

GOD-FEARERS:  
LITERARY FOIL OR HISTORICAL REALITY  
IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

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Paul's missionary work in Acts intersects four significant groups: Jews, Gentiles, proselytes, and "God-fearers." These distinct groups historically have had specific relationships to Second Temple Judaism. Are these relationships valid historical reconstructions? Are they distinct classes or is there a better explanation for the data?

Let us begin with definitions. The Halakhic definition of a Jew is, "[a] child born of Jewish parents or a convert to Judaism are considered Jews, possessing both the sanctity of the Jewish people (Ex. 19:6) and the obligation to observe the commandments."<sup>1</sup> One may notice the two aspects of this definition: the first is a racial followed by a religious. The racial aspect of the Jew played a significant role in Second Temple Judaism. Paul understood this (2 Cor. 11:22, Rom. 11:1, Phil. 3:5) and it explains why he chose to have Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy was racially a Jew, by virtue of his mother, and thereby must be circumcised.<sup>2</sup> This is the approach taken by many but there is no evidence that Paul understood Timothy to be a Jew. F.F. Bruce first wrote, "In the eyes of Jews, Timothy was a Gentile because he was the uncircumcised son of a Greek."<sup>3</sup> In his revised commentary he writes, "By Jewish law Timothy was a Jew, because he was the son of a Jewish mother, but because he was uncircumcised he

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. X (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Shaye Cohen, 'Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1-3)? Patristic Exegesis, Rabbinic Law, and Matrilineal Descent', *JBL* 105.2 (1986), 251-268. On page 264 he provides the reference from *m. Qidd.* 3.12. He concludes that Timothy was not understood to be Jewish at the time of Luke's writing.

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 322.

was technically an apostate Jew.”<sup>4</sup> Bruce presents this statement without any supporting evidence, evidence that is lacking. These two descriptions reveal the difficulty in properly ascertaining specific details about certain aspects of Second Temple Judaism and its relationship to its mission.<sup>5</sup>

The second group was the Gentile, defined as a, “...non-Jew. It was only during the later Second Temple period that a sharp distinction and a barrier of separation was erected between the Jew and the gentile.”<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that Philip engaged in the first full-fledged mission to the Gentiles, specifically, to a Gentile from the Sudan. Paul does minister to Gentiles, most notably at the Areopagus in Athens. Paul was primarily addressing Gentiles. The effort he invested to justify his position that faithful Gentiles were co-heirs alongside Jews also argues towards his audience being Gentile. The sections in the New Testament with the “justification of Gentiles” theme are the only sections that are complete themes and not interjections, explanations or glosses. That makes them primary, not the interpolations, if this is what is being suggested.

The Jewish proselytes involved, “acceptance of the Torah, including an identification with the historic experience of the Jewish people. For males, circumcision was required as the ultimate sign of Jewish identity; the convert must be purified in a ritual bath; and the convert was to bring a sacrifice to the temple.”<sup>7</sup> The extent and the method of Jewish proselytism has been a topic of much debate recently.<sup>8</sup> It appears that

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<sup>4</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 304.

<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). The consensus is that Judaism was a missionary religion., 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Enc. Jud.* VII, 410.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Stuehrenberg, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:504.

<sup>8</sup> James Carleton Paget, ‘Jewish Proselytism at the Time of Christian Origins: Chimera or Reality?’, *JSNT* 62 (1996), 65-103. James provides a dense presentation of the multiple works on this topic. This article is a good starting point for acclimating oneself to the topic and the implications of the topic for early Christian origins.

the best understanding of Jewish proselytism during Second Temple Judaism is one of appealing to the Gentiles by living a life that compels them to convert to Judaism. Nicolas, in Acts 6:5 appears to be a proselyte from some type of Jewish mission. Josephus records the following: Καὶ οὗτοι ἐκ τῶν Ἰσραηλῶν ἐν τῷ Σπασίνου κατὰ τὴν ἐκείνου ἰουδαϊσμοῦ ἐπιδασκόντων αὐτοὺς τὸν θεόν ὡς Ἰουδαῖοι. “Now during the time when Izates resided at Charax Spasini, a certain Jewish merchant named Ananias visited the king’s wives and taught them to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition.”<sup>9</sup> So, there appears to have been some type of mission going on during Second Temple Judaism, but it appears rather small in scope.<sup>10</sup>

“God-fearers” is a broad term referring to those who attached themselves to much of Judaism without becoming full-blown proselytes. Much of the discussion recently has revolved around the proper understanding of this group and its role, if any, in the formation of early Christianity.<sup>11</sup> A number of different terms have been considered, “sympathizers” appears to have gained support among those wishing to avoid to traditional connotations of “God-fearers.” There is no longer agreement concerning the relationship these Gentiles had with Judaism. It appears, however, an undetermined

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<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XX.34. Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1965) translation Louis Feldman., 407-09. See through verse 38

<sup>10</sup> Robert Hayward, ‘Abraham as Proselytizer at Beer-Sheba in the Targums of the Pentateuch’, *JBL* 117 (1998) 24-37. Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994), 89-145.

<sup>11</sup> Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: 5. Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 51-126.

amount of Gentiles had some connection with the synagogue even if the nature of that connection is unclear.<sup>12</sup>

### **Luke the Historian argues against “God-Fearers”**

One of the reasons the acceptance of “God-fearers” is questioned is because of the lack of acceptance of Acts as an historical document. Traditionally it has been seen similar to other Greek writers, such as Thucydides. It is assumed that Luke invented material just as other historians did in antiquity. Thucydides wrote:

As to the speeches that were made by different men, either when they were about to begin the war or when they were already engaged therein, it has been difficult to recall with strict accuracy the words actually spoken, both for me as regards that which I myself heard, and for those who from various other sources have brought to me reports. Therefore the speeches are given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting to the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said.<sup>13</sup>

Marshall suggests that Luke’s historiography must be compared not only with that of the Greek historiographers of that time and with Josephus, but also with the LXX and the historiography of the Old Testament.<sup>14</sup> Acts does have information that may be of use to the modern historian.<sup>15</sup> All these points may be obvious, however, one is on solid

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<sup>12</sup> Rainer Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 109. R.S. MacLennan and A.T. Kraabel, ‘The God-Fearers – A Literary and Theological Invention’, *BAR* 12:5 (1986), 46-53.

<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 54-6.

<sup>15</sup> Darrell Bock, ‘Understanding Luke’s Task: Carefully Building on Precedent (Luke 1:1-4),’ *Criswell Theological Journal* (1991), 183-202. Nicholas van Ommeren, ‘Was Luke an Accurate Historian?’ *BibSac* (Jan-Mar 1991), 57-71. On the other hand, Raymond Brown notes, “As for provable errors, the most obvious ones are in Palestine history rather than in Christian history. Whether or not, perhaps for anti-Sadducee reasons, Gamaliel the elder advocated some tolerance toward the early followers of Jesus (Acts 5:34-39) we cannot know, but his speech is probably for the most part a Lucan creation. Luke 2:2, combined with 1:5, is inaccurate about the date of the census of Quirinius; and there is a similar inaccuracy in Acts 5:37 about the revolt of Judas the Galilean directed against that census. By the time Acts was written, the Roman cohort Italica was in Syria and could be used when needed in Caesarea; it is not impossible that 10:1 is anachronistic in positing its presence there ca. 39. But such minor inaccuracies do not mean that we can dismiss the general historicity of Acts’ portrayal of early Christianity. ... Though he

historiographic ground in recognizing that Acts records some events and information that allows one to reconstruct early Christianity history to some extent, including the existence of “God-Fearers.”

Luke presents “God-Fearers” as the bridge between Judaism and Christianity. Their importance in the narrative of Acts cannot be overlooked. One must keep in mind that Luke may be presenting the “God-Fearers” as a buffer for his audience because of the sensibilities of the significant number of ethnic Jews in the ranks of the early Christians, as well as, against charges of being an illegal religion. The “God-Fearers” serve as a more palatable mediator between these two groups than the Gentiles thoroughly entrenched in the rest of the Greco-Roman religions of the day. This is the thesis of this article: Luke uses the “God-Fearers,” which are historical, as a literary foil to buttress the religious sensibilities of the constituency of early ethnic Jewish Christians and to assure the continued early protection for the fledgling movement. This allows for Luke’s usage in Acts while doing justice to the archaeological evidence that seems to indicate that the “God-Fearers” were not of significant number or influence in the larger scheme of things.

### **Greco-Roman Influence**

Early Christianity was clearly attached to Judaism in its Greco-Roman settings. It received the same status as its parent religion (as a *religio licita*, “approved religion”). It is interesting to note that the Centurion would have to continue to be a part of the Roman Emperor Cult, but is still referred to as a “God-Fearer.” The whole issue of whether those

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wrote more in a biblical style than in a classical historical style, it is not ridiculous to think that the author might have been a fitting candidate for membership in the brotherhood of Hellenistic historians...” Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (1997), 321-22. This more skeptical approach, when applied to the God-Fearers, leads one to doubt their existence, see: A.T. Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the “God-Fearers””, *Numen* 28,2 (1981), 118.

who claim “Jesus is Lord” can also recognize Caesar as “Lord.” If not, it would amount to treason (*maiestas*). How does this concept impact early Christian origins?<sup>16</sup>

Christianity remained *illicita* until Constantine’s Edict of Milan of 313 A.D. I suspect it was declared *illicita* by virtue of the verdict in Paul’s trial, which I would date in 58 A.D. In any case it had to be *illicita* by 64 A.D. in order for the persecutions associated with the fire of Rome to be possible. It was not yet *illicita* at the time of Paul's appearance before Gallio as recorded in Acts (54 A.D.?).<sup>17</sup>

### Greco-Roman Archaeology

An inscription from Aphrodisias is important to an informed discussion concerning “God-fearers.” It lists 54 Gentiles along side of a number of Jews who are collectively referred to as *qeosebij* or “God-fearers.”<sup>18</sup> Although various scholars argue that the title “God-fearer” here means the Gentiles concerned have simply expressed their support for the Jews as fellow townspeople, it seems more likely that the term indicates that these Gentiles were linked in some formal way to the Jewish community, without being proselytes.

Does the use of *qeosebij* indicate a formal connection of a group of “God-fearers” with Second Temple Judaism?<sup>19</sup> As MacLennan, Kraabel, Murphy-O'Connor, and R. Anscough have noted, it is highly questionable that it does, at least if by “formal connection” or “being linked in some formal way” one means adopting the beliefs –

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<sup>16</sup> W.H.C. Frend *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church : A Study of a Conflict from the MacCabees to Donatus*.

<sup>17</sup> M. Jack Suggs, "Concerning the Date of Paul's Macedonian Ministry," *Novum Testamentum*, 4 (1960), 60-68

<sup>18</sup> J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias*, Cambridge Philological Society, Supplementary Volume 12, Cambridge 1987, 48-66.

<sup>19</sup> For a review of the range of meanings, consult the series of articles that appeared under the title "God-fearers: Did They Exist?" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1986, 44-63. These include "The God-Fearers: A Literary and Theological Invention" by Robert S. MacLennan and A. Thomas Kraabel; "Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphrodite" by Robert F. Tannenbaum; and "The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers" by Louis H. Feldman." There is also a study by Jerome Murphy O'Connor entitled "Lots of Godfearers?" in *Review Biblique* 1992. And classical references are examined by Feldman in "Jewish Sympathizers in Classical Literature and Inscriptions", *TAPhA* 81 [1950] 200-208.

especially the monotheism – of the Synagogues and/or becoming Jewish proselytes. For at least nine of those named in the inscription as *qeoseboi* are willing members of, and full functionaries within, the Aphrodisias city cult dedicated to gods other than Yahweh. Now if one holds that *qeoseboi* designates Gentiles who attached themselves to synagogues, and thereby implicitly renounced (as Jewish proselytes had to do to be recognized as such) worship of all God's but Yahweh (let alone designates Gentiles who were on the verge of circumcision), then obviously this cannot be the meaning that *qeosebij* has in the inscription. The application would involve a contradiction.

More over, the inscription, which was first published in 1987 by Joyce Reynolds and Tannenbaum dates from CE 210. Which begs the question, if a term possessed a technical meaning in the third century what relevance is that for the term having the same technical meaning in the first century? One cannot gratuitously assert that they have the same technical meanings without further evidence. Therefore, one must resist, on methodological grounds to assert that the usage at Aphrodisias is the same usage that Luke employs in Acts.

As to other archaeological evidence, there is a Jewish manumission inscription from the first century CE in which the term/title appears.<sup>20</sup> So there is no doubt that the term was employed outside of Luke in Luke's era. But the questions still remain as to whether one can simply assume that even in that inscription the term bore its Lukan meaning (Murphy O'Connor thinks not), and even if it did, what the appearance of that

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<sup>20</sup> See CIRB 71 in the catalogue of inscriptions referred to by J. Murphy O'Connor in his 1992 Review Biblique article on "Lots of God Fearers?" There is also a 2<sup>nd</sup> century inscription uses the same term Luke does, *theon sebon*. See Feldman's "The Omnipresence of the God-fearers. Also, Besides the Aphrodisias inscription, also a Second Century AD inscription from the Roman theatre at Miletus in Turkey speaks of a special section in the theatre reserved for God-fearers.

term in inscriptions outside of Luke indicates with respect to the actual size of the group to whom it is applied.

Perhaps the single most important piece of evidence is the existence at the Jerusalem Temple, around 19/20 BCE of the huge “Court of the Gentiles”:

The entire complex was enclosed in the Court of the Gentiles, represented today by the great platform of the Haram al-Sherif. The Court of the Gentiles covered about 35 acres, which is much larger than the court of the previous temple, and it was extended from its former square shape and made into a huge rectangle, paved and enclosed by a wall on all four sides. Greco-Roman Corinthian columns surrounded the interior.<sup>21</sup>

The existence of such a massive “Court of the Gentiles” at the Temple surely would indicate a considerable interest among the Gentiles in the Jewish religion.

It would appear that given the sketchy amount of archaeological evidence (i.e., the actual number of extra Lukan instances of the term *qeosebh* – which, methodologically, is surely what should be used to determine that term’s extra Lukan meaning -- is rather small), scholars who take this evidence as an indication that there were large numbers of “God-fearers” place a weight upon it that it simply cannot bear.

So, what can one confidently assert concerning “God-fearers” based on the archaeological evidence? This and other inscriptions, and some literary sources, strongly suggest that there were a number of Gentile “God-fearers” who were formally associated with the Jewish community, were involved in at least some facets of synagogue life and kept some of the commandments without becoming proselytes who joined the community.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <http://campus.northpark.edu/history/WebChron/MiddleEast/HerodTemple.html>

<sup>22</sup> P.R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 145-66); Josephus *Ant.* 14.7.2 §110; *J.W.* 7.3.3 § 45).



**Did Paul say he targeted “God-Fearers?”**

The difficulty here is that Paul himself never speaks of targeting Gentile sympathizers,<sup>23</sup> his mission strategy as he reveals it is quite different from the way Luke portrays it, and the Lukan Jew first/Godfearers/Gentiles scheme may be a wholly Lukan construction. It is partly the difference between the mission strategy that appears in Paul’s letters and that with which Luke presents us that led Kraabel to claim that Luke’s assertions about the existence of Gentile “God-fearers” are fictitious. It would appear that Kraabel’s conclusions are unsatisfactory for most evangelicals. It also appears that there are other more plausible solutions for the lack of references to “God-fearers” in the Epistles.

What about the initial commissioning of Paul to preach to the Gentiles, for all intents and purposes he evangelized Gentiles that were associated with the synagogues of the Diaspora, in Damascus and Arabia.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Paul’s ministry to Gentiles began with the sympathizers of Judaism. When Paul ‘goes west young man’ he targets this group (Acts 13:50; 16:14; 18:6-7; cf. 13:43; 17:4; 17:17).<sup>25</sup> So, it would be anachronistic for Paul to mention the “God-fearers” because they are now believers in Jesus. Asking why Paul does not mention “God-fearers” is similar to asking, “Why Paul is not mentioned in the Gospels?”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This is the term Sanders prefers. E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief; 63 BCE - 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, and Phil: Trinity Press International, 1992), 265.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer. *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years*. London: SCM Press, 1997, 107-08.

<sup>25</sup> Also, Rainer Riesner. *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Footnote 50 on page 156 of Scot McKnight’s, *A Light Among The Nations* writes, “It is a fact that not all ‘sympathizers’ had religious motives; so Kraabel, “Christian Evidence,” 649...Kraabel is known for his famous essay “Disappearance,” but it is now clear that he means (I’m not sure he meant so at the time of “Disappearance”) disappearance from the narrative of Acts; see his forthcoming essay “Beloved.” I

Barrett provides the following correction to Kraabel's views:

What is important is (a) that some Gentiles were attracted to Jewish ethics, theology and worship, but did not become proselytes; (b) that in some places (one, Cornelius!) they formed a recognized and valued element in the synagogue community, though the degree of their religious attachment is not specified and remains unknown; (c) that such Gentiles presented a great opportunity to Christian evangelists; (4) that Luke was aware of this.<sup>27</sup>

The issue of Luke's awareness of this causes one to reflect on his emphasis on Gentiles in general in Luke-Acts. For example, Is Luke's stress on them around the synagogue as interlocutors with Paul based on a historically accurate description of what occurred? Or is something else going on there? This speaks to the heart of the issue! Recent work by Kraabel says no, it's not historical, but is part of Luke's theological agenda.<sup>28</sup> It appears that Paul and Luke, for that matter, were engaging in what was accepted practice in Second Temple Judaism. Although Diaspora Jews do not seem to have been involved in an organized active mission to convert Gentiles, they do seem to have welcomed Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish community either as God-fearers or proselytes.<sup>29</sup>

It appears that Jesus was aware of this, as well, in Matthew 23:15. The role of the Jews here then was passively to bear witness through their existence and life. It also seems likely that at least some Diaspora synagogues were visible and open to outsiders. It

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detect somewhat of a concession on his part: perhaps from Luke the falsifier (as theologian) to Luke the magnifier (as theologian)."

<sup>27</sup> C.K. Barrett ICC on Acts, 501.

<sup>28</sup> For a quick summary, see Richard Ascough's *What Are They Saying About the Formation of the Pauline Churches?*

<sup>29</sup> Lieu, North and Rajak, eds., *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), 53-78

is also noteworthy that we know of some proselytes (Josephus J.W. 2.19.2 § 520; 2.20.2 §559-61; Acts 6:5 and some inscriptions), although their numbers are quite small.

How is one to properly understand Matthew 23:15 where Jesus mentions that the Pharisees “traverse the sea and the dry land to make a single proselyte”? First of all, it is somewhat obvious that this verse is a “hyperbolic invective.”<sup>30</sup> But it does raise the question, to what degree, if any; did first century Jews try to make converts? Words are of course very slippery things and it is often hard to get our hands on them so as to properly assess their meaning.

As for the Greek term *proshlutoj*, in the LXX<sup>31</sup> it is used to translate the Hebrew term גֵּר a word designating an immigrant.<sup>32</sup> Later it became a technical term for a convert to Judaism. Karl Georg Kuhn has identified ten inscriptions referring to Jewish proselytes, including two from Jerusalem and eight from Italy. Concerning these he has written:

There proselytes were buried with other Jews, in contrast to God-fearers who had not become full Jews and were thus buried among Gentiles. This means ... that proselytes were counted as full members of the community, whereas the God-fearers were in practice Gentiles.”<sup>33</sup> But evidence that Jews actively sought out converts is very slim. John J. Collins writes: “There is some evidence of active proselytizing in Rome. In 139 BCE the Jews were allegedly expelled from Rome “because they attempted to transmit their sacred rites to the Romans” [Valerius Maximus]. The expulsion under Tiberius in 19 CE may have had a similar reason: “they were converting many of the natives to their customs” [Cassius Dio]. Such active proselytizing is not well attested elsewhere.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Davies & Allison *Matthew*, ICC (1997), 288.

<sup>31</sup> “A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint” edited by J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Paul F. Stuehnenberg, “Proselyte.” ABD 5:503-505.

<sup>33</sup> Kuhn, Karl Georg “PROSHLUTOS.” TDNT 6:727-744.

<sup>34</sup> Collins, John J. “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century” in: “To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christian, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity” (edited by Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs; Scholars Press, 1985), 170-71.

Davies & Allison write: “The current consensus, with which we are uneasy, seems to be that available evidence does not establish Judaism as much of a proselytizing religion before or after AD 70. Certainly our verse, which is hyperbolic invective, can scarcely be turned into good ‘evidence of intense Jewish missionary activity.’”<sup>35</sup> Leaving Mt 23:15 aside as obviously hyperbolic, one can say that first century Judaism did attract some proselytes (Gentiles converting to Judaism), but it is unclear to what degree Jews actively sought converts. One’s determination about the topic hinges on what one means by “actively.”

There was fairly widespread adoption of some Jewish customs such as lighting of lamps (Josephus Ag. Ap. 2.38 § 282) and not working on the Sabbath (Ovid *Ars amatoria* 1.413-16, see below) by Gentiles who did not come into the more formal category of “God-fearers.” Clearly Gentiles were attracted to Judaism to varying degrees throughout the period. One may ask, however, does this evidence argue for a technical understanding of “God-fearers” in Acts?

### **Greco-Roman Literature**

The following references were made in Trebilco’s article on Diaspora Judaism in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*.<sup>36</sup> Juvenal, *Satirae* 14.96-99, concerning keeping commandments without joining; Juvenal, *Satirae* 14.96-106, concerning proselytes; Persius, *Sat.* 5.179-84, concerning lighting lamps and Ovid, *Ars amatoria* 1.413-16, concerning not working on the Sabbath. Trebilco’s references, upon

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<sup>35</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:288.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Martin & Peter Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*. IVP, 1997. 292. Trebilco is a respected author on this topic, but to the question of inscriptions, mentioned earlier, and as to why he quotes these authors as evidence for his view, he does so based on the material from the section on Godfearers from Vol 3.1, pp. 160ff of the Vermes, Schurer work. It is interesting to note how Schurer is followed here. Be that as it may, if one is interested in seeing what the other inscriptions are as well as why the Juvenal and other texts which may be found dubious as references to God fearers are taken to be so, please check Schurer.

first glance, are significant and appear to argue forcefully for the traditional understanding of “God-fearers.” When one studies the references, however, they appear to have the same inadequacies that the archaeological evidence had. They simply do not support a technical meaning for Lukan usage and do not shed significant light on the “God-fearers” in Acts.

Juvenal is often quoted as support for the Lukan concept of a “God-fearer,”  
Juvenal, *Satirae* 14.96-99:

Quidam sortiti metuentem sabbata patrem nil praeter nubes et caeli numen adorant, nec distare putant humana carne suillam, qua pater abstinuit, mox et praepudia ponunt.. Some, having had a father who reveres the Sabbath worship nothing but clouds and heaven's divinity, nor do they reckon pork, from which their father abstained, as any different from human flesh, soon they put away their “praepudia.”<sup>37</sup>

Juvenal, *Satirae* 14.96-106. concerning proselytes is a continuation of the same passage:

... mox et praepudia ponunt; Romanas autem soliti contemnere leges Iudaicum ediscunt et servant ac metuunt ius, tradidit arcano quodcumque volumine Moyses, non monstrare vias eadem nisi sacra colenti, quaestum ad fontem solos deducere verpos. sed pater in causa, cui septima quaeque fuit lux ignava et partem vitae non attigit ullam.... soon they put away their foreskin; though quite accustomed to flouting Roman laws they learn and keep and revere Jewish law, whatever Moses handed down in his mysterious tome, not to show the ways except to one who worships the same sacred [things], and to conduct only circumcised persons to the much-desired font. But the father is to blame [for all of this], to whom each seventh light [day?] was idle and did not affect any part of life [i.e., left the whole of life untouched].<sup>38</sup>

If one carefully studies the text, it seems that Juvenal is speaking solely of Jews not of Gentiles. In fact his target here is Jewish sons of Jews and his scorn here is leveled against them for not being Gentiles. It appears that these passages should not be used

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<sup>37</sup> [My translation, drawing on Ramsay, LCL 91, p. 271f] Is he making an analogy between putting away pork and putting away the foreskin in the act of circumcision?

<sup>38</sup> [My translation, drawing on Ramsay, LCL 91]

when attempting to establish the existence of “God-fearers.” One must ask, what within in it could possibly allow this text to be taken as a satire on Gentiles who are drawn to Jewish ways? Therefore, it seems that this text cannot be used as evidence of Juvenal's knowledge and acknowledgement of the existence of “God-fearers”

Juvenal seems to be contemplating a younger generation of Jews, perhaps attending Roman schools, and hence potentially productive Roman citizens, who nevertheless are simultaneously being insidiously indoctrinated in the strange ways of their fathers, and who will presumably end up as odd and socially marginal and exclusionary as they. When Juvenal is properly contextualized it appears to support a non-technical use by Luke. If this is the case, it weakens Trebilco's argument in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, he also references Persius, Sat. 5.179-84. concerning lighting lamps:

...at cum

Herodis venere dies unctaque fenestra dispositae pinguem nebulam vomuere lucernae portantes violas rubrumque amplexa catinum cauda natat thynni, tumet alba fidelia vino, labra moves tacitus recutitaque sabbata palles.

....but when

Herod's birthday comes round, and, placed about the greasy windows the lamps wearing violets have vomited their luscious cloud [of smoke], when the floppy tunnies' tails are curled round the ruddy dish and the white vessel swells with wine, you silently move your lips, turning pale at the circumcised Sabbath.

Ovid, *Ars amatoria* 1.413-16. not working on the Sabbath.

Tu licet incipias qua flebilis Allia luce Vulneribus Latiis sanguinolenta fluit, Quaque die redeunt, rebus minus apta gerendis, Culta Palaestino septima festa Syro, Magna superstitio tibi sit natalis amicae: Quaque aliquid dandum est, illa sit atra dies.

The last two passages are simply statements of cultural customs that were connected with the Jewish people that were co-opted by Gentiles. The evidentiary value

of these two passages is suspect. Although, there does appear to be some type of interest in the Sabbath observance, albeit for altruistic purposes, numerous “God-fearers” do not appear to be the case. It would appear that Trebilco’s article on “God-fearers” breaks no new ground and actually attempts to support his views with suspect texts.

Other Greco-Roman literary evidence, however, may corroborate Trebilco’s and Schuler’s reliance on these classical works. For example, as supplied by Tertullian, here is what appears like a catalog of Jewish religious customs that the Gentiles already adopted widely in his time. Tertullian in “Ad Nations” addresses a Gentile critic of Christianity in this passage.

By resorting to these customs, you deliberately deviate from your own religious rites to those of strangers. For the Jewish feasts an the Sabbath and “the Purification,”(5) and Jewish also are the ceremonies of the lamps,(6) and the fasts of unleavened bread, and the “littoral prayers,”(7) all which institutions and practices are of course foreign from your gods.<sup>39</sup>

Now, it is interesting that Kraabel, in concluding his examination of “God-fearers,” makes a plea for historians to stop using the figure of the “God-fearer” as the quintessential example of the “inadequacy of Judaism” in the Greco-Roman world. According to him, “The New Testament, provides no evidence of such a failure, if the God-fearer texts are properly understood.”<sup>40</sup>

This appears to be the main point of Kraabel’s analysis, that is, he is responding to a perception that the existence of “God-fearers” has anti-Semitic implications. His statement concerning Hengel further evidences this, “This comment by Hengel is doubly unfortunate, in that it moves from what may be a misinterpretation of Acts to what is

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<sup>39</sup> [http://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/humftp/E-text/Tertullian/ad\\_nationes\\_1.html](http://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/humftp/E-text/Tertullian/ad_nationes_1.html)

<sup>40</sup> Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-Fearers’”, 122

surely an anti-Jewish statement.”<sup>41</sup> It appears self-evident that no scholar today would wish to use this term in such a manner. In any case, Kraabel’s thesis is clearly irrelevant to this present study, because if “God-fearers” existed then the vitality of Second Temple Judaism within the Greco-Roman world is established, not its inadequacy.

### **Definition of a “God-fearers”**

The traditional understanding of God-fearers, i.e. F.F. Bruce, “God-fearers were Gentiles who attached themselves in varying degrees to the Jewish worship and way of life without as yet becoming full proselytes.” impacts one’s view of the makeup of the original audience for Acts. If it can be established that there were a significant number of these individuals in the early church, (Acts 2:10; 6:5; 8:27-39) it also impacts synoptic choices later? In other words, the existence of “God-fearers” is important to understanding the original readers/hearers of the New Testament and provides a rubric under which to evaluate the editorial intentions of the writers, especially Luke.<sup>42</sup> It appears the general tendency in New Testament scholarship today is still to accept that the use of the term “God-fearer” by Luke was reflective of his social milieu, and that

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<sup>41</sup> Kraabel, “The God-Fearers – A Literary and Theological Invention”, 47. Here is Hengel’s statement, “The large number of God-fearers standing between Judaism and paganism in the New Testament period...shows the indissoluble dilemma of the Jewish religion in ancient times. As it could not break free from its nationalistic roots among the people, it had to stoop to constant and ultimately untenable compromises.” Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Phil, 1975), v. 1, 313.

<sup>42</sup> Darrell Bock in “Scripture and The Realisation of God’s Promises” writes, “This observation about Israel-nations juxtaposition, along with the attention paid to God-fearers in Acts, may suggest that attempts to argue that Acts is written primarily to Gentiles or Jews may be a false dichotomy. More plausible is an explanation that argues that Gentiles belong in the new community, and need not be Jews to fit. Perhaps Luke writes to God-fearers who had left Judaism for Christianity. These Gentiles had originally discovered God through a different route than the new community was arguing through Jesus. Both the amount of appeal to the OT and the racial mix in various passages suggest this point. Imagine the reshuffling of perspective that such an entry into the community required. Theophilus may have been a God-fearer who came to Jesus from Judaism, but now wonders if he should go back.” I. Howard Marshall & David Peterson eds. *Witness to the Gospel: the Theology of Acts*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 59-60.



there were ancient “God-fearers.”<sup>43</sup> The most beneficial definition for this present study is from Louis Feldman who writes, a “God-fearer” or sympathizer:

. . . refers to an ‘umbrella group,’ embracing many different levels of interest and commitment to Judaism, ranging from people who supported synagogues financially, (perhaps to get the political support of the Jews) to people who accepted the Jewish view of God in pure or modified form to people who observed certain distinctively Jewish practices, notably the Sabbath. For some this was an end in itself; for others it was a step leading ultimately to full conversion to Judaism.<sup>44</sup>

This definition avoids the monolithic Lukan understanding and attempts to incorporate archaeological and literary evidence with the Biblical text.

### **Inventory of Usage in Acts**

In Acts 10:2 one reads, *eusebhj kai. foboumenoj ton qeon* “a devout man and one who feared God.” In Acts 10:22 Cornelius is referred to as *dikaioj kai. foboumenoj ton qeon* “a righteous and God-fearing.” In Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:16 he refers to *oi` foboumenoi ton qeon* “you who fear God.” Paul reiterates in Acts 13:26 *oi en umih foboumenoi ton qeon* “those among you who fear God.” An interesting linguistic change occurs; at this point Luke changes the word he uses to describe this group. In Acts 13:43 one is surprised to read *twh sebomenwn proshlwtwn* “of God-fearing (worshipping) proselytes.” One is even more surprised to read in Acts 13:50 *taj sebomenaj gunaikaj taj euschmonaj* “the God-fearing (worshipping) women of high station.” It is interesting to note the negative connotations of this group and that some modern translations refer to them as “devout.” In Acts 16:14 Lydia is referred to as a *sebomenh ton qeon* “a fearer

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<sup>43</sup> John G. Gager, "Jews, Gentiles, and Synagogues in the Book of Acts," *HTR* 79, no. 1–3 (1986): 91–99; Irina A. Levinskaya, "The Inscription from Aphrodisias and the Problem of God-Fearers," *TynBul* 41 (1990): 312–318; Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 145–166; J. Andrew Overman, "The God-Fearers: Some Neglected Features" in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel*, edited by J. Overman and R. MacLennan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 145–152.

<sup>44</sup> Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 344.

(worshipper) of God.” In Acts 18:7 Titus Justus, as well, is referred to as *sebomenou ton qeou* “a fearer (worshipper) of God.”

“God-fearer” appears to be a proper translation of *fobew* and *sebw*. Luke uses the former term in the first half and the book and switches to the latter in the last half of the book. This seems to be for stylistic reasons because of the lack of a technical use for the term throughout. The ranges of meanings for the terms overlap and there is no consistent contextual usage either; if one considered the contextual usage of Acts 19:27 and its reference to Artemis worship then one may have some support for the inter-mingling of the two terms.<sup>45</sup> So, Luke’s understanding of these two terms appears to be a “gentile sympathizer of Judaism” (10:2, 22; 13:16, 26; 16:14; 18:7) but can refer to a “pious or devout Jew” (13:43; 13:50) and a pagan worshipper (19:27). Therefore, one should not be too quick to refer to “God-fearer” as a technical term. Actually it is not an either/or situation. Luke uses it with the sense of “a Gentile sympathizer – one who has attached himself to the synagogue and renounced polytheism.” But Josephus and certain inscriptions (i.e., one at Miletus) show that it sometimes bore the meaning “Jew.” Other data indicates that it was simply “those Gentiles friendly to Jews.”

### **Conclusion**

A careful examination of the groups to whom Paul ministered, the historical genre in which Luke wrote, Greco-Roman influence, archaeology, and literature reveal that the concept of “God-fearer” was very diverse in antiquity. The concept of “God-fearer” was expanded to include devout Jews as well as, an umbrella term for Gentiles with varied interests in Judaism. Luke understood this diverse and non-technical moniker as an

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<sup>45</sup> BDAG, 917.

appropriate bridge to handle the religious sensibilities of Jewish Christians who would naturally have questions about the new members of the community of believer's former lives in paganism. More importantly, Luke saw the widespread usage of *foβew* and *seβw* throughout the Roman Empire as a perfect protective shield to assure protection for the fledgling movement.