

XVIII.—Jewish “Sympathizers” in Classical Literature and Inscriptions¹

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In the early centuries of the Christian Era many of the ancients showed their “sympathy” for certain Jewish practices and beliefs without actually becoming proselytes to Judaism. The terminology relating to these “sympathizers”² with Judaism has caused much confusion in the ranks of even the greatest scholars; and it is proposed here to present a fresh treatment of the question whether there are technical expressions for them in the Greek, Latin, and Talmudic writings. Such a survey would seem to be especially justified since no previous commentator has surveyed the valuable epigraphic evidence exhaustively.

Discussions of this subject usually start with the well-known passage in Juvenal, who laments with sarcastic exaggeration that Rome was in the hands of Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews. In his fourteenth satire, in stating the thesis that parental example is the most potent of educational instruments, he points to the Jewish proselytes: “Some whose lot it is to have a father who reveres the Sabbath worship nothing but the clouds and the sky and think that the flesh of swine from which their father abstained is no less

¹ I should like to express my sincere debt to the various members of the Semitics and Classics Departments at Harvard and to Rabbi Hugo Mantel of Holyoke, Mass.

² I prefer this expression to the term “semi-proselytes” (criticized by G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1 [Cambridge, Mass. 1927] 326–327, as being meaningless from the point of view of Jewish law) used by many commentators (e.g. J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire romain*, 1 [Paris 1914] 274). H. A. Wolfson, *Philo*, 2 (Cambridge, Mass. 1947) 369, refers to this class as “spiritual proselytes,” appropriate enough, so far as Philo’s references to this class are concerned, but somewhat confusing in those instances in other writers where the “sympathizers” are mentioned as observing merely certain Jewish customs, without necessarily accepting the moral and philosophic tenets of Judaism. The erroneous identification of the “sympathizers” with the proselytes made by A. Bertholet, *Die Stellung der Israeliten und der Juden zu den Fremden* (Freiburg and Leipzig 1896) 328 ff., is still found in L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 6 (Philadelphia 1928) 344, note 6. The “sympathizers” are sometimes called spiritual kinsmen of the *gere toshab*, who were, as resident aliens of Palestine, bound to obey the seven so-called Noachian commandments. But I hope in a later paper to show that there was an important difference between these two groups, in that the “sympathizers” did not necessarily accept monotheism, one of the basic tenets of the Noachian creed.

abhorrent than that of man."³ The son, Juvenal proceeds to say, even becomes circumcised, that is, he undergoes complete conversion to Judaism, and zealously learns the laws of Moses and despises the Roman laws.

The precise phrase which Juvenal uses in the above passage for "reveres the Sabbath," *metuentem sabbata*, is nowhere else to be found in Latin literature or inscriptions.⁴ But Jacob Bernays, in a brilliant article entitled "Die Gottesfürchtigen bei Juvenal,"⁵ goes so far as to claim that a Hebrew counterpart of the similar Greek phrases, *phoboumenoi* and *sebomenoi ton theon*, is to be seen in a number of references in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms.

Bernays starts with the story in the second book of Kings about the Jewish priest who was brought back from exile to help counteract a plague by teaching the new inhabitants of Samaria "how they should fear the Lord." The account continues: "They feared the Lord and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away."⁶ Here then, we have something analogous, it would seem, to the pagans who worshiped many Oriental deities in addition to their ancestral gods.⁷

³ Juv. 14.96-99. This and all other references to the Jews in classical literature have been collected in T. Reinach, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au Judaïsme* (Paris 1895). At the time of his death in 1945, Hans Lewy of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem left incomplete a more comprehensive and much more fully annotated work which would have superseded Reinach's book. The great advances in both Jewish and classical scholarship make such a work highly desirable, especially since a number of new texts on papyri have been discovered.

⁴ *Metuens* by itself or in another phrase is, to be sure, found in a number of inscriptions noted below. But it is certainly misleading for Juster (above, note 2) 1.275 to claim that the term *metuens* is employed especially by Juvenal to refer to "sympathizers." The truth of the matter is that, so far as I can determine, Juvenal employs the term in only three places besides 14.96. But two of these passages — *metuensque flagelli* (5.154) and *metuens virgae* (7.210) — obviously have nothing to do with a religious group. The third — *metuens ne crimen poena sequatur* (13.90) — has nothing to do with Jewish "sympathizers," since the *metuens* here calls upon Isis.

⁵ In *Commentationes philologicae in honorem Theodori Mommseni* (Berlin 1877) 563-569, reprinted with a few additions by H. Usener in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen von Jacob Bernays*, 2 (Berlin 1885) 71-80. All references in this article are to the latter.

⁶ II Kings 17:28 ff. Bernays (above, note 5) 75-76. F. C. Porter, in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 (New York 1902) 134, however, suggests that this passage is perhaps an ironical description of the Samaritan religion.

⁷ J. Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (trans. from the Hebrew by W. F. Stinespring, New York 1943) 41, cites a similar example in the case of Naaman, the Syrian captain (II Kings 5:15-18), who, despite his acknowledgment of the God of Israel, continued to bow down with his master, the King of Syria.

When he reaches the Psalms, Bernays claims that the "Fearers of the Lord" there mentioned are the special class of "sympathizers."⁸ He similarly interprets the many references in the New Testament to the *phoboumenoi* and the *sebomenoi ton theon*, as well as the inscriptional references to the *metuentes*. But when one reads the passages in the Psalms, one's first feeling, despite the Midrashic interpretation,⁹ is certainly that the "Fearers of the Lord" refer to all those who feared the Lord, no less to born Jews than to proselytes, and perhaps even to the "sympathizers," who were legally non-Jews. One of the Psalms cited by Bernays and by several commentators after him contains the famous verses: "Bless the Lord, O house of Israel; bless the Lord, O house of Aaron; bless the Lord, O house of Levi; ye that fear the Lord, bless the Lord."¹⁰ Bernays would have us believe that after enumerating the houses of Israel, the Psalmist is here referring to a class of people who were not Jews by birth but had "attached" themselves to the Jewish religion.¹¹ Certainly the natural way to understand the text is to suppose that the "Fearers of the Lord" refer not to a special class of non-Jews but to the whole house of God-fearing Jews. We are here dealing with Hebrew poetry, in which parallelism is the salient technical characteristic. After enumerating the various classes of Jews, the poet asks the whole house of Israel to bless the Lord.

As a matter of fact, there are a large number of passages in the Bible in which fear of God, far from being the identifying characteristic of "sympathizers," is regarded as the chief commandment for all Jews. Thus in Deuteronomy we have the well-known passage: "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with thy soul."¹²

⁸ Ps. 115:11, 118:4, 135:20.

⁹ See, e.g., the statement of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi in *Midrash Tehillim* on 22:24. See below, note 28.

¹⁰ Ps. 135:19-20. And what shall we do with Ps. 115:9-11 and 118:2-4, in which Israel, the house of Aaron, and the "Fearers of the Lord" (*Yire'e Adonai*) are enumerated? How are we to explain the omission of the Levites; or are the *Yire'e Adonai* the Levites in these cases? Surely the Psalmist is not so rigorous and legalistic in his enumeration of classes as some of his commentators.

¹¹ Bernays (above, note 5) 76.

¹² Deut. 10:12. Cf. also 6:2, 13, 24; 10:20; Lev. 19:14, 32; 25:17; Ps. 15:4; 22:25; 25:12, 14; 31:19; 60:4; and Mal. 3:16; 4:2. Similarly in the Apocrypha: Ecclesiasticus 2:7-10, 18-21; 6:16-17; and 34:14-19.

Again, the famous Biblical dictum — *Re'shit hakemah yire'at Adonai*, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" — can hardly have any reference to the "sympathizers."¹³ Finally, though the Bible describes Obadiah as a "God-fearing man," this is surely no evidence for thinking that he was a "sympathizer" in the technical sense.¹⁴ The fact of the matter is that Hebrew lacked a word for "religious"; and that such an expression as *Yire'e Adonai*, "Fearers of the Lord," was a convenient circumlocution for this concept. The *sine qua non* for Judaism is the fear of the Lord; but it is the *sine qua non* for born Jews as well as for newcomers to the faith.

Bernays also cites an inscription which speaks of a certain Aurelia Soteria, *religioni <s> iud <a> eicae metuenti*, who, he concludes, was a "sympathizer."¹⁵ He correctly believes that Soteria was a pious Jewess; but "sympathizers" are not Jews, as has been stated above. Whoever, then, claims as "sympathizers" all those who are styled *metuentes* in inscriptions is certainly going too far. In fact, Julia Irene Arista, who is termed not a *metuens* but *dei virtut[em] et fidem sationis conservatae iuste legem colenti*, has considerably more claim to the title of "sympathizer" than Soteria.¹⁶

Furthermore, not all the *metuentes* were "sympathizers" with Judaism. There is no clear evidence, for example, that would justify Usener in classing the Roman knight Aemilius Valens, who is termed simply *metuenti*, as a Jewish *metuens*.¹⁷ An obvious case of a non-Jewish *metuens* is found in the inscription which speaks of *domini metuens I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) l(ibens) m(erito) sacr(um)*, with its address to Jupiter.¹⁸ As to the Greek equivalent, *sebomenoi*, the phrase τοῖς σεβόμενοις Ἀπ[ό]λλωνα] shows us that it is

¹³ Ps. 111:10. Cf. Prov. 1:7 and 9:10; and Job 28:28. (In all transliterations from Hebrew I use the system of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1.xxv.)

¹⁴ I Kings 18:3. Obadiah is classed in legend (together with Abraham, Joseph, and Job) as one of the "four God-fearing men"; but Ginzberg (above, note 2) 5.361, note 332, rightly claims that this title was bestowed upon them for their charity and loving-kindness. (For the sources of the legend see Ginzberg 6.345, note 8.)

¹⁵ CIL 5.88. This inscription is no. 642 in J. B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, 1: Europe (Città del Vaticano 1936). Frey's *Corpus* will be hereafter referred to as *CII*.

¹⁶ CIL 6.29758 (CII 72). From the wording of the inscription, however, we can hardly be sure whether Arista was a "sympathizer" or a Jewess. Juster (above, note 2) 1.275 is, therefore, mistaken in positively identifying Arista as a "sympathizer."

¹⁷ CIL 6.31839 (CII 5). In Bernays (above, note 5) 80.

¹⁸ CIL 6.390.

possible to revere someone other than Jehovah.¹⁹ Again, there is real difficulty in reading a technical meaning for *sebomenoi* in the Milesian inscription which speaks of "God-fearing" Jews (Ελουδῶν τῶν καὶ Θεοσεβίων).²⁰ If Θεοσεβίων is a technical term referring to the class of "sympathizers," surely it is a basic contradiction to speak of "sympathizers," that is, non-Jews, who were Jews. Similarly, in the expression εἰσπονητοὶ ἀδελφοὶ σεβόμενοι θεὸν ὑψίστον found in two third-century inscriptions belonging to a syncretistic cult in Tanais, the *sebomenoi* do not necessarily refer to "sympathizers" with Judaism.²¹ The truth is that the terms *metuentes*, *theosebeis*, *phoboumenoi*, and *sebomenoi ton theon* are not at all uncommon in the general sense of "religious" or "pious."

In fact, a careful check of Frey's *Corpus*²² reveals that only four Jewish inscriptions from Italy mentioning *metuentes* are possibly relevant to our discussion. That of Aurelia Soteria cited above specifically mentions that she revered the Jewish religion. Another inscription has Jewish symbols engraved on the tombstone.²³ Two others were found in Jewish cemeteries.²⁴ And in these very in-

¹⁹ Dittenberger, *SIG*³ 557, line 7. There is a similar difficulty in τοῖς σεβομένοις τὸν Ἀνουβιν (Plut. *Mor.* 368F) and in Ov. *Mel.* 1.323: Aut illa (i.e. Pyrrha) metuentior ulla deorum.

²⁰ I.e. 'Ιουδαίων τῶν καὶ Θεοσεβίων. See A. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*⁴ (Tübingen 1923) 391-392. Deissmann admits that when he first saw the inscription he wondered why it did not read "of the Jews and God-fearers." But there can be no doubt, as Deissmann himself grants, that Θεοσεβίων is an epithet of Ελουδῶν. There is no reason for "correcting" the text, as E. Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*⁴ 3 (Leipzig 1909) 174, note 70, would have us do, from τῶν καὶ to καὶ τῶν.

²¹ K. Lake, "Proselytes and God-Fearers," in F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1: The Acts of the Apostles*, 5 (London 1933) 94-95, properly translates "initiated brethren, worshipers of God Most High."

²² Above, note 15.

²³ *IG* 14.1325 (*CII* 500), which commemorates Agrippas θεοσεβῆς, has two lulabs and a crown engraved on it. Schürer (above, note 20) 3.174, note 70, believes that Agrippas, who is here called Φανήσιος, was a member of the sect of Theosebeis mentioned by Cyril of Alexandria, *De Ador. et Cultu in Spir. et Ver.* 3 (*MPG* 68.281), since Phaena is in Trachonitis in Palestine, one of the centers of this cult.

²⁴ *CII* 202 (not in *IG*) is too fragmentary to admit of certain restoration; and *CII* 228 (not in *CIL*) is set up for Eparchia Theosebes. The former inscription does contain the words προσή[λυτος] . . . [θ]εοσεβι; and it is quite possible that the latter word should be restored, as Frey has done, to read [θ]εοσεβή<ς>. This inscription, then, refers either to two individuals, one a proselyte and one a "God-fearer," or to one individual who is described as a "God-fearing" (i.e. pious) proselyte, a phrase reminiscent of Acts 13:43: τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων. In *CII* 228, I take Theosebes not as Eparchia's surname but as *theosebēs*, "God-fearer." Frey, who is very eager to find "sympathizers" in his inscriptions, is wrong in not recognizing a possible one here.

stances, it is probable, as Bernays himself admitted in the first case, that the *metuentes* are simply and literally "pious" Jews in the general and not the technical sense. In short, we have here a dilemma: either those inscriptions mentioning *metuentes* and *sebomenoi* are not necessarily Jewish at all and therefore ought not to have been included by Frey in his *Corpus* of Jewish inscriptions; or, if it can be shown that they are definitely Jewish, they probably refer to pious *Jews* rather than to "sympathizers."

Those who would have us translate *metuentes* and its Greek equivalents in the technical sense of "sympathizers" always appeal to the eleven passages in the Acts in the New Testament in which the Greek terms are found. But a careful examination of these passages by Lake leads him to conclude that in all but two cases the most natural meaning of the term is "pious" or "those who were worshipping," without any necessary reference to either Jews or "sympathizers."²⁶ A crucial passage — and one which has caused considerable difficulty to those who claim that *sebomenoi* is a technical term — is the one mentioning τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων, a phrase which obviously means "the pious proselytes" or "the proselytes who were worshipping." They are, of course, not "sympathizers" at all.²⁶

These observations would seem to be confirmed by the fact that in all the extant works of Philo and of Josephus, so far as I have been able to check them, the "sympathizers" are never referred to by the terms *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi*.²⁷ In fact, in the one place, namely, in commenting on Exodus 22:20 (21) and 23:9, where he definitely does refer to this class, Philo calls them *prosēlytoi* — a strange confusion indeed if a technical term of a quite different

²⁶ Lake (above, note 21) 85–88.

²⁶ Acts 13:43. W. Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments*³ (Berlin 1937) 1192, instead of questioning his *a priori* assumption that *sebomenoi* is a technical term, explains that this expression represents a confusion of the two terms. Mention should also be made here of the two passages in Revelation in which the similar expressions τοῖς φοβουμένοις τὸ ὄνομά σου (11:18) and οἱ φοβούμενοι αὐτόν (19:5) clearly do not refer to Jewish "sympathizers," but to religious, God-fearing people generally. As to the οἱ φοβούμενοι of II Chronicles 5:6, in the Septuagint — a phrase for which there is no equivalent in the Hebrew text that has come down to us — there seems to be no more reason for supposing that they are the "sympathizers" than that they are proselytes.

²⁷ A careful examination of J. Leisegang's Index Verborum to Philo, in L. Cohn and P. Wendland's edition of Philo, 7.2 (Berlin 1930) s.v. σέβειν and φοβεῖν, shows that Philo uses such expressions as αὐτόν (sc. θεόν) . . . φοβείσθαι (*Spec. Leg.* 1.55 300) simply in the general sense of "to feel awe before" or "to fear."

character was widely in vogue.²⁸ Philo, writing not many years before the author of Acts, quite evidently did not know the technical term; for his point is that the term for proselyte, *ger*, as used in these passages in Exodus, does not refer to a proselyte in the technical sense of the convert who has been circumcised and has agreed to follow the whole Law. Philo uses the term *prosēlytoi* figuratively in the sense of "aliens who have come over to the truth" of some Jewish beliefs; but never once does he say that he is using this term as the equivalent of *sebomenoi*. Just as the Septuagint had translated *ger* by *prosēlytos* in a number of passages, so Philo renders *ger toshab*, that is, "resident alien," by *prosēlytos* in the figurative sense. Again, in a number of other places noted by Wolfson, Philo refers less definitely to people who seem to come under the general definition of "sympathizers." He calls them "pious men"; but it is certainly significant that the Greek term here is not *phoboumenoi* or *sebomenoi ton theon* but *δύων ἀνθρώπων*.²⁹

Josephus, in his references to the "sympathizers," likewise nowhere employs the term *sebomenoi* in the technical sense.³⁰ Lake has shown conclusively that in the one passage to which most editors have assigned the technical meaning, this is the result of a mistranslation of the Greek.³¹ Finally, it is significant to note that

²⁸ Philo, *Frag.* ed. Richter, 6.241–242 (Mangey, 2.677). Cf. the discussions by S. Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law* (Cambridge, Mass. 1940) 46–47; and by Wolfson (above, note 2) 2.369 ff. This confusion between proselytes and "sympathizers" is a far different matter from the dispute (*Mekilta* on Exodus 22:20 [21] and *Midrash Tehillim* on 22:24) between Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who said that the *Yire'e Adonai* are the *Yire'e Shamayim*, and Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman, who said that they are the proselytes (see below, note 33). The fact that the dispute existed shows that both rabbis realized the difference between the "sympathizers" (*Yire'e Shamayim*) and the proselytes. See also Wolfson (above, note 2) 2.373, note 335, and the other references cited therein.

²⁹ Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.12.42. Wolfson (above, note 2) 2.373, says that it is "not impossible" that this passage refers, in so far as it includes non-Jews, to "sympathizers"; actually this view seems extremely probable, as the context shows. Philo here speaks of pious men "who follow nature and her ordinances." In 2.12.44–45, he presumably includes non-Jews when he mentions "all who practice wisdom, either in Grecian or barbarian lands, and live a blameless and irreproachable life" as being, quite similarly, "the closest observers of nature and of all it contains."

³⁰ Nero's mistress (and later wife), Poppaea Sabina, however, is termed a "religious" (*θεοσεβής*) woman by Joseph. *AJ* 20.8.11.195, though this does not by any means indicate that she was necessarily a Jewish "sympathizer" in the technical sense.

³¹ Lake (above, note 21) 85, on Joseph. *AJ* 14.7.2.110. R. Marcus, in the note on this passage in his translation in the Loeb Library, is thus, I feel, unjustified in stating that "they were undoubtedly pagan semi-proselytes." (For my objection to the term "semi-proselytes" see above, note 2.)

Josephus, far from using the terms *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi*, employs the phrase οἱ τὰ ἡμέτερα τιμῶντες ἔθνη in referring to those Greeks "who revere our practices."³² If either of these terms were technical, it is fair to suppose that he would have employed it rather than τιμῶντες.

If, then, we admit that *metuentes*, *phoboumenoi*, and *sebomenoi ton theon* are not in themselves technical terms for "sympathizers," one problem still remains, a satisfactory answer to which no commentator has yet given. Lévi has clearly proved that in Talmudic literature, as early as the *Mekilta*, a Midrashic commentary to Exodus dating from the second century of the Christian Era, there exists a definite term for "sympathizers" — *Yire'e Shamayim*, that is, "Fearers of Heaven."³³ Such a passage as the following third-century anecdote is decisive: On Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) the Emperor Antoninus used to go out with sandals; but the rabbis comment that *even* the "Fearers of Heaven," *Afilu Yire'e Shamayim*, do so.³⁴ Now, *shamayim*, "heaven," is clearly a metonymy for *Adonai*, "Lord," which is itself a substitute for the tetragrammaton; and one's first impulse is to identify the *Yire'e Shamayim* of the Talmudic writings with the *Yire'e Adonai* of the Bible. But I should here like to offer the following hypothesis as one which seems most reasonable. The term *Yire'e Shamayim* was, I fancy, originated by the rabbis as a complimentary term for the "sympathizers," as distinguished from the proselytes and the "resident aliens" (*gere toshab*).³⁵ To get a good appellation the rabbis naturally turned to the Bible and selected the term *Yire'e Adonai*, which they changed slightly by substituting *shamayim* as a metonymy for *Adonai*. It is not hard for one familiar with rabbinical exegesis to see how this phrase might have been chosen: One of the rabbis, in studying such a passage as Psalm 135:19–20, thought

³² Joseph. *AJ* 3.8.9.217.

³³ *Mekilta* on Exodus 22:20(21). See above, note 28. On the dating of the *Mekilta* see J. Z. Lauterbach, ed. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 1 (Philadelphia 1933) xx–xxi. On the interpretation of this passage see I. Lévi, "Le Prosélytisme juif," *Revue des Études Juives*, 50 (1905) 4–8, and 51 (1907) 29–31; and J. Winter and A. Wünsche, trans. of *Mekilta* (Leipzig 1909) viii–ix. Juster's view (above, note 2) 1.275 is precisely the opposite of mine. While claiming that *metuentes*, *sebomenoi*, and *phoboumenoi* are technical terms, he believes that the rabbinic writings do not contain a special term for "sympathizers."

³⁴ Talmud Yerushalmi, *Megillah*, 72b.

³⁵ The proselytes also were referred to by a complimentary term, *gere ha-zedek*, that is, "righteous strangers." On the *gere toshab* see above, note 2.

that the *Yire'e Adonai* listed after the houses of Israel, Aaron, and Levi constituted a special group, namely the "sympathizers," who could not be included under any of the three previous groups. The truly "religious" people, he said, were the pagans who accepted the Jewish monotheism. Some of the rabbis, indeed, thought that the phrase referred not to "sympathizers" but to proselytes.³⁶ The prevailing view, however, was that the proselytes, who were Jews in the fullest sense, were included in the House of Israel, and that the phrase referred to the "sympathizers." The rabbis then read the technical sense of *Yire'e Shamayim* into all previous references to the *Yire'e Adonai*. Almost all commentators since then have mistakenly identified the *Yire'e Shamayim* with the *metuentes*, the *sebomenoi*, and the *phoboumenoi*, which are common words in Latin and Greek meaning "religious."

A fresh survey of all the relevant evidence, then, indicates that the only term definitely referring to the "sympathizers" is the Talmudic *Yire'e Shamayim*. Bernays' attempt to equate *metuentes*, *sebomenoi*, *phoboumenoi*, and *Yire'e Adonai* with the "sympathizers," and thus bring order out of chaos in the matter of terminology, must therefore be abandoned; and each instance where the term occurs must be examined on its own merits. The resulting chaos would seem to be preferable to an order that is not in accordance with the facts.

³⁶ See above, notes 28 and 33.