a list of donors that refers, first, to a number of Jews, as we can see from the names, second, to two proselytes named Samuel and Ioses, and, finally, to Emmonios and Antoninos (good pagan names), who are called *theosebeis*, God-fearers. Here, finally, we have in the same inscription Jews, proselytes and “sympathizers,” distinguished from one another.

Thus far, as MacLennan and Kraabel have stated, the situation at Aphrodisias seems to be unique; but the references in rabbinic literature of the same period to a separate class of “sympathizers” would lead us to expect that we should find “sympathizers” in other communities as well.

In addition, a reference to a community of “sympathizers” has been found in a second-century A.D. inscription⁶² that appoints the community of Jews and the God-fearers (*theon sebon*) as guardians of an enfranchised slave.

The happy fact that the Roman administrators in Egypt recorded the names not only of the inhabitants but also those of their parents and grandparents enables us to reconstruct the names of whole families. The name Sambathion (apparently given to children born on the Sabbath) in 20 Egyptian papyri ranging in date from the early first century A.D. to the fifth century apparently refers to adherents of a sect of Sabbath observers, since their kinsmen seem to be non-Jewish and the papyri were found in villages that are non-Jewish so far as we know. It is striking that no other Hebrew name was ever borrowed by non-Jews; and the most likely reason for the choice of the name, consequently, is that the parents were Sabbath observers. The name Sambathion, which occurs so often in these papyri, was given by the parents of these people; hence we may consider every Sambathion as representing a whole family;⁶³ and the total number of Sabbath observers was consequently not inconsiderable, though, of course, we cannot be sure that all members of the families were actually Sabbath observers. The name Sambathion occurs frequently in the second century and disappears by the fourth century; hence we may deduce a decline in the number of Sabbath observers.⁶⁴

Some inscriptions of uncertain date describe donors to synagogues in Sardis and Philadelphia and Tralles in Asia Minor as *theosebeis* (God-fearers). These people too are probably “sympathizers.”⁶⁵

In summary, the God-fearers, referring to “sympathizers” to Judaism or semi-Jews, have not disappeared. Jewish proselytism was a movement of such scope during the Hellenistic and Roman periods that it would be difficult to suppose that it failed to lead to intermediate subgroups. And, indeed, the evidence from classical, talmudic and Christian literature, from Philo to Josephus, and finally from inscriptions and papyri, while not always clear-cut, cumulatively confirms the existence of such a class, at least from the first century A.D. and especially in the third century A.D. The fact that popular philosophers and satirists refer to “sympathizers” would confirm that they were well known. This does not mean that the references in Acts to God-fearers are to “sympathizers,” nor does it mean that there were “perhaps millions” of “sympathizers” in the first century as Hertzberg postulates.⁶⁶ Surely, however, by the third century, the evidence of rabbinic literature and of the Aphrodisias inscriptions is conclusive—there was a class of gentiles in two widely separated areas—Palestine and Asia Minor—who observed some of the practices of Judaism without becoming full Jews.

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