

Godfearers and Religious Syncretism: Investigating Aphrodisias' Stone Inscription and Its Time

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes the stone inscription in the Asia Minor city of Aphrodisias in the context of the religious pluralism of this environment at the time of the creation of the inscription. Therefore, the questions of the cultural context of the origin of the inscription in Aphrodisias, its dating and linguistic specificities are analyzed in particular, and an attempt is made to find an answer to the question of who the Godfearers are in question here.*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea analizează inscripția din piatră din orașul Afrodizia din Asia Mică în contextul pluralismului religios al acestui mediu cultural în momentul realizării inscripției. Prin urmare, sunt analizate în special întrebările legate de contextul cultural al originii inscripției din Afrodizia, datarea și specificitățile lingvistice ale acesteia și se încearcă găsirea unui răspuns la întrebarea legată de adoratorii de aici.*

Keywords: Aphrodisias, godfearers, syncretism, Greek epigraphy.

Introduction

In 1976, while building a museum to house the numerous archaeological finds in the ancient city of Aphrodisias, the construction workers found a remarkable stone. This stone, a block of marble, is about 280 cm tall when standing up. It tapers slightly towards the top, at the bottom measuring 45 by 45 cm, at the top measuring 43 by 43 cm.² That in itself was not what drew the attention of many scholars, but rather the many lines of Greek lettering inscribed in it. These lines of Greek lettering contain over a hundred names. At least half of them are typical Jewish names derived from the Hebrew Bible, the remaining names are typical Greek and Anatolian ones. One side of the stone includes a short text from which we learn that it is erected to commemorate people who donated for a Jewish memorial building. What generated most interest is the list of people that are called θεοσεβῆς, God-worshippers. It is uncertain who these people were and why they are mentioned as a specific group of people. Could it be possible that there is a connection between these God-worshippers and Christians who frequented synagogues as we read in the biblical book of Acts, or are they exceptionally pious Jews? The first part of this paper exists out of an excursus on Aphrodisias in Antiquity and the inscriptions

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² REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987, 3.

on the stone. In the second part, I attempt to define the identity marker θεοσεβείς more clearly by comparing it to other markers used for people sympathizing with Judaism, προσήλυτος, φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν, and σεβόμενος τὸν θεὸν. In the third part, I assess the θεοσεβείς more closely to see how this word was used in other contexts. In the fourth part with my answer to the question of who these Aphrodisian Godworshippers might have been. In part five, I give an overview of my findings as well as questions for further research to conclude the paper.

1. The stone in Aphrodisias

1.1. Aphrodisias in Antiquity

The ruins of Aphrodisias are located in the west of modern-day Turkey, some two hundred and forty kilometers south-east of Izmir in a fertile valley carved out by the river Orsinus. Archaeological excavations in the valley have resulted in locating two prehistoric settlement mounds, dating to the sixth millennium BC. These mounds were periodically habited by humans until the end of the Bronze Age, ca. 1500–1200 BC. Pottery dating from the 7th and 6th centuries BC points at continued habitation in that period.³ Around the end of the 6th century BC, a religious cult settled at Aphrodisias that probably built a temple there.⁴ The name 'Aphrodisias' itself, however, is first attested only in the late second to early first century BC on bronze and silver coins. The original name of the city most likely was Nineuda or Nineudon, after Zeus Nineudios, a deity who is frequently named in inscriptions and depicted on walls in Aphrodisias.⁵ An honorific inscription on a wall discovered in 2003 is evidence that the founding of the city as an independent *polis* called Aphrodisias can be dated more precisely between 188 and 167 BC.⁶ Due to its favorable location and close ties to the Roman emperors, Aphrodisias became an administrative and religious center and the capital city of the Late Roman province Caria in the centuries that followed.⁷

Sometime in the third century a small Christian community emerged in the city and a bishop is attested for the year 325.⁸ This community grew over time, as Christianity did in the whole Roman Empire. Polytheistic religion remained active in Aphrodisias for a long time, however, even after it was officially outlawed by Emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century. Around 450, the pagan philosopher Asklepiodotos of Alexandria was attracted to Aphrodisias's polytheistic community where he married the daughter of a leader of the city,

³ RATTÉ 2008, 11.

⁴ ERIM 1986, 163.

⁵ CHANIOTIS 2010, 456-466.

⁶ CHANIOTIS 2010, 456-466.

⁷ RATTÉ 2008, 10.

⁸ ROUECHÉ 1989, 15-16, 322.

also named Asklepiodotos. Furthermore, an honorary epigram dated around 480 AD dedicated to a man called Pytheas calls Aphrodisias ‘City of the Paphian goddess and of Pytheas.’⁹ Ultimately, Christianity managed to get the upper hand, and in the sixth or seventh century the city was renamed to Staupopolis, City of the Cross. Around that same time, the city started to deteriorate, possibly because of flooding, earthquakes and threats of Persian invasions. Later references to the city become rare. Sometimes a bishop of Aphrodisias is attested in patriarchal documents, and Byzantine sources indicate that the city had been captured by the Turks at least four times in the thirteenth century.¹⁰ Its citizens gradually abandoned the city in the remainder of the Middle Ages, but Aphrodisias never really was ‘lost’.¹¹ It saw some archaeological activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth century with several excavations organized mostly by European archaeologists, and in 1961 the University of New York started methodological excavations on a serious scale. It was during their expedition in 1976 that they found the remarkable stone that mentions Jews and God-worshippers, as I described in the introduction of this paper. It gives us valuable information about the Jewish community that existed next to the Christian and pagan communities in Aphrodisias and Asia Minor.

1.2. *The Greek text of the Inscriptions*

Two of the four sides of the stone have been inscribed and are commonly called side *a* and side *b*. Below, I cited those parts of the inscriptions that are most relevant for this paper. Letters between brackets are added to complete abbreviations

Inscription side *a*

- Col. Θεὸς βοηθός, πατελλαδο[ς]¹²
 Οἱ ὑποτεταγμέ-
 νοι τῆς δεκαν(ίας)
 τῶν φιλομαθῶ[ν]
 5 τῶν κὲ παντευλογ(--ων)
 εἰς ἀπενθησίαν
 τῷ πλήθι ἔκτισα[ν]
 ἐξ ἰδίων μνημα
 Ἰαηλ προστάτης
 10 ν. σὺν υἱῷ Ἰωσοῦα ἄρχ(οντι?)
 Θεόδοτος Παλατῖν(ος?) σὺν
 ν. υἱῷ Ἰλαριανῶ vac.

⁹ CHANIOTIS 2010, 458.

¹⁰ ERIM 1986, 34-35.

¹¹ ERIM 1986, 37.

¹² In contrast to REYNOLDS and TANNENBAUM, the ‘πατέλλα? δο[. 1 or 2.]’ For my argument, see section 1.3 below. Dating and interpretation of the inscriptions.

- Σαμουηλ ἀρχιδ(έκανος?) προσήλ(υτος)
 Ἴωσῆς Ἰεσσέου *vacat*
- 15 Βενιαμιν ψαλμο(λόγος?)
 Ἰούδας εὐκόλος *vacat*
 Ἴωσῆς προσήλυ(τος)
 Σαββάτιος Ἀμαχίου
 Ἐμμόνιος θεοσεβ(ής) *v. v.*
- 20 Ἄντωνῖνος θεοσεβ(ής)
 Σαμουηλ Πολιτιανοῦ
- Col. God, help, put [food] on our plates.¹³
 Those listed below
 of the decany
 of the lovers of learning,
 5 those who all fervently praise [God]
 for relief of mourning
 for the community, built
 from their own [funding] a memorial building
 Iael, president/patron¹⁴
- 10 with his son Iosua the archon
 Theodotus Palatinos with
 his son Hilarianos
 Samouel the arch-deacon, proselyte
 Ioses, son of Jesseos
- 15 Beniamin, psalm-singer (?)
 Ioudas the good-natured
 Ioses, proselyte
 Sabbatios, son of Amachios
 Emmonios the God-worshiper
- 20 Antoninos the God-worshiper
 Samouel, son of Politianos¹⁵
- 22

¹³ See the discussion below for this translation

¹⁴ There has been some debate on the gender of Iael, as in two papers Bernadette J. Brooten argued that it is a woman. While it was certainly possible for Jewish women to be mentioned on such inscriptions, I do not think that in this case Iael is a woman because of the masculine προστάτης that accompanies the name instead of the expected feminine προστάτις. See for the two papers written by BROOTEN:1991, 149–162; 1990, 163–173.

¹⁵ Translations of ancient languages are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

- [Four names, added later]

27

Inscription face *b*

Col. Καὶ ὅσοι θεοσεβῆς *stop* Ζήνων βουλ(ευτής)

35 Τέρτυλλος βουλ(ευτής) *stop* Διογένης βουλ(ευτής)

Ὀνήσιμος βουλ(ευτής) *stop* Ζήνων Λονγι(ανοῦ?) βου(λευτής)

Ἀντιπέος βουλ(ευτής) *stop* Ἀντίοχος βουλ(ευτής)

Ῥωμανός βουλ(ευτής) *stop* Ἀπονήριος βουλ(ευτής)

1

- [Approx. 55 names]

33

And as much as there are god-worshippers · Zenon, councilor

35 Tertullos, councilor · Diogenes, councilor

Onesimos, councilor · Zenon, son of Longianos, councilor

Antipeos, councilor · Antiochos, councilor

Romanos, councilor · Aponerios, councilor

39

- [Approx. 43 names of god-worshippers]

61

1.3. Dating and interpretation of the inscriptions

Reynolds and Tannenbaum, the authors of the *editio princeps*, come to the conclusion that both inscriptions – side *a* and side *b* – should be dated somewhere between the late second and early third centuries and that they were inscribed by two different epigraphers for the remembrance of a single memorial building. This dating is certainly not without debate, with other scholars offering datings from the third until the sixth centuries.¹⁶

The interpretation of the inscriptions given by Reynolds and Tannenbaum places the texts firmly in a rabbinical Jewish context, mainly because of the incomplete first line on side *a*. This line starts with invocation Θεὸς βοήθός, ‘God, help’ followed by the letters ΠΑΤΕΛΛΑΔΟ.

¹⁶ REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987, 19–23. They rely on epigraphic elements and the occurrence and frequency of certain names for their dating since the inscriptions themselves do not contain an explicit date or obvious feature to place it securely in a certain timeframe. For later datings, see e.g. Margaret Williams, who places it in the middle of the third century: WILLIAMS 2013, 216–230. Helga Botermann and Angelos Chaniotis argue for a fourth-century date: BOTERMANN 1998, 184–194; CHANIOTIS 2002, 204–241. Concludingly, Marianne Palmer Bonz argues for a dating in the fifth century for side *a* and the sixth century for side *b*, refuting the arguments and reinterpreting the data from Reynolds and Tannenbaum rather radically: BONZ 1994, 281–299, esp. 282–291.

Reynolds and Tannenbaum take *πατέλλα*, originally 'plate' or 'dish', to be a Greek translation of the Mishnaic Hebrew *תמחוי*, *tamhui* which means soup-kitchen. They interpret the remaining letters ΔΟ to be some form of either the verb *δίδωμι*, 'to give', or from the verb *δέμω*, 'to build' which for the former would entail that something is given to the *πατέλλα*, possibly funds. For the latter, it can refer to a building built for the *πατέλλα*.¹⁷ There are some counter-arguments to be made for this interpretation. In both of the above explanations, it means that *πατέλλα* must be written in the dative case but the expected *iota subscriptum* is lacking in the inscription. Furthermore, as Williams points out, the succession of letters after the invocation might also be the aorist imperative verb *πατελλαδός* which she translates as 'put [food] on our plates'.¹⁸ This would mean that the text begins with a double invocation, which was fairly common in Diasporic inscriptions.¹⁹ I follow Williams in my translation because it is more elegant and is not dependent on a rather questionable connection with the Hebrew word *tamhui*. Still, this option is not more than another possibility, we probably will never know for sure what it originally said. In any case, I agree with Williams that reconstructing a rabbinic Jewish context based on an unclear first line of side *a* is unsatisfactory.²⁰ What is clearer, is that this stone is erected to commemorate those people who donated for the construction of a memorial building in honor of the dead of the Jewish community in Aphrodisias.²¹

2. The Identity of sympathizers of Judaism

What did it mean to be called *θεοσεβής*? Why were these people not called *φοβούμενοι τὸν θεὸν*, *σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν* or *προσήλυτοι*, other terms used to describe people affiliated with and sympathizers of Judaism? Is *θεοσεβής* indeed a term used to describe gentile sympathizers as Reynolds and Tannenbaum think, or can it be a title to describe pious Jews as Marianne Palmer Bonz argues?²² In this part of the paper, I will try and border these titles in relationship to one another by comparing in which contexts they were used in the LXX, the NT, and early Judaism before looking at more general uses of *θεοσεβής* in the following part.

2.1. *προσήλυτος*

The term *προσήλυτος* is attested only in Jewish and Christian writings. In other Greek texts, the titles *ἔπηλος* and *ἐπήλυτης* (sometimes *ἐπήλυτος*) are used to render the same

¹⁷ REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987, 26–28.

¹⁸ WILLIAMS 2013, 229. A more 'correct' translation would probably be 'give [food] to our plates'.

¹⁹ WILLIAMS 2013, 228.

²⁰ WILLIAMS 2013, 218–230.

²¹ See the LSJ, s. v. *μνημα* II: *mound* or *building* in honour of the dead, *monument*, *tomb*.

²² See REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987 48–67, esp. 55: 'It would appear likely then that the *theosebeis* are other than, and somehow less than, born Jews.' Further see: BONZ 1994, 298–299.

meaning, an outsider who is initiated into a religion. Philo and Josephus avoid using προσήλυτος and show preference for ἔπηλυς and ἐπηλύτης, most likely because these terms are more familiar to their readers.²³

The LXX: In the Old Testament there are two classes of aliens, visitors (Dt 14:21) and residents, temporary and permanent (Ex 12:49).²⁴ An alien from this second group, called a גר (*gēr*), is much like a later proselyte in that they have to keep the festivals except for Passover if they are not circumcised. Of the 85 occurrences of the word προσήλυτος in the LXX, 77 are used to describe these resident aliens and are translations of גר (*gēr*).²⁵

The NT: the first of four instances of the word προσήλυτος in the New Testament is in Matt 23:15. Jesus criticizes scribes and pharisees who travel sea and land to make a single proselyte even though they do not let people enter the kingdom of God (v. 13–14) so that they make of this proselyte a son of hell (ποιεῖτε αὐτὸν υἱὸν γεέννης).²⁶ The other three instances are all found in Acts. In Acts 2:11 Luke notes that there were proselytes among the many groups of people who traveled to Jerusalem, most likely for the Jewish Feast of Weeks.²⁷ In Acts 6:6 Nicolaus from Antioch is explicitly called proselyte (Νικόλαον προσήλυτον Ἀντιοχέα) whereas the other six men also mentioned were Jews.²⁸ In Acts 13:43 Luke lists ‘many God-fearing proselytes’ among those people who followed the apostles, πολλοί τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων. The combination of these two terms is unique and only occurs in Acts and in later authors who cite this verse directly. Because the two groups addressed in Acts are normally Ἰουδαίων or Ἰσραηλίται in combination with σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν, the addition προσηλύτων in this verse is most likely an error.²⁹ The other three uses of προσήλυτος point to a use similar to that in Rabbinic Judaism, which means that the word is used to describe circumcised gentile converts to Judaism.

Early Judaism: The earlier OT term גר (*gēr*) is used in Rabbinic sources to denote full gentile converts to Judaism which means that they keep the whole law and not part of it as some gentile sympathizers chose to do. The rite to become an official proselyte consists of circumcision, baptism,³⁰ and a sacrifice. The *Mekhilta* distinguishes between full gentile converts, גרי צדק (*gerē tzedeq*) and God-fearers, יראי שמים (*yirēy šamayim*). This second group only has to keep the Noachic commands, a lighter version of the full law which proselytes, the *gerē tzedeq*, are obliged to keep.³¹

²³ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1985, 851.

²⁴ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1985, 851.

²⁵ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1985, 851.

²⁶ LUZ 2005, 115–116

²⁷ CONZELMANN 1987, 13.

²⁸ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1985, 742.

²⁹ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1985, 743.

³⁰ SÄNGER 2011, 291–334.

³¹ SÄNGER 2011, 852; REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987, 48–49.

2.2. φοβούμενος/σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν, θεοσεβής

As I will show below, the phrases φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν and σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν are best understood as parallels in both the LXX and the NT. Θεοσεβής is first attested in the work of Sophocles, denoting true piety. It has close ties to the phrase σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν because both are derivatives from the verb σέβουμαι, 'to worship.' It was used as a narrower concept in comparison to εὐσεβής. According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 'θεοσεβεία denotes, not so much an inner attitude or disposition, but rather pious conduct in the form of religious exercise or achievement, or of worship.'³²

The LXX: The verb φοβέομαι, to fear, in the LXX is often a translation of the Hebrew verb ירא. Combinations of this verb with either the tetragrammaton or אלהים are common and often rendered as the formula 'to fear the Lord God', translated in the LXX as φοβεῖσθαι κύριον τὸν θεόν, with a middle infinitive instead of a middle participle of the verb φοβέω. The formula φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν does appear a few times in the LXX Psalms where it is a translation for יראי אלהים (*yirēy elohim*) or יראי יהוה (*yirēy adonai*) denoting God-fearers who sacrifice in the temple (66:16) and have their hope in God (147:11). These people also are the righteous in the congregation (145:19, 115:11).³³ Because these people are the righteous in the congregation, it seems to me that in Psalms the formula φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν is primarily used to describe devout Israelites and not gentile sympathizers. The formula σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν/κύριον is used in the same sense as the formula φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν and also used as translation of יראי אלהים (*yirēy elohim*) and יראי יהוה (*yirēy adonai*).³⁴ It is used less frequent than φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν/κύριον.

The word θεοσεβής occurs seven times in the LXX, four of which in canonical books, once in Exodus and three times in Job. All four occurrences of θεοσεβής are translations of the Hebrew יראי אלהים (*yirēy elohim*). In Exodus 18:21 Moses is ordered by his father-in-law Jethro to find powerful men who fear God, אנשי חיל יראי אלהים (*ansēy hayil yirēy elohim*). The LXX renders this as ἄνδρας δυνατοὺς θεοσεβεῖς, 'powerful, God-worshipping men'. Θεοσεβεῖς in LXX Exodus 18:21 is used to denote God-worshipping Israelite men because Moses' father-in-law Jethro orders him to choose judges for Israel who must have been Israelites themselves. In LXX Job, he himself is called θεοσεβής, once by the author in 1:1 and twice by God, in 1:8 and 2:2. Because it is unclear if Job was a Israelite or a Gentile man, it is not clear how θεοσεβής should be interpreted, i.e. if it should be understood as a title for a God-fearing gentile or an exceptionally pious Israelite.³⁵

³² KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1965.

³³ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1965, 1157.

³⁴ REYNOLDS, TANNENBAUM 1987, 49.

³⁵ On the unclarity of Job's name and the land of Uz where he lived, see e.g. HARTLEY 1988, 65-67.

The NT: In the New Testament both formulae are only used in Acts, φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν in the first section, σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν in the second. The phrase φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν occurs five times in Acts (10:2, 22, 35, 13:16, 26). In Acts 10, Peter visits Cornelius the centurion. Cornelius, a non-Jewish man, is called God-fearer three times in this chapter.³⁶ The other two occurrences of the formula in Acts show more clearly that only non-Jews are called God-fearer; in Acts 13 Paul addresses the people gathered at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch where he distinguishes twice between two groups of men. First in v. 16: Ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλίται καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν. The plural article οἱ makes clear that there is no hendiadys intended and that Paul addresses two separate groups, so not 'Israelite and God-fearing men' but 'Israelite men and the God-fearers'. This use of the plural article is repeated in v. 26: Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, υἱοὶ γένους Ἀβραάμ καὶ οἱ ἐν ὑμῖν φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, 'Men, brothers, sons of Abraham's generation and those with you (who are) God-fearers'.

Luke uses the phrase σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν twice, also exclusively in Acts (16:14, 18:7). In Acts 16:14 Lydia, a woman from Thyatira, is called σεβομένη τὸν θεόν. It is not directly clear if Lydia was a Jewish woman or a gentile God-fearer as Cornelius the centurion was. For that, we have to shift our attention to Acts 18:7 and its context. In Acts 18:1–4, Luke describes that Paul went to Corinth to preach there among Jews and Greeks. When he tried to convince Jews that Jesus was the messiah in Acts 18:6, they attacked him, so Paul decided to focus his mission on gentiles: τὸ αἷμα ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ὑμῶν, καθαρὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν εἰς τὰ ἔθνη πορεύσομαι, 'your blood be on your own head, I am clear of it. From now on I will go to the nations.' Paul goes to the house of Titus Justus the God-worshiper directly after this confrontation. He lived next to the synagogue. It seems to me that Titus Justus was not a Jew because it would be highly unlikely that Paul would go to the house of a Jew moments after he said he would stop preaching among Jews. To return to the case of Lydia, I think it is safe to assume that she was also a gentile involved in Judaism because just as Titus Justus, she is called a God-worshiper and not a Jew. Compare to this for example the story in Acts 18:24–28, where the conversion story of the Jew Apollos is mentioned. Luke had no problems with telling stories of Jewish converts, so why would he not call Lydia and Titus Justus Jews if they in fact were? Luke thus clearly differentiates between Jews on the one hand and people interested in and sympathizing with Judaism on the other hand, whom he calls either φοβούμενοι or σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν.

Both θεοσεβής and θεοσέβεια are attested only once in the NT. In John 9:31 Jesus heals a blind man who says the following: οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀμαρτωλῶν ὁ θεὸς οὐκ ἀκούει, ἀλλ' ἐάν τις θεοσεβῆς ᾖ καὶ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ ποιῇ τούτου ἀκούει, 'We know that God does not hear sinners, but when someone is a God-worshiper and does His will, He hears him.' The only occurrence of

³⁶ Acts 10: 2: εὐσεβῆς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ, 22: εὐσεβῆς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ, 34–35: Ἐπ' ἀληθείας καταλαμβάνομαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν προσωπολήπτης ὁ θεός, ἀλλ' ἐν παντὶ ἔθνει ὁ φοβούμενος αὐτὸν καὶ ἐργαζόμενος δικαιοσύνην δεκτὸς αὐτῷ ἔστιν.

θεοσεβεία is found in I Tim 2:10 where it denotes true religion. Christian women are expected to do good works, not in the sense that it is a prerequisite of faith but rather that it is a logical consequence of true religion, of θεοσεβείας.

Rabbinic Judaism: Rabbinic Judaism uses the phrase יראי שמיים (*yirēy šamayim*), fearer of the heavens, to speak about God-fearers as I indicated above. Because of the holiness of God they avoid writing His name which was a common practice. Instead they referred to God by the use of this metonymy.³⁷ Some Rabbinic sources chose the more traditional description גר הושב (*gēr tošab*). While these definitions are not consistently used, both phrases were applied to gentiles who followed part of the Mosaic law.³⁸

3. Θεοσεβής in the Late-Antique Greco-Roman world

Before the discovery of the stone in Aphrodisias, there were many debates on what the role of θεοσεβείζ in Jewish communities could be. There was some evidence of people called θεοσεβείζ on several inscriptions, most notably in Sardis. Because these inscriptions are short and lacunous, they provide almost no context and it is therefore unclear how they should be interpreted. Scholars argued that θεοσεβής was best understood as a variant of φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν and σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν in Acts.³⁹ In the preceding section of this paper I have shown that it is not as clear as they presented it. The times the word θεοσεβής is used in the LXX and NT, its meaning is not consistent nor clear. In the LXX it is used to describe either Israelites or Job, and in John it concerns someone in general who worships God: ἕάν τις θεοσεβής. It does not say anything about people who felt attracted to Judaism.

Kraabel is one of the scholars who seriously attacked the existence of God-fearers in the sense of gentile sympathizers in his 1981 article *The Disappearance of the 'God-Fearers'*. He argues that the φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν and σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν in Acts are merely used as rhetorical, invented groups employed by Luke in order to show the success of early Christianity. Since these two phrases also only occur in Acts in the NT, Luke let the two groups disappear again after they served their purpose.⁴⁰ If we accept this standpoint, it is then of course of no use to connect these imaginary groups with the θεοσεβείζ found on inscriptions. There is one major flaw to his article, however. Although he wrote his article in 1981 and the stone in Aphrodisias was unearthed five years prior, he was not aware of its discovery. As a result, he was heavily criticized because the Aphrodisian stone clearly distinguishes between Jews, proselytes, and θεοσεβείζ, so others argued. One of them is Levinskaya: 'The importance of this [Aphrodisian] inscription (...) lies in the fact that, once and for all, it has tipped the

³⁷ Acts 48–49.

³⁸ SIM 2013, 9–27, here 16.

³⁹ KRAABEL 1981, 113–126, 114–115.

⁴⁰ KRAABEL 1981., 114.

balance and shifted the onus of proof from those who believe in the existence of Luke's God-fearers to those who have either denied or had doubts about it.⁴¹

The Aphrodisian stone has so far not been able to settle the debate on the nature of the θεοσεβῆς as can be seen in Kraemer's 2016 article, which renews the criticism of Kraabel: 'In my judgement, even the Aphrodisias inscriptions (...) do not resolve the larger problem. Regardless of the inscriptions Kraabel knew by 1981, none of the inscriptions extant and published as of now constitute unambiguous evidence. All these inscriptions do is characterize either donors or deceased individuals as "theosebes": the argument that they thereby designate Gentile practitioners is either circular, or at best, derived from highly ambiguous clues, such as nomenclature.'⁴²

Kraemer's argument here is that the θεοσεβῆς do not prove that they are the group so many scholars want them to be, e.g. the God-fearers as portrayed in Luke. To understand this argument, we need to take a step back to evaluate the use of the word θεοσεβῆς once more. This time through the broader lens of late Antiquity as a whole, because according to Kraemer '[t]here is at least as much, if not more, evidence for the use of *theosebes*, especially, in ways that are demonstrably *not* indications of Gentile practice of limited aspects of Judean/Jewish piety' (italics original).⁴³ He gives several examples of the word θεοσεβῆς being used to denote piety in broader and different senses. Herodotus uses the word to describe the piety of the Egyptians (1.86, 2.37), Josephus uses it several times to describe several people,⁴⁴ most notably Nero's wife Poppaea which generated much debate.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the use of the word in John 9:31 is also of a general nature as I already indicated.⁴⁶ Θεοσεβῆς and cognates in early Christian texts are especially used by apologists to describe the true Christian religion – true piety – in contrast to Greek-Roman paganism.⁴⁷ Kraemer also notes that 'after the first half of the second century, there is no substantial *literal* evidence for *theosebes* and other terminology of pious fear as a designation for Gentile adherents to Judean practices and beliefs' (italics original).⁴⁸ What we are left with are eighteen occurrences of the word in epigraphic material, practically all without enough context to conclude the consensus that it was used to denote gentiles involved in Judaism.⁴⁹ Kraemer thus comes down on harshly on any scholar who is convinced that the God-worshipers in Aphrodisias are proof of Luke's.

⁴¹ LEVINSKAYA 1996, 80.

⁴² KRAEMER 2016, 169-199, 174.

⁴³ KRAEMER, 175.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.284; 14.308, *Against Apion* 2.140.

⁴⁵ KRAEMER 1988, 97-111.

⁴⁶ KRAEMER 1988, 175-176.

⁴⁷ KITTEL, FRIEDRICH 1965.

⁴⁸ KRAEMER 1988, 180.

⁴⁹ KRAEMER 1988, 180-194.

4. *The God-worshippers, a possible solution?*

All this does not mean that all is lost for those who argue *contra* Kraabel and Kraemer. A problem in both Kraabel's and Kraemer's articles is the existence of the so-called יראי שמים (*yirēy šamayim*), the fearers of heaven, in Rabbinical sources as I indicated in part 2 of this paper. Kraabel and Kraemer only assess Greek and Latin inscriptions and base themselves on them in their claims that there is not enough evidence to speak of god-worshippers as a technical term, a separate group. I agree with them that it indeed does not have to be exactly the case that the word θεοσεβής on an inscription is used to describe god-worshippers in the 'traditional' sense. However, I think they are ignoring a broader trend in Judaism as a whole by not looking at Rabbinical evidence; there are clear instances of gentile people interested enough in Rabbinic sources to follow the Noachic law, but not interested enough to turn it into a full proselytization as I pointed out above. And of course, we could employ Kraemer's argument here again, because that these heaven-fearers existed does not prove that θεοσεβής was a translation of יראי שמים and I would agree. But that is not all.

An interesting parallel to the Rabbinical יראי שמים is found in several 5th century Roman imperial edicts as Kraemer himself points out. These edicts legislate against people that are called *caelicoli*, heaven-fearers. The *Codex Justinianus* seems to imply that they are Christians who need 'to *return* to God's law and Christian veneration' (italics original).⁵⁰ This leads Kraemer to conclude rather carefully that the θεοσεβείς in Aphrodisias might have been these Christian *caelicoli* as described in the legislations.⁵¹ If we follow him here, and say that there might be some connection between the θεοσεβείς and the *caelicoli*, I dare to suggest that it is hardly coincidental that *caelicoli* is a literal translation of the Rabbinical Hebrew phrase יראי שמים, those people interested in Judaism and who were only obliged to follow part of the Jewish law. Linder, in his book *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, defines the *caelicoli* in similar terms, they are 'semi-converts who observed only a part of the halachic rules.'⁵² Furthermore, we know that the Church Fathers often warned Christians to not visit synagogues. When we take all these points into account, I think it is reasonably plausible that the people called θεοσεβείς in Aphrodisias can be identified with the Christian *caelicoli*, who possibly took their name from the Hebrew equivalent. At the very least, the existence of *caelicoli* proves more definitely that there were people who affiliated with Judaism which makes similar assumptions surrounding θεοσεβείς more plausible. There were non-Jewish sympathizers of Judaism who called themselves *caelicoli* in Latin, and who possibly called themselves θεοσεβείς in Greek.

⁵⁰ KRAEMER 1988, 194.

⁵¹ KRAEMER 1988, 194. See e.g. *Codex Justinianus* 1:9:12: *Caecolarum nomen inauditum quodammodo novum crimen superstitionis vindicavit*, 'A new crime of superstition claimed somehow the unheard name of heavenfearers.'

⁵² LINDER 1987, 81.

This could then also be the connection with Luke's φοβούμενοι τὸν θεὸν and σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν in the Acts of the Apostles because the use of 'heaven' in Rabbinical sources is a metonymy, just as it seems to be the case for the *caelicoli*. In reality it is not the heaven but God that these people fear, just as the φοβούμενοι τὸν θεὸν and σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν do in Acts.

5. Conclusion: God-fearers, heaven-fearers?

In this paper I hope I have shown several matters, some more direct, other perhaps more indirect. As a way of concluding the paper, I briefly summarize my findings to then give my final thoughts and some points of further research.

(1) In the first part of this paper I briefly introduced Aphrodisias and its ancient context. I also gave an overview of the stone and some of the interpretive discussions. I also noted that one of the groups of people on this stone are called θεοσεβῆς. This has generated much interest because of a possible connection with the Biblical book of Acts and because it is thought that Paul's mission was most successful under these God-fearers and God-worshippers.

(2) In the second part, I have compared the use of θεοσεβής with the terms φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν and προσήλυτος. Whereas it is clear that προσήλυτοι are people committed to Judaism, who convert fully and are initiated into Judaism by circumcision, a sacrifice, and baptism. Less clarity surrounds the terms φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν and θεοσεβής because of the lack of occurrences and relative unclear context.

(3) To get a clearer idea on the θεοσεβῆς, I evaluated some critical scholars and their interpretations of the use of the word in part three. I gave special attention to Kraemer who argued that the use of θεοσεβής was used to denote piety in more general terms, and that even the epigraphic material in Aphrodisias is not sufficient to prove that we can interpret the word θεοσεβής to denote gentile sympathizers with Judaism.

(4) It was he himself, however, who offered a plausible solution to the problem; the existence of people called *caelicoli*, people who feared heaven. Kraemer thought that there might be a connection with these people and the Aphrodisian θεοσεβῆς. I agree that this is an interesting train of thought that is worth it discovering further, especially when we know that Rabbinic sources speak of heaven-fearers also, which Kraemer failed to mention.

It is true that I am careful with my conclusion because research on this subject is vast, the argumentations are often dense, and this paper is limited in its scope. It is therefore not my intention to give a concluding answer to tie all the loose ends to one another, but a connection between יראי שמים, θεοσεβῆς, and *caelicoli* could help us give insight into the people who were most likely to convert to Christianity during Paul's mission effort.

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