THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE 'GOD-FEARERS'

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I

It is notoriously difficult to comprehend what happens when one religious tradition comes in contact with another. The problem arises first of all from the fact that we approach such a confluence either from one tradition or from the other. In the West, at least, we usually lack a paradigm which may equally and fairly include both. When the examples come from the ancient world, the problems are compounded; not only are the sources incomplete, but modern prejudices and presuppositions often get in the way. Such misreadings may distort our perception of the ancient traditions themselves, as well as of the effects of their meeting. This paper explores one instance in which such a serious misreading of the evidence has taken place.¹

For many years we have had an image of those Gentiles who stood at the intersection of Judaism and Greco-Roman piety in the classical world; they are called the ‘‘God-fearers.’’ In 1962 the classicists’ primary reference work, Pauly-Wissowa, distinguished God-fearers from proselytes (= converts). The God-fearers are more numerous: ‘‘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 have not moved to full conversion to Judaism through circumcision. They are called...sebomenoi or phoboumenoi ton theon.’’² The Encyclopedia Judaica in 1971 stated that ‘‘in the Diaspora there was an increasing number, perhaps millions by the first century, of sebomenoi (...God-fearers), gentiles who had not gone the whole route towards conversion.’’³

For Michael Avi-Yonah these God-fearers were a ‘‘numerous class’’ of Gentiles under the Empire; ‘‘although most of them did not feel able to shoulder the whole burden of the Law, they sympathized with Judaism...They were to be found in the provinces as
well as in Italy, even at Rome... As they often belonged to the upper classes, their mere presence added in the eyes of the authorities to the weight of Jewish influence..." (1976).

David Flusser wrote in 1976 that the existence of these "many God-fearers" reveals that "Hellenistic Judaism had almost succeeded in making Judaism a world religion in the literal sense of the words." Martin Hengel agrees with Flusser on the number and influence of the God-fearers, but draws different conclusions: "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 nationalist roots among the people, it had to stoop to constant and ultimately untenable compromises" (1975).

The reference to New Testament times is not out of place, because the best-known God-fearer is a Roman soldier who eventually becomes a Christian, the centurion Cornelius of chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. Indeed, it is Acts which has always provided the canonical picture of the God-fearer; the authors cited above rely on these eleven verses in Acts: 10: 2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26 (where the operative word is phoboumenos/oi) and 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7 (which have some form of sebomenos). No other clear references are found in the rest of the New Testament.

In the traditional reconstruction of the historical situation, the characteristics of the God-fearer are as follows:

1) They are gentiles interested in Judaism, but not converts = proselytes; the men are not circumcised.

2) They are found in some numbers in the synagogues of the Diaspora, from Asia Minor to Rome.

3) The God-fearer as traditionally understood is particularly significant for students of the New Testament and early Christianity; it was from the ranks of the God-fearers that Christianity supposedly had recruited a great number of its first members.

The evidence which produced this picture of the God-fearer was overwhelmingly literary; Acts provided the initial description, and to it were added isolated references from classical literature and Greek and Latin inscriptions. Always the technical terms were drawn from Luke, the author of the Gospel and of Acts. These are