

God-Fearers

I am a non-Jewish Believer, and I have encountered some Messianic Jews who consider me as some sort of “God-fearer” in their midst. What is this supposed to mean? Even with our natural differences and distinctions, I thought we were supposed to emphasize one another as fellow brothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, for far too many people who make up today’s broad Messianic movement, the distinctions which exist among God’s people, are more important to be emphasized than the common traits and faith in Yeshua the Messiah, which is to bind them together, and how we can all uniquely contribute to the well being of the community. Comments are ongoing about the specific category that non-Jewish Believers “really fall into.” This goes far beyond various evangelical Christian denominations (and their associated arrogance), which are rigidly complementarian in their outlook on the people of God.

There are various Messianic Jews who are most welcoming of non-Jewish Believers into their congregations, and of them adopting things like the Sabbath or kosher eating, thinking that they best fall into the category of the ancient God-fearer, which was a group of people frequently present within Diaspora synagogues of the Second Temple era. These were largely people who had not become circumcised as full-fledged proselytes, but did voluntarily follow a Jewish style of life as Greeks and Romans. One advocate of non-Jewish Believers in Messianic Judaism being like “God-fearers” is Patrice Fischer, who draws the conclusion,

“[T]hese Godfearers were every bit as Jewishly observant as their Jewish friends...They...probably were more deeply devoted to Judaism than many native-born Jews...Gentiles who maintain Torah practices like biblical Godfearing Gentiles can be welcomed into full membership and leadership within Messianic congregations today.”¹

The principal evidence one should consider in terms of the God-fearer is seen in the Book of Acts. Those who are often classified as being God-fearers include: the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 22), a sub-group of the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16, 26), a group of proselytes in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:43), a group of devout women in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50), a group of Greeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), a sub-group of the synagogue at Athens (Acts 17:17), and Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:7). The thought of S. McKnight is, “the term *Godfearer* is used of Gentiles who honor God in various ways (including almsgiving and synagogue participation) who are distinguished from run-of-the-mill Gentiles,” further adding how at times, “the term seems to be nearly synonymous with ‘proselyte’ or a category of proselytes.”² However, a usage of terms to describe a group of people in an historical context does not necessarily imply an Apostolic endorsement of the institution. T.R. Schreiner indicates how “The precise status of ‘God-fearers’ in the book of Acts is...disputed,”³ requiring Bible readers to take a look at how vocabulary describing non-Jewish non-proselytes is actually used.

The main noun employed to designate an ancient God-fearer was *theosebēs* (θεοσεβής),⁴ actually appearing in a Third Century C.E. Jewish register.⁵ *TDNT* explains how *theosebēs* and its related adjective *theosebeia* (θεοσεβεία)⁶

¹ Patrice Fischer, “Modern-Day Godfearers: A Biblical Model For Gentile Participation in Messianic Congregations,” in John Fischer, ed., *The Enduring Paradox: Exploratory Essays in Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer, 2000), pp 178, 180.

² S. McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 846.

³ T.R. Schreiner, “Proselyte,” in *ISBE*, 4:1010.

⁴ “*god-fearing, devout*” (*BDAG*, 452).

are used “only once each” in the Apostolic Scriptures, in how “The adjective occurs in Jn. 9:31: God hears those who fear him, which is defined as doing his will...The noun comes in 1 Tim. 2:10, which teaches that women professing religion...should substantiate their confession with good deeds.”⁷ These are not the terms used in Acts, and they are used for Jews as well.

What is instead employed in Luke’s record in Acts are two verbs, each of which details the concept of “fearing God.” These include *phobeō* (φοβέω), the relatively common verb for “fear,”⁸ and *sebō* (σέβω), “to worship, be religious” (LS).⁹ Does this actually make any difference? Schreiner does note, “It is generally agreed that Luke used” these two verbs to describe God-fearers, but he goes on to conclude, seeing how the verbs are used, “When one looks at the use of the terms in Acts it seems unlikely that...[they] are technical terms.”¹⁰ He concludes that ultimately, any term seeming to imply “God-fearer” is more concerned with “one [who] is a pious person. Thus Jews, proselytes, and Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism were all described as ‘pious.’ The meaning of ‘God-fearer’ in any particular passage must be determined from the context.”¹¹

It may be true that in different Diaspora synagogues which Paul visited, there was a sub-group of non-Jews which the leadership would consider *theosebēs*, and they perhaps even enrolled these people as such. But when Paul addressed those in Pisidian Antioch with the word, “Brothers!—sons of Avraham and those among you who are ‘God-fearers’” (Acts 13:26, CJB), is this some kind of an endorsement of the status of God-fearer? Not necessarily. While Paul affirms the Jews present as sons of Abraham, everyone else is *hoi phoboumenoi* (οἱ φοβούμενοι), a participle meaning “those fearing” (“you who fear God,” NASU), the more expected term *theosebēs* is not used. It would be imprudent of us to think that Paul called non-Jews at this synagogue “God-fearers” (NIV) and thus upheld it as a classification to be enforced, although he did use “fearing” terminology as he was a guest among those in Pisidian Antioch (cf. Acts 13:15), and was most tactful. The requirement to fear God, though, is universal for all of His people, and is not limited to only one sector.¹²

The God-fearer was a category of the Jewish Synagogue, and was certainly how many of the non-Jewish Believers who had been a part of the Synagogue—and then found Messiah Yeshua—would have once been defined. Most New Testament scholars are agreed that Paul had the best success with presenting the gospel to those who were associate God-fearers of the Diaspora Synagogue, who did not have to be circumcised as proselytes in order to be fully welcomed into the people of God. But, the God-fearer *only* describes those non-Jewish non-proselytes within the Synagogue *before* coming to Messiah faith, and is not how the Messiah followers at all defined themselves.

Let it not be overlooked that even though many God-fearers in the Mediterranean had found the God of Israel, and were fully dedicated to Him—this was probably not always the case. In Acts 17:4 in Thessalonica, a large number of Jews and “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks¹³ and a number of the leading women” (NASU) were persuaded to believe in Yeshua. What is perplexing, though, is how in the opening greeting of 1 Thessalonians, written after this visit, Paul describes, “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1:9, NASU). While it is possible that once a gathering of Messiah followers was established in Thessalonica, people were attracted to it directly from paganism, it is also possible that some of the “God-fearers” associated with the synagogue had not been completely dedicated to the Lord.

An association with a local synagogue for a Greek or Roman did not necessarily mean a total abandonment of paganism. Some “God-fearers” could have only added the worship of Israel’s God to a pantheon of other deities they worshipped, or they were still dabbling in their old religious practices here and there on the side. While many God-fearers were doubtlessly welcome in the Jewish Synagogue, some had not come as far as they should have in

⁵ “This quasi-official participation in Judaism has been recently confirmed by the discovery in Aprodias [current southwest Turkey] of a stele that dates to about A.D. 210...In a list of subscribers to a Jewish institution or burial society there are three proselytes (a. lines 13, 17, 22) and two ‘Godfearers’ (*theosebēs*, lines 19-20)” (McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 846).

⁶ “**reverence for God or set of beliefs and practices relating to interest in God, piety, godliness**” (BDAG, 452).

⁷ G. Bertram, “*theosebēs, thesēbeia*,” in *TDNT*, 331.

⁸ Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26, 43.

⁹ LS, 725; Acts 13:43; 50, 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7.

¹⁰ Schreiner, “Proselyte,” in *ISBE*, 3:1010.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Psalm 15:4; 22:23; 25:12; 115:11, 13; 118:4; 135:20; Malachi 3:16; 4:2; et. al.

¹³ Grk. *tōn te sebomenōn Hellēnōn* (τῶν τε σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων).

recognizing the One God of Israel as the only Deity—perhaps because not being Jews they were not given as much attention and instruction as they could have been.

God-fearers were recognized as existing in the historical record of Acts, but being a “God-fearer” is not a status which is affirmed or employed by the First Century Messianic community. The one, consistent term that is encountered throughout the Apostolic Scriptures as a self-referent of the Believers is *adelphoi* (ἀδελφοί), which the NRSV and TNIV have largely, and perhaps with more clarity, rendered as “brothers and sisters.” This is the identity that the early Messiah followers were implored to recognize themselves as having. Yet, for some reason or another, today’s Messianic movement does not always emphasize all of those within our faith community as brothers *and* sisters.

And if “God-fearer” is not a status that was used by the early Messianic community, then it is also appropriate that we recognize that the Torah classification of *ger/sojourner* has itself undergone some changes as salvation history has progressed forward. While in the Pentateuch, both the native and sojourner were largely held equal before God’s Law, the sojourner was still a person from the outside having entered in, and circumcision was required in order to be reckoned as a native of the land (Exodus 12:48). In the Apostolic era, Paul instructed those in Asia Minor to regard themselves “no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and...of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19, NASU), indicating that the internal designation of “alien” was largely for a previous time.¹⁴ Even more important might be the words of Peter, who writes, “To those who reside as aliens...Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11, NASU).

The non-Jewish Believers were not considered some kind of associate member of Israel, perhaps as the *ger/sojourner* would be in some previous times. If anything, ***all Believers are aliens and strangers on Planet Earth!***¹⁵ As Paul says in Philippians 3:20, “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Yeshua the Messiah” (NASU). Jewish *and* non-Jewish Believers sojourning on the Earth, awaiting for King Messiah to return, intensifies the need for all of us today to understand how while there were sojourners present in the community of Ancient Israel—so were figures like Abraham,¹⁶ Lot,¹⁷ Jacob,¹⁸ Joseph and his brothers,¹⁹ Moses,²⁰ and even Israel itself in Egypt,²¹ regarded as sojourners. As the author of Hebrews describes it, “But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:6, NASU). Yet as my family must observe, how frequently have today’s Messianic Believers really probed these realities?

Today’s Messianics wrestle most significantly with the idea that the Kingdom of Israel, in the end, is going to be an enlarged, internally diverse, but single people of God. (Even in the eschatological division of the Promised Land after the Second Coming, those labeled as sojourners will be regarded as full natives [Ezekiel 47:22].) The categories of *ger/sojourner*, proselyte, and God-fearer largely concerned or regulated a previous time in the pre-resurrection era. The main classifications we should be most concerned with now, as Messiah reigns in Heaven and we wait for the completion of all things being subjected to Him (Hebrews 2:8), are: fellow citizen, joint heir, and most importantly **brother and sister**. Whether we be Jewish or non-Jewish, our membership within the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) is determined by the Lord’s sacrificial work on our behalf, and our striving to not only emulate His obedience, but how our common faith in Him affects our relationship to one another (Mark 3:35; Matthew 12:50).

¹⁴ “In Eph. 2:19ff. especially, Paul emphasizes that the...Christians [meaning, Believers] are no longer to view themselves as ‘strangers and aliens’ (*xénoi kai pároikoi* [ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι]; cf. Heb. *gēr w’eṯōšāb* [גֵּר וְתוֹשָׁבִים]), but fellow citizens (*sympolitai* [συμπολίται]) with the saints of the household of God” (D.I. Block, “Sojourner,” in *ISBE*, 4:561).

The Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament rendered *xenoi kai poroikoi* in Ephesians 2:19, as *gerim v’toshavim* (גֵּרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים).

¹⁵ “The Christians in the diaspora are compared to the Israelites and Judeans sojourning in exile (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11ff), and they are instructed about their conduct” (Ibid., 4:563).

¹⁶ Genesis 17:7-8; 20:1; 21:34; 23:4.

¹⁷ Genesis 19:9.

¹⁸ Genesis 28:4; 32:4.

¹⁹ Genesis 47:4, 9.

²⁰ Exodus 2:22; 18:3.

²¹ Genesis 15:13; 47:4, 9; Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19; 23:7.