

# «God-fearers»

a survey of the sources and the academic debate  
that surrounds them

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## Some definitions and introduction:

According to a most general definition the «God-fearers» were «gentiles who observed some of the practices of Judaism.»<sup>1</sup> Salo Baron defines them as «people who sympathized with Judaism and enjoyed a recognized status upon the fringes.»<sup>2</sup> A modern rabbinic definition presents them as, «Gentile adherents to the One God of Israel, who directed their religious loyalty to the Jewish Sages and the Holy Temple.»<sup>3</sup>

The «God-fearer» is thus to be distinguished from a full convert to Judaism. In hellenistic times among Greek, Latin, Jewish and Christian writers, there are numerous references to this group of Gentiles. Also the Hebrew Bible attests to Gentiles who adhere to certain aspects of Judaism.

there is a significant volume of evidence to suggest that a body of 'God-fearing' pagans was attached to many Jewish communities in the diaspora, and thereby adopted the Jewish (i.e. monotheistic and imageless) form of worship. They attended Jewish synagogues, but as regards the observance of the Law restricted themselves to certain aspects, and so were not counted as belonging to the main body of each Jewish community.<sup>4</sup>

In the following I will first write shortly about the term «God-fearer». Then I will present the sources which has been used as evidence in order to validate the existence of God-fearers as a recognised class of Gentiles. In the latter part of my paper I will present some of the academic debate that still sorrounds this enigmatic group. In my brief summary I will also present some thoughts for the upcoming writing of my master thesis.

### About the term «God-fearer»:

In the Hebrew Bible we encounter the term יראי ה' (*yirei HASHEM*), «those who fear the LORD» and יראי אלקים (*yirei Elokim*), «those who fear God». The term used in Talmudic and Rabbinic literature is יראי שמים (*yirei shamayim*),<sup>5</sup> «Fearers of Heaven».

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman 1986

<sup>2</sup> quoted in MacLennan and Kraabel 1986

<sup>3</sup> Weiner 2011:20

<sup>4</sup> Millar 1986:165

<sup>5</sup> «Heaven» is a well known metonymy for «God». See for instance Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987:48n167

The Septuagint uses the phrase φοβουμενοι τον κυριον (*phoboumenoi ton kurion*), «those who fear the LORD». <sup>6</sup> This latter term is also used in the Greek New Testament, together with the term *sebomenoi ton theon* «those who fear/revere God». In Josephus' writings and in Greek inscriptions and literature we most commonly find the term *theosebeis*, while Latin literature uses the term *metuentes*.

These terms are reckoned by most academic scholars to be translations of the Hebrew terms and as synonyms of the basic meaning «fearing God», in the general meaning of «worshipping God». As such, the term «God-fearer» can refer to any pious person, whether Jew, full convert to Judaism, Gentile adherent to Judaism or Gentile observer of pagan religion.

## The Sources

### Literary and epigraphical sources:

The sources that I will present are literary and epigraphical.

The literary evidence is from the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the New Testament, Greek and Latin authors, Jewish authors (Josephus and Philo), Talmudic and Midrashic sources.

The epigraphical evidence is from synagogue inscriptions found in Diaspora Judaism, mostly in Asia Minor.

### The literary evidence:

#### **The Hebrew Bible**

(extract of text)

I Kings 8:41-43, *Gentiles may  
pray in the Temple*

«You shall hear in heaven Your dwelling place,  
and do according to all that the stranger calls You  
for, that all peoples of the earth may know Your  
Name, to fear You, ...» <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Overman 1986:21; The phrase οι φοβουμενοι is used in the following passages in the Septuagint: 2 Chron. 5:6; Pss. 115:9-11; 118:2-4; 135:19-20; Mal. 3:16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. with Acts 8:27-28 and the Ethiopian eunuch who returns from Jerusalem where he worshipped. This verse seems to be giving a clear Biblical allowance for Gentiles to pray within the Temple. cf. «The court of Gentiles» which allegedly was in what was properly called the «Outer Court» which was within the Temple grounds.

II Kings 5:14-19, <i>Naaman, the Syrian general</i> <sup>8</sup>	«Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel!»
II Kings 17:28ff, <i>how to fear the LORD</i>	«And one of the priests whom they had exiled from Samaria came and settled in Bethel, and he would direct them how they should fear the Lord. <sup>9</sup> ... they do not fear the Lord, neither do they practice according to their <sup>10</sup> statutes and laws, nor according to the Law and the commandment that the Lord commanded the sons of Jacob.»
Jonah <sup>11</sup> 1:16, <i>the men from the nations</i>	«And the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they made sacrifices to the Lord and made vows.»
Psalms 22:24, <sup>12</sup> <i>God-fearers</i>	«You who fear the Lord [יְרֵאֵי ה',] praise Him! All you offspring of Jacob, honor Him! Be in dread of Him, all you offspring of Israel!» <sup>13</sup>
Job 1:8, <i>fears God</i>	«Have you noticed My servant Job? <sup>14</sup> There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil!»
Ecclesiastes 12:13, <i>universal fearing</i>	«Fear God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad.» <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In verse 19 Elijah allows Naaman to bow in the Temple of Rimmon. Naaman must do this in order to give support to his master. This allowance is indicative of Judaism enabling Gentiles to believe in Jewish monotheism without having to adhere to the Mosaic code of law.

<sup>9</sup> The verse is talking about the new Gentile inhabitants in Samaria, and the verse implies that there is a correct way to fear God (and thus an incorrect way) and that this way can be taught, indicating the existence of clear instructions.

<sup>10</sup> here is a clear differentiation between 'their statues and laws' (i.e. the Noahide commandments?) and 'the Law and the commandment that the Lord commanded the sons of Jacob' (i.e. the specific Jewish commandments)

<sup>11</sup> The book of Jonah attests to the universality of the Hebrew Bible. Jonah is called to prophecy to a Gentile nation. Generally the Prophetic books have many references to the prophets directly addressing the nations. This indicates that a certain type of behavior is expected of them, and that they will be rewarded and punished accordingly. Cf. Ecclesiastes 12:14.

<sup>12</sup> Generally the Psalms are abundant with references to «those who fear God» and with an universal call to fear God. See Psalm 33:8, «Let all the earth fear the LORD [יִירְאוּ מֵה'].» See also Psalms 2:11; 5:8; 33:18; 34:8,10,12; 55:20; 56:5,12; 90:11; 61:6; 64:10; 65:9; and many more. See also Proverbs 8:13 and Job 28:28.

<sup>13</sup> See commentary to *Leviticus Rabbah* 3.2

<sup>14</sup> The significance of this verse is that Job is a Gentile. Cf. Acts 10:2.

<sup>15</sup> If God is calling everyone to account for their actions, that would imply the presence of clear instructions of what they would be accountable for, and since Gentiles are not punished for transgressing specific Jewish commandments, such as eating the meat of a carcass (see Deut. 14:21) and ritual laws, this would imply the presence of another law code that the Gentile have to abide by.

## The Septuagint

2 Chron. 5:6, *and the fearers*

«And King Solomon and all the gatherings of Israel and the fearers [και οι φοβουμενοι] and their gathered ones ...»<sup>16</sup>

## The New Testament<sup>17</sup>

Luke 7:1-5 - *The Roman Centurion*

«for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.»

Acts 8:27-28 - *The Ethiopian Eunuch*

«he had come to Jerusalem to worship... reading the prophet Isaiah.»

Acts 10:2 - *Cornelius, a Roman Centurion*

«he was a devout (εὐσεβῆς)<sup>18</sup> man who feared (φοβούμενος) God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.»

Acts 10:22 -

«a righteous (δίκαιος) and God-fearing man (φοβούμενος τον θεον)»<sup>19</sup>

Acts 10:34-35 -

«anyone who fears (φοβούμενος) him and does what is right is acceptable to him.»

Acts 13:16 - *Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia*

«You Israelites, and others who fear (φοβούμενοι) God, listen.»

Acts 13:26 -

«descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear (φοβούμενοι) God»

Acts 13:43 -

«Jews and devout (σεβομένων) converts (προσηλύτων) to Judaism ... urged them to continue in the grace of God.»

Acts 13:50 -

«the devout (σεβομένας) women of high standing and the leading men of the city.»

Acts 16:14-15 - *The Conversion of Lydia*

«Lydia, a worshipper of God (σεβομένη τον θεον), was listening to us.»

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<sup>16</sup> Overman 1988:21, "The passage [2. Chron. 5:6 in LXX] is significant for two reasons. First, this group does not appear in the Hebrew text. We find them only in the LXX. Second, the group appears to be distinct from the Israelites.

<sup>17</sup> It is stated by many academic scholars that the «council in Jerusalem» (Acts) and the precepts that the Gentile Christians are to observe are strongly reminiscent of the lists of the Noahide commandments. See f.ex. Bockmuehl 2000:165.

<sup>18</sup> Commentary: This verse combines the words εὐσεβῆς (similar to σεβομένοι) and φοβούμενος, establishing their synonymity. This could help explain why Luke interchangeably uses the words φοβούμενοι and σεβομένοι. Using either of them would in practice imply the other.

<sup>19</sup> Commentary: The phrase ἀνὴρ δίκαιος («righteous man») is reminiscent of Gen. 6:9 in the LXX - ὡς ἀνθρώπος δίκαιος («Noah was a righteous man»).

Acts 17:4 - <i>The Uproar in Thessalonica</i>	«the devout (σεβομένων) Greeks and not a few of the leading women.»
Acts 17:17 - <i>Paul in Athens</i>	«So he argued in the synagogue with the Jew and the devout (σεβομένοις) persons»
Acts 18:7 - <i>Paul in Corinth</i>	«Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.»
Acts 18:7 - Titius Justus	Titius Justus, a worshipper of God (σεβομένου του θεου)

## Greek and Latin Authors<sup>20</sup>

Petronius - (died *ca.* 65 CE), *fragment no. 37.*

Petronius draws a distinction between those who abstain from eating pork and adopt monotheism, thus presumably becoming “sympathizers,” and those who actually undergo circumcision and become full-fledged Jews.

«The Jew may worship his pig-god and clamor in the ears of high heaven, but unless he also cuts back his foreskin with the 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.»<sup>21</sup>

Epictetus - (*ca.* 60-140 CE), cited by Arrian (*ca.* 95-175 CE), *Discourses* 2.9.19-21

Epictetus here distinguishes between full-fledged proselytes who undergo baptism and those who merely act like Jews, i.e., “sympathizers.”

«...Why, then, do you call yourself a Stoic, why do you deceive the multitude, why do you act the part of a Jew, when you are a Greek? ... For example, 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 is both a Jew in fact and is also called one.»<sup>22</sup>

Juvenal - (*ca.* 60-*ca.* 130 CE), *Satires* 14.96-106

In this famous passage Juvenal notes a progression from the “sympathizer” who observes the Sabbath to one who accepts monotheism and abstains from pork to one who becomes a full-fledged Jew by undergoing circumcision.

<sup>20</sup> Beside the evidence that is included below, see also Seneca, cited by Augustus, *City of God*, 6.11; Seneca, *Epis.* 95, 47 (on forbidding the lighting of Sabbath lights); Plutarch, *Cicero* 7.6.5; Suetonius, *Lives of Caesars*, 12.2; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 32 (Schurer 1986:161n50, “A remarkable illustration of the spread of the Jewish Sabbath at the beginning of the imperial period; Horace, *Sat.* i 9, 68-72. (the Gentile who observes the Jewish Sabbath is described as *unus multorum* ‘one of many’); Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, i 13, 3-4 (Schurer 1986:161n50, “Tertullian is admittedly speaking here only of gentiles who observed isolated Jewish customs.”); Persius *Sat.* vi 179-84 (Schurer 1986:161n50, “[Persius] gives a hostile representation of this [gentile observance of Sabbath and the lighting of lamp]”); *Theodosian Code* 16.5.43;

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:138

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*:138; This passage also attests to the «God-fearer» being mistaken for a Jew. Cf. Philo *Questions on Exodus* 2.2 (on Exodus 22:20 [21])

«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. ...»<sup>23</sup>

Dio Cassius - (ca. 160-230 CE), *Roman History* 67.14.1-2 (95 CE)

Dio Cassius here mentions that many who had drifted into Jewish ways were condemned as atheists. The word *drifted* implies that they had not actually converted but merely had tendencies toward Judaism.

«And the same year Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property.»<sup>24</sup>

## Jewish sources

Philo<sup>25</sup> - *Questions on Exodus* 2.2 (on Exodus 22:20 [21])

Philo speaks of those who have not actually but only figuratively undergone circumcision.

«Why does [Scripture] in admonishing, 'Thou shalt not oppress a sojourner (*ger*),' add, 'For ye were sojourners (*gerim*) in the land of the Egyptians'?... But what is the mind of the sojourner if not alienation from belief in many gods and familiarity with honoring the one God and Father of all?»<sup>26, 27</sup>

Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.110

Josephus here distinguishes between those who are Jews and those who, without actually becoming Jews, worshipped the G-d of the Jews.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*:139

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*:139

<sup>25</sup> See also additional evidence in Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.4.20-24; *Special Laws* 2.12.42,44; *Embassy to Gaius* 245; *Every Good Man is Free* II, 72

<sup>26</sup> Feldman 1986:BAR article, "A clear allusion to "sympathizers" may be found in the work of the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Philo. Commenting on a passage in Exodus, Philo says that the term "proselyte" (*ger*) 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 (*ger*), 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. **Perhaps other Alexandrian Jews might have considered such gentiles to be converts [i.e. Jews], but Philo insists that they are not.** [emphasis mine]»

<sup>27</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:138

<sup>28</sup> Feldman 1986, "A key passage is the one in which Josephus describes the great wealth of the Temple in Jerusalem, noting that Jews throughout the inhabited world and those who worshipped God (sebomenon theon), both those from Asia and from Europe, had contributed to it for a very long time. The distinction Josephus is drawing is evident.»

«But no one need wonder that there was so much wealth in our Temple, for all the Jews throughout the habitable world, and those who worshipped God, even those from Asia and Europe, had been contributing to it for a very long time.<sup>29</sup>

Josephus,<sup>30</sup> *Against Apion* 2.282

Josephus here mentions several Jewish practices, namely the Sabbath, fast days, lighting of lamps to usher in the Sabbath, and several (though not all) dietary laws that have spread among non-Jews, with the implication that they have not actually become Jews.

«The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances; and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread, and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed.»<sup>31</sup>

### Talmudic and Midrashic sources

Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 3.2.74d (codified ca. 400 CE)

In this passage the question is raised as to whether the Emperor Antoninus actually converted to Judaism. The fact that he wore cutaway sandals on the Day of Atonement is no proof, since “sympathizers” also do. Only when he circumcised himself did he become a Jew.

«Why did Rabbi say: Blessed be God? Why not: Blessed be our God? If he said: Blessed be God, this indicates that Antoninus was not converted. If he said: Blessed be our God, it indicates that Antoninus was converted. There are some things that indicate that he was converted and vice versa. They saw him going out on the Day of Atonement wearing a cutaway sandal [indicating that he was converted]. What can you deduce from that? Even fearers of heaven may go out wearing such a sandal. Antoninus asked Rabbi: Will you let me eat of leviathan in the next world? He answered: Yes. But he objected: You will not let me eat of the paschal lamb; how then will you let me eat of leviathan? He replied: “what can we do for thee, since it is written (Exod 12:48) ‘no one that is uncircumcised may eat thereof.’ ...»<sup>32</sup>

Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 28.6 (ca. fifth century CE)

According to the passage below, God has so much regard for the “sympathizers” that he declined to annihilate the nation of the Cherethites for the sake of merely a single “sympathizer.”

«Rabbi Huna [Babylonian, third century CE] said: What was perpetrated by the coastal cities was not perpetrated even by the generation of the Flood, for it is written, ‘Woe unto

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<sup>29</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:139

<sup>30</sup> See also additional evidence in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.17-96 (the conversion of Helena, and where the Jewish merchant Ananias explains to Izates that he can worship God without being circumcised), 195 (the wife of Nero is referred to as a *theosebeis*); *The Jewish War* 2.454, 463, 7.45; *Against Apion* 1.166-167.

<sup>31</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:140

<sup>32</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:140-141

the inhabitants of the sea-coast, the nation of the Cherethites' (Zeph 2:5), which means that they deserved to be annihilated. 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.»<sup>33</sup>

Midrash *Leviticus Rabbah* 3.2 (ca. fifth century CE)

The following passage clearly distinguishes between “God-fearers” (“sympathizers”) and proselytes.

«'And when one bringeth a meal-offering unto the Lord' (Lev 2:1). [Applicable to this is the passage], 'Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him; All ye the seed of Jacob, glorify Him; And stand in awe of Him, ye seed of Israel, for He hath not despised nor abhorred the lowliness of the poor; neither hath He hid face from him. But when he cried unto Him He heard' (Ps 22:24f.). 'Ye that fear the Lord,' said Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, means those that fear heaven. Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman said: It means the righteous proselytes.»<sup>34</sup>

Midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* 43 (ca. ninth century CE)

The following passage distinguishes between those who accept conversion and those who fear God, i.e., “sympathizers.”

«At sight of Sarah's milk the nations of the earth brought their children to Sarah to give them suck, thus confirming the truth of the statement that 'Sarah would give children suck.' ... Accordingly, all Gentiles throughout the world who accept conversion and all Gentiles throughout the world who fear God spring from the children who drank of the milk of Sarah. Hence Sarah is alluded to as 'a joyful mother of children.'»<sup>35</sup>

### The epigraphical evidence:

Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary* (1987), 5-7.

The chance discovery in 1976 of **two inscriptions** (the longest that have thus far been found in Greek pertaining to Jews) **at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor**, dating apparently from the third century CE, has shed dramatic light on the Jewish movement to win proselytes and especially “God-fearers” (“sympathizers”). ... The fact that one of the inscriptions lists a number of donors who are Jews, followed by the names of two proselytes and two “God-fearers,” would seem to be conclusive evidence that proselytes are to be distinguished from “God-fearers.”

«...Benjamin psalm-singer [?]; Judas good-tempered; loses [i.e., Joseph] a proselyte; Sabbatios son of Amachios; Emmonios “G-d-fearer”; Antoninos ‘G-d-fearer’; Samuel son of Politianos; Joseph a proselyte son of Eusebios; and Judas son of Theodoros...»<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:141

<sup>34</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:141

<sup>35</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:141-142

<sup>36</sup> Reinhold and Feldman 1996:142-143 (emphases are mine)

«**An inscription from Panticapeum** (p. 37 above) recording a manumission 'under the guardianship of the synagogue of the Jews and the "God-fearers"' (... και θεον σεβων)

**Two inscriptions from the mosaic floor of the synagogue at Sardis** (p. 21 above) name persons, called Αυρ(ηλιος) Ευλυγιος and Αυρ(ηλιος) Πολυιππος, who had fulfilled vows, and who are each described as θεοσεβης. The first name in particular could well be that of a Jew; but in fact in neither case is there any proof either way. There is no reason why a Jew, named individually, could not be described as 'God-fearing'; but equally the term could indicate that both persons belonged to a category of gentile 'God-fearers' attached to the Sardis synagogue.

No conclusions can be drawn from the fragmentary inscription from **the catacomb of the vigna** Randanini in Rome ... or from that on a marble slab of unknown origin now in Rome describing one Agrippas from Phaena as *theosebēs*, or from **the epitaph of 'Eparchia theosebēs'** from the Via Appia, CIJ I, no. 228.

**An inscription from Deliler near Philadelphia in Lydia** (p. 22 above) shows a water basin being dedicated 'to the sacred synagogue of the *Hebraioi*' by a man called Ευσταθιος ο θεοσεβης (CIJ II, no. 754). There is again no clear indication as to whether he is Jewish or not; but in the light of ... the possible contrast between himself and the *Hebraioi* here, it must be slightly more probable that he is to be seen as a gentile 'God-fearer'.

The same problems arise over **the inscription from Tralles** (p. 24 above) in which a lady named Capitolina, described as αξιολογ(ος?) και θεοσεβ(ης), records her construction of parts of a building which may well be a synagogue.

The most complex issues are however presented by the well known inscription from **the theatre at Miletus**. Roughly carved on one of the rows of seats, probably in the later second or early third century, the inscription reads ΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΙΟΥΔΕΩΝ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΣΕΒΙΩΝ. The expected form of the last word would naturally be θεοσεβων, but in the light of the parallels previously given its meaning is clear. But are the persons to whom seats are allotted one group (and if so, which?) or two? In view of the informal character of the inscription it is not impossible that the third and fourth words have been reversed. The meaning would then be quite clear: 'seats of the Jews and "God-fearers"' (compare the inscription from Panticapaeum above). But clearly such a correction is to be avoided if possible. As it stands, the inscription refers to 'Jews, those also (called) "God-fearers"'. It has thus often been taken to be an allusion to the Jewish community itself, as established in Miletus. On the other hand a specific reference to the piety of a Jewish group seems both superfluous in general and all the more puzzling in this purely pagan context. H. Hommel has suggested, alternatively, that the allusion is specifically and only to gentile 'God-fearers'. On this interpretation they will have been known in Miletus as 'Jews' (Ιουδαιοι - for this usage see Cassius Dio ...), but in the context of the theatre seating will have been given also a more precise designation. The inscription would, on this interpretation, have the meaning 'place of the "Jews" who are also (more precisely called) "God-fearers"'. If this interpretation is correct, it must follow that in Miletus gentile 'God-fearers' continued to attend the theatre and were a significant and publicly recognized group. It may be relevant to recall the nine town-councillors listed first among the *theosebēs* of Aphrodisias.»<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Millar 1986:166-168 (all emphasises are mine)

## The Debate

Within the academic world a variety of terms has been used to refer to Gentile adherents of Judaism: «God-Fearers»,<sup>38</sup> «Sympathizers»,<sup>39</sup> «semi-proselytes»,<sup>40</sup> «spiritual proselytes»,<sup>41</sup> «adherents»,<sup>42</sup> «Judaisers»<sup>43</sup>, «honorary Jews»,<sup>44</sup> and «religious heaten / religious person».<sup>45</sup>

This variety in itself attests to the debate and confusion this group has caused «in the ranks of even the greatest scholars».<sup>46</sup>

### A brief history of the God-Fearers in the The Academic World

Academic authorities within the field of religious research from the latter part of 19th century and the first half of the 20th, like Emile Schürer<sup>47</sup> and Kirsopp Lake<sup>48</sup> has taken the historic existence of God-fearers for granted and that has also been, and remains, the consensus position. Their main sources for this proposition is the above presented evidence. Also the so-called pseudographical literature, such as the Sibylline Oracles are used as evidence that there existed a Jewish mission to win proselytes, and that these proselytes did not have to accept the whole range of Jewish law.

Even though the existence of God-fearers, in accordance with very general definitions (see above), are agreed upon by the majority of academic scholars there has been, and still is, disagreement about their connection to Judaism. Did they have an official status recognized by mainstream Judaism, or were they a loosely connected group without any official status? If recognised, from where does this recognition stem from and to what

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<sup>38</sup> see f.ex. Moore 1927:326-327; Lake 1933:74

<sup>39</sup> See f.ex. Feldman 1950:200n2

<sup>40</sup> See f.ex. Marcus 1952:247. This term is criticized by Moore 1927:326-327

<sup>41</sup> Wolfson 1947:369

<sup>42</sup> in Cohen, S. J. D 1987 as opposed to «converts»

<sup>43</sup> in Williams 1988:99, where she uses the term «Judaisers» interchangeably with the term «sympathizers»

<sup>44</sup> referenced in Feldman 1989:274.

<sup>45</sup> Lake 1933:76 (Volume I)

<sup>46</sup> Feldman 1950:200

<sup>47</sup> Schurer 1890:291-319 (Volume II)

<sup>48</sup> Lake 1933:74-96 (Volume I)

degree where they connected? Does it go back to Biblical times, or did the concept evolve during the Hellenistic period?

Much of the debate still evolves around whether or not God-fearer is a technical term, but it is also common to regard «God-fearer» as «a catch-all term covering a wide spectrum of degrees of [Gentile] interest in Judaism - from the half-hearted to the fully committed - but short of actual conversion.»<sup>49</sup>

The academic scholarship in the 18th century<sup>50</sup> accepted that a non-Jew interested in Judaism, i.e. a God-fearer (*sebomenoi*, etc), was identical with a special kind of proselyte (hebr. גר),<sup>51</sup> «the proselyte within your Gates» (hebr. גר בשעריך). This category of proselyte is in Biblical writings distinguished from «the proselyte in the Land» (hebr. גר בארצך).<sup>52</sup> The latter, which in the Talmud is also referred to as a «proselyte of righteousness» (hebr. גר צדק), have to undergo conversion rituals and is then to be considered as a full convert and as such legally bound to follow the whole range of Jewish law.<sup>53</sup> The former is a Gentile who resides under Jewish jurisdiction and has agreed to observe the Noahide laws (hebr.

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<sup>49</sup> Tannenbaum 1986

<sup>50</sup> Lake 1933:82 (Volume I)

<sup>51</sup> Gesenius 1846, entry גר', «[Root גור], a sojourner, stranger, foreigner, a person living out of his own country. Gen. 15:13; Ex. 2:22; 18:3; 22:20, etc. Often joined with the syn. תושב a stranger ..., Gen. 23:4; opp. to אזרח a native, Ex. 12:19.»; entry גור' «...TO TURN ASIDE FROM THE WAY, like זור; hence to turn aside to any one, and in the common use of the language - (1) to tarry anywhere, as a sojourner and stranger, to sojourn. ...used of individuals ... and of whole nations. ...».

<sup>52</sup> The Hebrew Bible attests to this difference. «When a stranger dwells among you in your land [גר בארצכם], do not taunt him. The stranger [הגר] who dwells with you [הגר אתכם] shall be like a native among you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you were aliens [גרים] in the land of Egypt» (Lev. 19:33-34). «There shall be one law for you, it shall be for stranger [כגר] and native alike» (Lev. 24:22). That is, this category of גר is referring to a full proselyte. On the other hand. «You shall not eat any carcass; to the stranger who is in your cities [גר אשר בשעריך] shall you give it that he may eat it, or sell it to a foreigner, for you are a holy people to the Lord, your God» (Deut. 14:21). Seemingly the word גר in this context cannot be a גר צדק, 'righteous proselyte', since a carcass is forbidden to be eaten by a full convert. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the גר referred to is a גר תושב, 'resident sojourner'.

<sup>53</sup> I have not found the specific sources in the Talmud yet, so I'll have to examine this point further; generally on the topic concerning conversion and ritual requirements, see Porton 1994, chapter 5-6 and Bamberger 1968 chapter 3 and Millar 1986:173-176; [Zohar in Exod. fol. 36. 1.; Jerusalem Talmud. *Kiddushin*, fol. 64. 4]

שבוע מצוות בני נח).<sup>54</sup> In the Talmud this proselyte is most commonly referred to as a «resident sojourner»<sup>55</sup> (hebr. גר תושב).<sup>56</sup>

Schürer argues against this equation of «God-fearers» and *ger toshav* on the argument that the two concepts belong to different historical contexts.

«For it is hardly likely that the Greeks and Romans who lived in Palestine would trouble themselves much about those Jewish regulations. So far then as practical life is concerned the so-called precepts for proselytes have no significance. They only represent a casuistical theory which was never reduced to actual practice. From this therefore it is evident that the גרי תושב have no connection with the σεβομενοι τον θεον.»<sup>57</sup>

This argumentation is accepted by Lake and the majority of the subsequent academic scholarship. Lake regards the presence of God-fearers as a result of Judaism in the Hellenistic world becoming slack in their demand of requiring of them to observe the whole range of all the specifics of Jewish law.<sup>58</sup>

Even though the God-fearers lost, so to speak, a clearly defined connection to Judaism through the concept of the *ger toshav* and the associated Jewish teaching concerning the 7 Noahide laws, their existence as such was still not questioned.

In 1962, *Pauly-Wissowa*, the classic reference work, wrote the following about God-fearers: «they frequent the services of the synagogue, they are monotheists in the biblical sense, and they participate in some of the ceremonial requirements of the Law, but they

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<sup>54</sup> Tosefta, *Avodah Zarah* 8.4; Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 56a-60b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Melachim* 9:1; Greenstone 1925:648, «Laws which were supposed by the Rabbis to have been binding upon mankind at large even before the revelation at Sinai, and which are still binding upon non-Jews. ... Although only those laws which are found in the earlier chapters of the Pentateuch, before the record of the revelation at Sinai, should, it would seem, be binding upon all mankind, yet the Rabbis discarded some and, by hermeneutic rules or in accordance with some tradition ..., introduced others which are not found there.»

<sup>55</sup> Alternately translated as «foreign citizen».

<sup>56</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah zarah* 64b. Here the accepted legal definition of a *ger toshav* is anyone who in the presence of a rabbinical court of three accepts the seven precepts which were accepted by the descendants of Noah.; Novak 2011:23, «In Athens such resident aliens were called *metoikoi*; in Sparta, as we have seen, *perioikoi*. In the Ptolemaic empire they were designated *paroikoi* or *katoikoi*. All of these terms derive from the Greek *oikein*, "to dwell," just as the term *ger* comes from the Hebrew *gur*, having the same meaning. In the earliest period of Roman history, we find *peregrines*, ... The concept of *ger toshav*, then, has many ancient parallels.»; There is also a Biblical precedent for the term *ger toshav*, most explicitly in Lev. 25:47, but then used with a copula. See also Deut. 5:13-14; 14:20-29; 16:10-14; 24:13-14; 26:11-12; 31:11-12.

<sup>57</sup> In my master thesis I want to delve deeper into this area of different usages of the term *ger* and to reinvestigate the possible connection between «God-fearers» and the Jewish teaching concerning the 7 Noahide laws (see also «summary»).

<sup>58</sup> Lake 1933:76 (Volume I)

have not moved to full conversion to Judaism through circumcision. They are called ... *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi than theon*.»<sup>59</sup>

### The contemporary debate - «The disappearance of the God-fearer»?

A key question which much of the debate still evolves around is whether or not «God-fearer» is a technical term of a group of society or merely a reference to piety. Also, what role, if any, did they play in the life of the Temple or Synagogue? Were there any connection between the Jewish doctrine concerning the Noahide Laws and the practices of the «God-fearers»? How numerous were they? Did they exist?

Thomas Kraabel is not convinced by the existent evidence, which he points out as too heavily depending on the information provided by the New Testament. Were it not for Acts, he argues, we would not know of the existence of the term «God-fearers».<sup>60</sup> He consequently questioned their very existence and presents the theory that they were a literary invention made by Luke in order to serve as «a symbol in helping Luke to show how Christianity had become a Gentile religion legitimately and without losing its Old Testament roots.»<sup>61</sup> Kraabel also points to the unsatisfactory archeological evidence. «The synagogue inscriptions - over 100 of them - never use the term *phoboumenos* or *sebomenos*. *Theosebese* appears perhaps 10 times, but as an adjective describing Jews.<sup>62</sup>»<sup>63</sup>

Kraabel's argument is not that there didn't exist individual God-fearers, but that the «evidence» that scholars have relied upon simply does not lend itself to the conclusion that the God-fearers were a substantial social sub-class.<sup>64</sup> Rather the term God-fearer is seen as a general reference to piety. This is a view he shares with Max Wilcox.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> quoted in Kraabel 1981:113

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*:118

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*:120

<sup>62</sup> Other academic scholars argue differently, that the inscriptions most likely refer to God-fearers, and not to Jews (see below).

<sup>63</sup> Kraabel.:116

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*:124n11

<sup>65</sup> Wilcox 1981

Overman<sup>66</sup> argues against Kraabel and claim that we would know of the term «God-fearers» independent of Acts. «The phrase οι φοβουμενοι τον κυριον [used in the Septuagint] is essentially the same as οι φοβουμενοι τον θεον in Acts.»<sup>67</sup> Also, Luke would be familiar with the phrase «God-fearer» since he were steeped in the Septuagint.<sup>68</sup> Finally, he criticises Kraabel (and other academic scholars) for being too narrowly focused on the specific phrase οι φοβουμενοι/σεβομενοι τον θεον.

The specific name or title of a group of Gentile ‘sympathizers’ is far less important than the question concerning evidence from this period which might indicate that Jewish communities of the diaspora had included such a group of Gentiles in their life and worship.<sup>69</sup>

Millar also finds it «premature to proclaim the ‘disappearance’ of the God-fearers’». Contrary to Kraabel, Millar sees the various Greek expressions found in Acts, Josephus and inscriptions, to indicate that they «refer to a category of gentiles who were in some definite way attached to Jewish synagogues».<sup>70</sup>

Around the same time, inscriptions was found in Aphrodisias<sup>71</sup> which makes references to Jews, proselytes and *theosebeis*. Besides contributing to a renewed interest in the subject, these inscriptions served for some as the final proof of the existence of «God-fearers» as a technical term.

the most important conclusion of the Aphrodisias inscriptions is, I believe, that it establishes, once and for all, that there was a special class, at least at the time of the inscriptions, known as *theosebeis*, since this group is clearly identified as such, in contrast to proselytes and presumed born Jews.<sup>72</sup>

For others, such as mentioned Kraabel and Wilcox, the question remains open. The *theosbeis* might as well be non-Jews who had a good standing with the Jewish community,

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<sup>66</sup> Overman 1988

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.:21

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.:21

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.:22

<sup>70</sup> Millar 1986:168

<sup>71</sup> Reynolds and Tannenbaum 1987

<sup>72</sup> Feldman 1989:277

without this having to imply that they were religiously attached.<sup>73</sup> «It is quite possible that gentiles were friendly toward Jews simply as neighbors or fellow-townspeople.»<sup>74</sup>

### **Summary - and the way ahead (the master thesis)**

The evidence presented is the most commonly accepted, it is therefore not exhaustive. Neither is my presentation of the academic debate surrounding the God-fearers.

In my master thesis I want to attempt to shed some new light on the God-fearers by viewing them as a recognized class of Gentile adherents of the Noahide laws. I will not in any way try to prove this connection, but I want to test out the hypothesis that there is such a connection and view the available evidence from this perspective.

As such, I will attempt to reopen the door of former academic scholarship prior to Schurer's 2nd<sup>75</sup> edition of his major work, at the same time as I include the later epigraphical findings, the insights and knowledge of contemporary academic scholars and teachings found in traditional Judaism.

In order to reopen this door I must question Schurer and Lake's dismissal of the connection between the God-fearers and the *ger toshav*. True enough, the concepts belong to different historical settings, but in the Hellenistic times the status of *ger toshav* could not be granted to Gentiles interested in living in conjunction with Jews and to follow the teaching of the 7 Noahide laws. This is due to the term *ger toshav* being a legal term, which can only be granted to non-Jews when the Jubilee years are observed.<sup>76</sup> It is therefore explainable that more informal terms like «God-fearer» were used later.<sup>77</sup> Also, I must reasonably demonstrate that the Talmudic formulations of the Noahide commandments in all probability have an origin prior to them being written down.

On a side-note. It could (perhaps) be worthwhile also to delve into linguistic comparisons between the Hebrew root *שׁב* (used in the words (*ger*) *toshav*, *teshuva*

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<sup>73</sup> It could be argued that a modern equivalent is the title «Righteous among the Nations» (חסידים אומות) (העלם) given to non-Jews who risked their lives in helping to save Jewish life during world war 2. This title is regardless of religious affiliation and is purely honorific, maybe the term *theosebeis* also was honorific?

<sup>74</sup> MacLennan and Kraabel 1986

<sup>75</sup> Schurer 1890:316 (Volume II), «Thus, it was quite usual to say (as was also done in the first edition of the present work), that the *σεβομενοι* correspond to what in Rabbinical language are called «proselytes of the gate» (גרי השער), and the *προσηλυτοι*, on the other hand, to what in the same language are known as «proselytes of righteousness»

<sup>76</sup> Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 10:6

<sup>77</sup> Weiner 2011:422, «a Gentile who observes the Torah's Noahide Code and lives outside the Land of Israel (and is therefore not called a Ger Toshav, but nevertheless may be a "chassid," meaning truly pious [i.e., someone who fears God]).

[«repentance», «return», **sheva** [«seven», «oath», «complete», etc.) and the Greek root σεβο(ῆ) (used in the words εὐσεβῆς) [«devout», Acts 10:2], σεβομένοι and θεοσεβής]. Also the **Sabians** which are mentioned in the Quran could provide an important link between God-fearers and adherents of the laws of Noah.<sup>78</sup>

All the time the academic majority are of the opinion that God-fearers followed certain, but not all, Jewish practices, I want to investigate if these observed practices are in correspondance with the Noahide precepts as taught by traditional Judaism. These further investigations will then show whether or not my hypothesis is sustainable.

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<sup>78</sup> «Abd al-Rahman Ibn Zayd (d. 798 CE) wrote: "The Sābi'ūn say that their religion is a religion to itself ... and believe in only one God." He also wrote that they have: "no cult though their main belief is 'La ilaha il Allah'." He also remarked that: "the Sābi'ūn did not believe in the Prophet Muhammad (in the same way as his followers did), yet the polytheists were known to say of the Prophet and his companions 'these are the Sabians' comparing them to them." following the Din of Noah as a sect who read the Zabur [i.e. Psalms] akin to Christianity. They appear to be between Judaism and Magianism but are in fact closer to Judaism.» (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabians>)

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