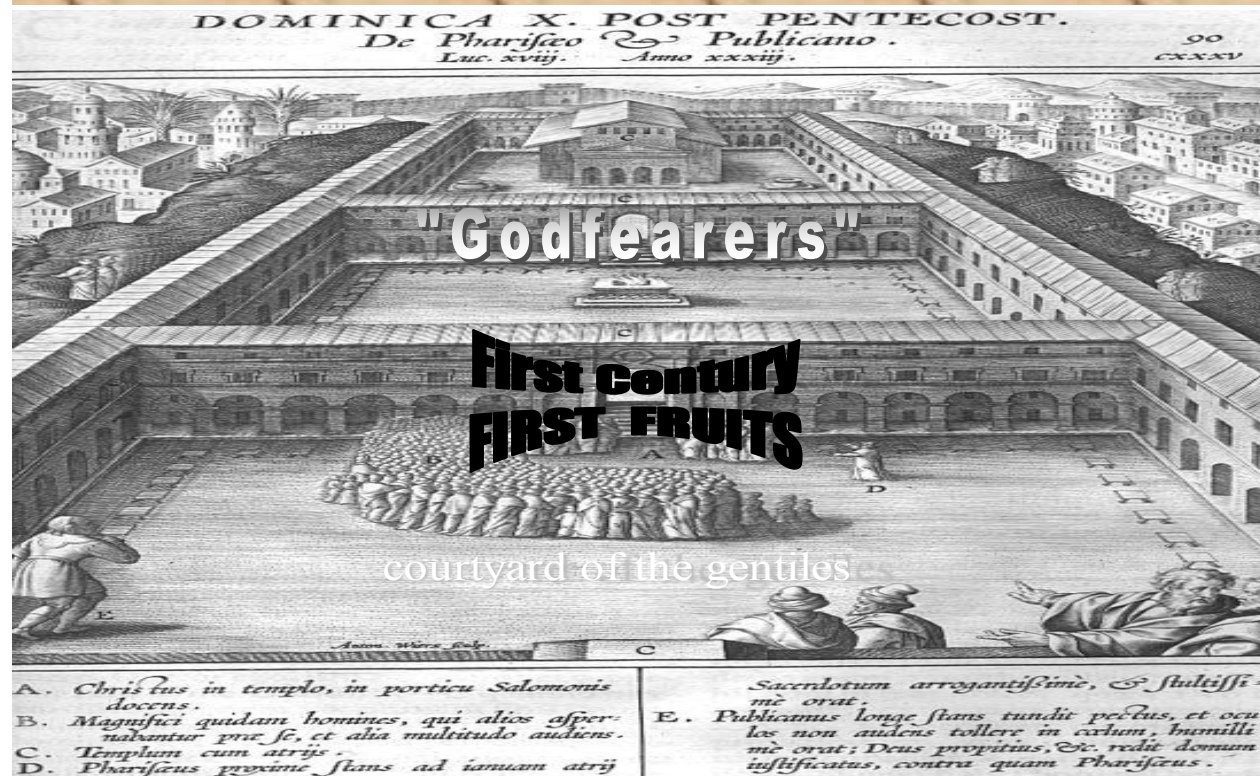


# God-fearers - Then & Now - First Converts

By David Lee Burris





For the **LORD** will  
**have mercy** on Jacob,  
& will still choose Israel,  
and **settle them** in  
their own land.  
The stranger SHALL  
**join himself** with THEM,  
and they **shall cleave**  
to the house of JACOB.

## ISAIAH 14 ONE

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## Barnes' Notes on the Bible

**And the stranger shall be joined to them** - The 'stranger,' here, probably refers to those foreigners who would become proselytes to their religion, while they were in Babylon. Those proselytes would be firmly united with them, and would return with them to their own land. Their captivity would be attended with this advantage, that many even of those who led them away, would be brought to embrace their religion, and to return with them to their own country. If it is asked what "evidence" there is that any considerable number of the people of Chaldea became Jewish proselytes, I answer, that it is expressly stated in [Esther 8:17](#): 'And many of the people of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them. Ezra, indeed, has not mentioned the fact, that many of the people of Babylonia became proselytes to the religion of the Jews, but it is in accordance with all that we know of their history, and their influence on the nations with which, from time to time, they were connected, that many should have been thus joined to them. We know that in subsequent times many of other nations became proselytes, and that multitudes of the Egyptians, the Macedonians, the Romans, and the inhabitants of Asia Minor, embraced the Jewish religion, or **became what were called 'proselytes of the gate.'** They were circumcised, and were regarded as entitled to a part of the privileges of the Jewish people (see [Acts 2:9-11](#); compare [Acts 17:4](#), [Acts 17:17](#)). Tacitus, speaking of his time, says, that every abandoned man, despising the religion of his country, bears tribute and revenue to Jerusalem, whence it happens that the number of the Jews is greatly increased.' - ("Hist." v. 5.) That the Jews, therefore, who were in Babylon should induce many of the Chaldeans during their long captivity to become proselytes, is in accordance with all their history.

## FOREIGN RESIDENTS WELCOME



### FOREIGN RESIDENTS BECAME PROSELYTES, & THE MALES SUBMITTED TO CIRCUMCISION

*"If a foreigner resides with you and he wants to celebrate the Passover to Jehovah, every male of his must be circumcised. Then he may come near to celebrate it, and he will become like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised man may eat of it. One law will apply for the native and for the foreigner who is residing among you."*

*(Exodus 12:48, 49)*



## God-fearers and Proselytes

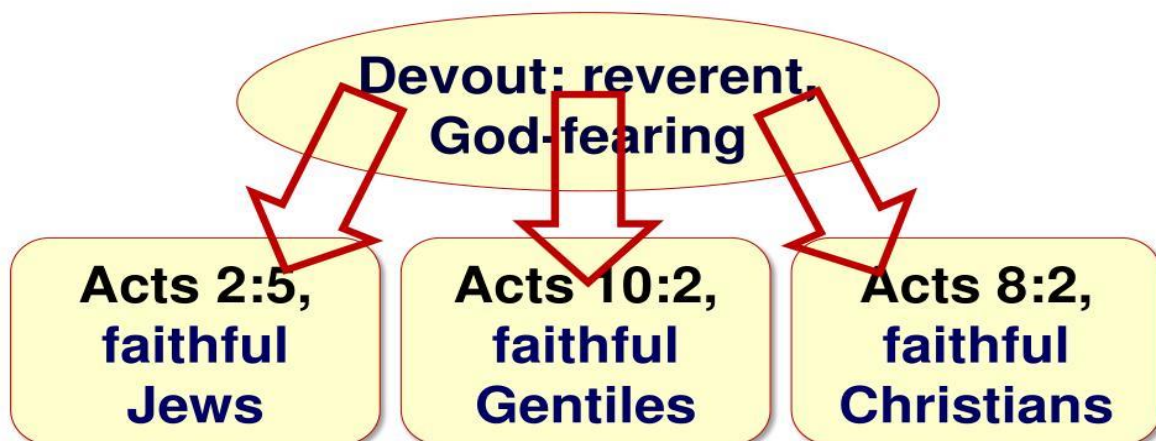
- Ac.13:16, Israelites AND **God-fearers**; 26.
- Ac.13:42-43, Jews AND **devout proselytes**

### God-fearers

“In the Acts, ‘proselytes of the gate’ are called [‘men that worship God’]. . . and simply [A.V. *the devout persons*] [R.V. *devout proselytes*] – Th., 572

## Proselytes: Ac.10, Cornelius

- Trained in same OT passages as Jews





# Cornelius Becomes a Christian



AP STAFF



From Issue: Discovery 12/01/08


Have you ever known someone who did some very good things, but was not a Christian? There are many people who help others, but never go to church. These people may even believe in God and pray to Him, but they have never been taught the truth about Christ. There is a man like this in the Bible. His name was Cornelius.

Cornelius was a leader in the Roman army. He was stationed in the Jewish city of Caesarea, where he learned about God from the Jews. He is described as “a devout man and **one who feared God** with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2). It is clear that Cornelius tried to be a very good man and wanted to please God. Yet, the things he did were not enough. Praying and helping the poor are good things to do, but by themselves they could never save him (Ephesians 2:8-9). **Cornelius wanted to please God**, so the Lord sent Peter to him to tell him what he needed to do. Cornelius’ conversion is very important, because he was the first Gentile the Bible records who became a Christian. Up to this point, God allowed the Jews (and Samaritans) to hear the Gospel. It was first preached to the Jews by Peter and the rest of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter would be the first to present the Gospel to the Gentiles. God told Peter that the Gospel was now for everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, and he began his sermon to Cornelius by saying that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34).

After Cornelius and his family were taught about Jesus, they decided to commit their lives to Him. Cornelius was a good man, but he still needed to believe in Christ and be baptized in order for his sins to be washed away. The story of Cornelius shows us that it is not enough to try to be good and believe in God; we must also be baptized “in the name of the Lord” (Acts 10:48). This story also shows us that the Gospel is for everyone.

## Expositor's Greek Testament

[Acts 10:2](#). (2), righteous, upright, *cf.* also [Proverbs 12:12](#), once as an equivalent of נָדָב, liberal, generous, see on [Acts 8:2](#) above; frequent in Ecclus. and Macc., see also Trench, *N.T. Synonyms*, i., p. 196. Taken by itself the word might denote goodness such as might characterise a Gentile, *cf.* [Acts 17:23](#), and its classical use (like the Latin *pietas*); but construed with φ. τὸν Θεόν it certainly seems to indicate that Cornelius was “a God-fearing proselyte” (not to be identified it would seem with “proselytes of the gate,” although the confusion is common (Schürer, *Jewish People*, div. ii., vol. ii., p. 316 E.T.)). In Acts this class of proselyte is always so described (or σεβόμενοι τὸν Θεόν) “they that fear God,” *i.e.*, the God of the Jews, *cf.* [Acts 10:22](#); [Acts 10:35](#), [Acts 13:16](#); [Acts 13:26](#), etc. All the incidents of the story seem to point to the fact that Cornelius had come into relations with the synagogue, and had learned the name and the fear of the God of Israel, *cf.* [Acts 10:2](#); [Acts 10:22](#); [Acts 10:25](#), without accepting circumcision, see especially Ramsay, *Expositor*, p. 200 (1896), where he corrects his former remarks in *St. Paul*, p. 43; Hamburger, *Real-Encyclopädie des Judentums*, “Fremder,” i., 3, p. 382; Hort, *Ecclesia*, p. 58; O. Holtzmann, *Neutest. Zeitgeschichte*, pp. 184, 185; Weizsäcker, *Apostolic Age*, i., 103 E.T.; McGiffert, *Apostolic Age*, p. 101, note, and for a further explanation of the distinction between the σεβόμενοι and the “proselytes of the gate” *cf.* Muirhead *Times of Christ* (T. & T. Clark), pp. 105, 106

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping blue shapes, including a large triangle and a trapezoid, creating a layered effect.

The Rabbis distinguished two classes of proselytes, **proselytes of righteousness**, who received circumcision & bound themselves to keep the whole of the Mosaic law and to comply with all the requirements of Judaism, and **proselytes of the gate**, who dwelt among the Jews, and although uncircumcised observed certain specific laws, especially the seven precepts of Noah against the seven chief sins, idolatry, blasphemy against God, homicide, unchastity, theft or plundering, rebellion against rulers & the use of "flesh with the blood thereof".



## I. Proselytes of the Gate

Proselytes of the Gate were Gentiles who recognized their place in subordination to the Nation of Israel, and desired to worship God via the mediatorial agency of Israel. They were uncircumcised, and were required to obey only the laws set forth in Acts 15.

### A. Examples

1. Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:29-38
2. Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10
3. The Canaanite woman in Mt. 15:22-28
4. The elect nations of Mt. 25:31-46 comprise proselytes of the gate.

### B. Laws for Proselytes of the Gate

James's edict in Acts 15:29 is in accordance with Noachian revelation: Gen 9:4 But flesh with the life thereof, *which is* the blood thereof, shall ye not eat (cf. Le 3:17 7:26 17:10-14 19:26 De 12:16,23 14:21 15:23 1Sa 14:34).

## II. Proselytes of Righteousness

Proselytes of Righteousness were Gentiles who desired to become Jews.

### A. Submitted to Mosaic Law

They were circumcised and submitted to all the ordinances of the Mosaic Law according to Ex. 12:48,49.

### B. Assigned a tribe

Proselytes of Righteousness were called "strangers" and to Israel they were as those "born in the country." These Gentile converts to the God of Israel would then be assigned a tribe. Ezek 47:22-23

### C. Jews of other nations

In Acts 2:5, Luke makes reference to Jews who were dwelling at Jerusalem during the Pentecost observance. Later, he describes them as "Jews and proselytes" (v. 10) who were born Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocian, etc. (vv. 8-11).

## **“The Veil Is Torn” The Christian History Project Volume One:**

The Jewish faith seemed to offer much that paganism lacked, and many Gentiles were converted to Judaism and became what were known as “God-fearers.” But there were many problems, all arising from the Law, the Torah. The food laws, for example, made it impossible for converts to dine with their fellow Gentiles. Because social & business arrangements, then as later, were frequently concluded over the dinner table, this became an obstacle.

A far more troublesome obstacle was the Torah’s insistence on circumcision. To the male mind in the Greco-Roman world, circumcision was a grotesque and offensive practice. While these men may have admired the Jewish God, they couldn’t stomach his demands, at least not as orthodox Jews presented them. Moreover, seething just below the surface in all this was the general anti-Semitism of the Hellenist world.

Thus, the God-fearers found themselves isolated on the fringes of two societies. They weren’t fully accepted as Jews because they stopped short of full adherence to the Torah; but they weren’t entirely acceptable to their Gentile friends and families either because they recognized the Jewish God and his moral teachings. They were caught between two worlds, and the early followers of Jesus showed a way to unite them.

The synagogues of the Diaspora created fertile ground for the seed that the Hellenistic Followers of the Way had carried from Jerusalem, and since they were still considered to be members of a sect of Judaism, the early church benefited from the same legal protections given by the Roman state to the Jewish faith.

## **God-Fearers by M. J. Chaignot**

Scholars believe God-fearers existed long before Christianity came on the scene. These Gentiles were sympathetic to Judaism & interested in at least some of its teachings. They might have attended the local synagogues and adhered to some of the Jewish dietary restrictions. Some of them might have observed the Sabbath as a day of rest or even have studied the Torah. However, most scholars think they would have drawn the line at circumcision. Obviously, there would have been a lot of latitude among the God-fearers as to how strictly they embraced & practiced the teachings of Judaism.

Scholars also feel that the influence of God-fearers extended well beyond the doors of the synagogue. Since God-fearers were not Jewish, they were well-integrated into all levels of Greek society. Some of them were quite prominent.

There is an interesting situation described in Acts. Paul had been preaching in Pisidian Antioch. Since the Jews were not listening to the word of God, he turned to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were thrilled, but the Jews weren't. They "incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul & Barnabas and expelled them from the region." (See Acts 13:49ff) Clearly God-fearers existed and had high standing and clout. They could get things done – like getting rid of Paul and Barnabas. In this case, the God-fearers were women who were very supportive of the Jews.



It is likely that the God-fearers facilitated the integration of Jews within the Greek community. Some of them even acted as benefactors for the Jewish community. Inscriptions indicate several prominent citizens built Jewish synagogues in various communities and contributed to Jewish charities. Josephus (a first-century historian) wrote that almost all of the women in Damascus were devoted to Judaism. Documents attest that many relatives and wives of royalty were also interested in Judaism.

When Paul came on the scene, he always started preaching in the synagogue of the town he visited. There he found eager converts among God-fearers. They heard from the Apostle Paul's preaching that they were accepted by God.

They worshiped God and followed his teachings and led righteous lives – Paul told them that was enough to be fully accepted into the Christian community. In fact, the whole encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10 demonstrated that the Holy Spirit was with them fully.

As Christianity progressed and many more God-fearers converted, the Jews had a vested interest in fighting for the hearts and minds of the God-fearers. In some cases, the Jews' existence in their own communities might have depended on it. Yet, the fact that Christianity continued to grow and prosper suggests it was a fight they were losing.

# **God-Fearers, the Sabbath, and the Book of Acts**

**By Kelly McDonald, Jr.**

Gentiles who were attracted to the moral teachings of Judaism and likely obeyed some degree of commandment keeping were called God-fearers (*phoboumenos*) or worshipers of God (*theosebes*). Josephus references the God worshipers in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*. He wrote: “Let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the world, and those that worshipped God (*Sebomenon ton theon*), even in Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and that from very ancient times.”

Jews throughout the Roman world and ‘those who worshipped God’ contributed to the wealth in the Temple. The Greek phrase refers to Gentiles who favored Jewish practices.

## **Archaeological Evidence of God-Fearers**

**An inscription in Panticapaeum** (modern-day Crimea), which dates to the first century AD, describes freedom given to a slave. The freed person was protected against re-enslavement by Jewish people and God-fearers. The inscription reads: “the protection (of his freedom) is accepted by the community of the Jews and God-worshippers”; the Greek reads: *Ioudaion kai theosebon* (Trebilco, p 155).

**A theater in Miletus or Miletos** (modern-day western Turkey) contains some inscriptions important to this research that dates to the late second/early third century. The seats in the theater were reserved for specific people groups, usually according to their rank/class. Inscriptions were found on seats in the theater designating where people groups were allowed to sit. One inscription reads: “the place for the Jews and God-worshippers” (Trebilco, pp 159-162). Another inscription referenced the “Jewish Blues” or the “Blue Jews”, which likely refers to Jewish people who were associated with a certain color (Spielman, p 117). A newer inscription found in 1998 mentioned the *thesebion* or God-worshippers without mentioning Jewish people (Baker, p 412).\*

**In Tralles** (western Turkey), **another inscription** dates to the third century. A woman named Capitolina fulfilled a vow and was described as a worshiper of God. She was related to the pro-consul of Asia at that time. “Capitolina, worthy and God-worshipping (*theosebēs*), have made all the platform and the inlaying of the stairs in fulfillment of a vow for myself and my children and my grandchildren. Blessings.” (Trebilco, p 157). The inscription concerned a Jewish synagogue.

**A stone found in the city of Deliler** (near Philadelphia in western Turkey) that dates to the third century. An inscription where a man named Eustathios, who was called a Theosebēs, made a dedication to the synagogue. It reads: “To the most holy synagogue of the Hebrews. Eustathios God-fearer, in remembrance of brother Hermophilos, I have dedicated the wash-basin together with my bride (or sister-in-law)” (Levinskaya, p 60).

Among the more well-known finds pertaining to this subject is the synagogue **inscriptions at Aphrodisias** (southwestern Turkey). Many date them to early third century, though some have suggested a little later. At the entrance to the synagogue is an inscription which lists people who donated to the synagogue. Among them are Ioses, a proselyte and Emmonios and Antioninos, who are called *theosebēs* or God-worshippers. On the other face of this inscription is a list of 54 Jewish people connected to the synagogue. It also lists 50 Gentile names with the heading *kai hosoi theosebēs* or “and those who are God-worshippers” (Bonz, pp 282-284). Another inscription, from a theatre in the city which reads, “place of those who are complete Hebrews” or *Hebreon ton teleion* (Feldman, 1986).

Lastly, **a synagogue in Sardis** (western Turkey) which dates to the fourth century provides us with another example. Two men made a vow to help with a synagogue mosaic. They were both called God worshippers or Theosebēs. “Aurelios Eulogios, *Theosebēs*, I have fulfilled my vow.” “Aurelios Polyippos, *Theosebēs*, having made a vow, I have fulfilled it” (Trebilco, pp 158-159)



Looking at the available evidence, it appears there was a difference between those who were complete Hebrews, those Gentiles who had completely committed to Judaism (*proselytes*) & those who followed some Jewish practices (*theosebites*).

### **Gentiles Named Their Children After the Sabbath**

In the third volume of the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, significant amount of space is given to Gentiles in the Roman Empire who took a name relating to the Sabbath, such as Sabatis, Sabbatatis, Sambathion, etc. In Egypt, a great number of people took on this name (idem, pp 43-45). Other cities such as Rome have evidence of this name in their burial monuments.

### **Gospel Accounts**

The gospels do mention some material that connects to this subject. In Luke 7:1-5, the centurion's servant needed healing. The Jewish elders asked Jesus to heal the servant because the centurion cared for them and built a synagogue. The inscriptions reviewed above dovetail with this account very well.

“4 When they came to Jesus, they urged him earnestly, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 **because he loves our nation, and even built our synagogue**” (Luke 7:4-5, NET, emphasis mine).

In John 7, Jesus talked about going places where no one else could go. In verse 35 we read: “Then the Jewish leaders said to one another, ‘Where is he going to go that we cannot find him? He is not going to go to the **Jewish people dispersed among the Greeks and teach the Greeks, is he?**’” (NET; emphasis mine)

When the Jewish people wondered where Jesus would go, their first guess is that he might go to the Jewish people in the diaspora and teach Greeks. Apparently, there were Greeks among the Jewish people who would have been interested in Jesus' teaching.

The last example from the gospels we will look at is in John 12:20-21. Jesus went up to keep Passover, and there were some Greeks who desired to speak with Him. We read: “20 Now some Greeks were among those who had gone up to worship at the feast. 21 So these approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and requested, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (NET).

### **The Book of Acts**

The book of Acts provides excellent examples of God fearers who were connected to the Jewish people of their respective cities. The Sabbath is also mentioned with them!

#### **Acts 10:1-2a, 22a**

“Now there was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort. He was **a devout, God-fearing man (*phoboumenos ton theon*)**, as was all his household; he did many acts of charity for the people and **prayed to God regularly...** They said, “Cornelius the centurion, a **righteous and God-fearing man, well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation...**” (NET, emphasis mine)  
Cornelius is considered the first Gentile to receive the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. Of all the Gentiles that could have been chosen for this event, it was a Gentile God-fearer and devout. This explains why the Jewish people viewed him positively.

#### **Acts 13:14-16, 42**

14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to **Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down.** 15 And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.” 16 Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, **and you who fear (*phoboumenoi*) God (*ton theon*)...**[Paul goes on to preach about Jesus and the resurrection]...“42 So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, **the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath...**” (NKJV)

### **Acts 13:43-44**

“<sup>43</sup> Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and **devout proselytes** followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, **persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.** **44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.**” (NKJV)

In Acts chapter 15, the disciples held the Jerusalem Council. At the end of it, the disciples decided on four minimum standards for Gentiles so that they could attend the synagogue. They also encouraged the Gentiles to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath.

### **Acts 15:19-21**

“<sup>19</sup> Wherefore my judgment is, that we trouble not them that from among the Gentiles turn to God; <sup>20</sup> but that we write unto them, that they abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For Moses from generations of old hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath.” (ASV)

Remember that the New Testament did not exist at that time. Every synagogue had at least a Torah scroll, which is the first five books of the Bible (also called the books of Moses). The apostles pointed out how Moses was taught in every city. They could learn about righteous living by hearing Moses.

### **Acts 16:12-15a**

“<sup>12</sup> and from there to **Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony.** And we were staying in that city for some days. <sup>13</sup> And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. <sup>14</sup> Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, **who worshiped (*sebomene*) God (*ton theon*).** The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. <sup>15</sup> And when she and her household were baptized...” (NKJV).



### **Acts 17:1-4**

“<sup>1</sup> After they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. <sup>2</sup> Paul went to the Jews in the synagogue, as he customarily did, and on three Sabbath days he addressed them from the scriptures, <sup>3</sup> explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead, saying, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” <sup>4</sup> Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along **with a large group of God-fearing (*sebomenon*) Greeks** and quite a few prominent women” (NET). They then went to Berea and found Jewish people along with Greeks studying the Old Testament together (Acts 17:10-12).

### **Acts 17:16-17**

“...<sup>16</sup> Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. <sup>17</sup> Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and **with the Gentile worshipers (*tois sebomenois*)**, and those in the marketplace daily who happened to be there” (NKJV).

### **Acts 18:1, 3b-4, 7-8**

“<sup>1</sup> After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth...he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. <sup>4</sup> **And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks...**<sup>7</sup> And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain Justus, **one who worshiped God (*sebomenou ton theon*)**, whose house was next door to the synagogue. <sup>8</sup> Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized...” (NKJV)

### **Conclusion**

The historical record, Jewish, Christian, and Gentile, attests to the widespread appeal that the Sabbath had to non-Jews. These sources reveal a significant number of Gentiles observed a degree of Sabbath observance. The archaeological record discusses a classification of Gentiles who were not full proselytes but attached to the synagogue – these are called God-fearers or God-worshippers.

**“Socially, many of the Godfearers in Acts were among the wealthy class who donated money to Jewish communities ([Acts 10:12](#)). DNTB says that such statements in Acts have been corroborated by archaeological evidence, including the discovery of a stele dating circa 200 AD in Aphrodisias (located in what is now Turkey). Upon this monument is a listing of those who gave to a local Jewish institution. One side of the stele lists 54 Jewish names, ‘after a break [is] a list of fifty Godfearers whose names are either Greek or Greco-Roman, suggesting a Gentile origin for the group.’**

**Godfearers were among the first members of the early church. They were intricately involved in its growth, hosting house churches & providing shelter for missionaries ([Acts 16:40](#)). Their acceptance of Jesus as the Christ and their subsequent receiving of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 10:33-34](#)) radically altered the church’s mission - opening the way for the Gospel to be preached to [Gentiles](#) (like us). A Godfearer, then, in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, was someone who sincerely revered the God of Israel, but wasn’t necessarily a practicing Jew.” – *Internet Research***

**THE FEAR OF  
THE LORD**  
IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM,  
AND THE  
**KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE HOLY ONE**  
IS INSIGHT.

PROVERBS 9:10

Blessed is the man  
who fears the Lord,  
who greatly delights  
in his commandments!

Fear can be a good thing in that it leads one to recognise a situation or person one cannot control. But it certainly also does help reveal our perceptions.

First, the earlier list of what our culture fears has one conspicuous absentee. Our culture does not have fear of God on its worry list. Neither, come to that, does an awful lot of what passes for Christianity. If one looks at Aquinas's account of fear to the effect it reflects my perceived lack of power, then my lack of fear readily reflects my perceived ability to 'handle' whatever the threat may be.

Unfortunately, such a lack of fear of God is ultimately despairing. Ultimately our culture has no answer to its fears, does it? With all those safety measures, accidents still happen. Some things remain beyond our control and power. And when we ceased to fear God, we ceased to have someone who could actually finally save.

In fact, one way or another, the assumption is that we need not fear God because we can deal with him: perhaps we think we have earned security before him, or that we are simply entitled to it or that he will never do anything we would find uncongenial. Of course, the more we articulate this assumption, the more problematic it appears. If God is God at all, then, as the Beavers remark in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he will not be 'safe', as in controllable by us. He may be good, but he is not tame or domesticated.

This has two consequences. First, it takes us back to the instructions God gives his people through Jeremiah and other prophets (E.g. Jeremiah 10:1-16. We are not to fear the idols and elemental principles that people without God do fear. We need not fear them because the God who is infinitely more powerful than us can deliver where we cannot. One current challenge for us is whether we fear God enough so that we need not fear the things that 'the nations' do. What we fear reveals a lot about where we think power truly lies. What, exactly, do we fear and in what order?

Second, one way of reading the environment of fear is that our culture would rather fear our modern version of *Tyche* with her grinding, ineluctable randomness than fear a God who providentially controls human affairs with purpose. I think it is indisputable that so many in the cultural do prefer *Tyche* to Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ovey, M. J. (2016). [Off the Record: Choose Your Fears Carefully](#). *Themelios*, 41(3), 411–412.



# Are We to Fear God?

## ALLEGED DISCREPANCIES

ERIC LYONS, M.Min.

The word “fear” appears in the New King James Version of the Bible 367 times. In some of these occurrences, the text is expounding upon “the fear of the Lord” and its relationship to wisdom (cf. Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7). In numerous other passages of Scripture, one can read where God commands that His creation fear Him (Leviticus 25:17; Deuteronomy 6:13; Matthew 10:28; et al.). It is widely known that one of the repeated truths in the Bible is that **God’s “mercy is on those who fear Him”** (Luke 1:50). It also is well known, however, that in the New Testament Paul informed Timothy that “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). The apostle John went even further, saying, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment” (1 John 4:18).

Some time ago, I noticed where Steve Wells, author of the *Skeptic’s Annotated Bible*, highlighted 2 Timothy 1:7 and 1 John 4:18 (verses indicating Christians are **not** to fear), and placed alongside these verses twenty-six Bible references that specify **we are to fear God**. He then asked, “Should we fear God?” Obviously, it was Wells’ intent to convince his readers the Bible’s discussion of fear is contradictory.

How can a person fear God and not fear God at the same time?

Although this is a question I thought a skeptic never would raise due to its seemingly obvious answer, it nevertheless requires a response. In most cases, when the Bible praises man’s fearlessness and his need to move beyond fear, it is using the term in a different context than the way it is used when referring to “the fear of the Lord.” The passage in 2 Timothy 1:7 is not teaching that we should not fear God; rather, Paul was instructing Timothy that we should not fear **for our lives** while doing the Lord’s work.



God wants His children to be fearless in their service to Him. Such courage will help His people “not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord” (2 Timothy 1:8). Like the Israelites who were instructed by Joshua and Caleb not to fear the people of Canaan (Numbers 14:8-9), Christians must not fear their adversaries around them, nor the task before them. God expects His people to understand that “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

But what about 1 John 4:17? Is it not referring to fearing God? A person must keep in mind that the term “fear” is used in various senses in Scripture (and whenever different senses of the same word or thing are under discussion, the skeptics’ allegations hold no value). **Fear can mean terror, dread, and horror; but it also can mean awe, reverence, and respect. The “perfect love” about which John writes casts out the former, not the latter.** As the late Gury N. Woods noted:

“Fear,” as here contemplated, is not that which the Psalmist declares is “the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10), a reverential, godly fear, which shrinks from any action which would displease God, the fear which an obedient child has for a loving father;...but **terror, dread, slavish fear**, such as is characteristic of a slave in the presence of a cruel and heartless master.... The fear that is absent from genuine love is the fear of the whip in the hands of the master; the dread of the chastisement which comes to the disobedient. Perfect (mature) love casts out such fear, because it can’t exist where genuine love is (1979, pp. 304-305, emp. in orig.).

In Malachi 2:5, the prophet linked fear and reverence together. Malachi stated: “So he feared Me, and was reverent before My name.” The Hebrew word transliterated *yare’*, frequently translated “fear,” also means “religious awe.” For this reason, some modern versions (like the New American Standard) have translated Malachi 2:5 thusly: “So he **revered** Me, and **stood in awe** of My name.”

Today, God expects His people to revere Him, not panic at the mere thought of Him as a slave might fear his cruel master. Furthermore, one way a Christian walks “in the fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31) is by boldly following in the steps of the Savior, Who stood fearless in the face of His adversaries.

