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

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

For Michael Avi-Yonah these God-fearers were a "numerous class" of Gentiles under the Empire; "although most of them did not feel able to shoulder the whole burden of the Law, they sympathized with Judaism...They were to be found in the provinces as
David Flusser wrote in 1976 that the existence of these “many God-fearers” reveals that “Hellenistic Judaism had almost succeeded in making Judaism a world religion in the literal sense of the words.” Martin Hengel agrees with Flusser on the number and influence of the God-fearers, but draws different conclusions: “the large number of [God-fearers] standing between Judaism and paganism in the New Testament period...shows the indissoluble dilemma of the Jewish religion in ancient times. As it could not break free from its nationalist roots among the people, it had to stoop to constant and ultimately untenable compromises” (1975).

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

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

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

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

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

The evidence which produced this picture of the God-fearer was overwhelmingly literary; Acts provided the initial description, and to it were added isolated references from classical literature and Greek and Latin inscriptions. Always the technical terms were drawn from Luke, the author of the Gospel and of Acts. These are
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phoboumenos and sebomenos, which appear in Acts, and theosebes, which was thought to be a variant of the latter term. (The last is an adjective, common in the inscriptions, which occurs only once in the New Testament, in John 9:31.) The other scattered evidence for Diaspora God-fearers, in Greek and Latin literature and inscriptions, is all held together by the locus classicus, Acts. It was argued that literary texts and inscriptions in which any of these words (or the Latin equivalent) was found were in fact using them in a technical sense, = God-fearer. Finally, rabbinic discussions of sympathizers and proselytes, and of conversion, were brought in. That completed a picture which most scholars adopted, particularly on the Continent, less so in Britain.8

II

But another part of the picture has recently materialized; since the Second World War the archaeological evidence for Diaspora Judaism under the Roman Empire has increased substantially. Well-preserved ancient synagogues were discovered at Ostia, the port of Rome, in 1961 and at Sardis in western Asia Minor in 1962. Substantial collections of Jewish inscriptions, papyri and artifacts are now in print, along with detailed studies of Jews in the Roman east at Dura Europus, in North Africa, in Alexandria and in Rome itself. Excavation continues on the synagogue of Stobi in Yugoslavia.9

By now enough information has become available to permit fairly detailed reconstructions of Jewish life in the Diaspora which are based entirely on archaeological evidence.

This new evidence broadens the older picture considerably. For earlier reconstructions of the Judaism of the Roman Empire, archaeological data were very limited; historians and exegetes were forced to rely almost entirely on literary evidence, the bulk of it rabbinic. But the direct relevance of rabbinic sources to western Diaspora Judaism is questionable; at the least, they needed to be filled out with other information as it becomes available. The archaeological evidence is particularly useful for this purpose, since it is of equal antiquity with the rabbinic literature and has the added advantage of coming directly from Diaspora sites. Further, it comes
from the Jews themselves, rather than from Gentile comments about them; Stern's recent re-editing of the relevant Greek and Latin texts from pagan authors offers many examples of how partial and distorted that "outside" evidence could be. And as we shall see, the use of Christian literature, particularly Acts, as direct evidence for Diaspora Jewish history is also plagued with difficulty.

The archaeological evidence I have drawn upon comes from six excavated synagogues of the Roman Diaspora; ordered from east to west, the ancient cities which contained them are as follows:

*Dura Europos* in Syria: the building is second century CE to 256.

*Sardis* in Asia Minor: second or third century CE to 616.

*Priene* in Asia Minor: third or fourth century?

*Delos*, on an island in the Aegean Sea: first century BCE to second century CE.

*Stobi* in Macedonia: fourth century. Earlier synagogues third century or before?

*Ostia* in Italy: fourth century. Earlier synagogue first century?

The dates are approximate except for those indicating the fall of Dura (256) and of Sardis (616). The Dura and Sardis buildings were extensively remodelled during their history. The earlier synagogues at Stobi and Ostia are attested in the excavated evidence; they were supplanted by the later buildings.

Much more evidence from Diaspora Judaism is available, of course, from random epitaphs to papyri to gems. But recall that the God-fearers are associated with synagogues, with organized Diaspora Jewish communities. They are substantial groups of people, not isolated individuals. They are found at the center of Judaism, not at the fringe. If they are to be identified archaeologically anywhere, it would be in association with the excavated buildings.

I have reviewed the evidence from these six buildings and for related sites in a recent survey article, and refer the reader to it and its bibliography for details. What is presented in this paper is chiefly conclusions. A thorough study of this evidence reveals:

1) The synagogue inscriptions—over 100 of them—never use the term *phoboumenos* or *sebomenos*. *Theosebes* appears perhaps 10 times, but as an adjective describing Jews, usually Jewish donors. (The God-fearers, for all their interest in Judaism, are not Jews.)
2) There are no other references in the inscriptions which would suggest the presence of interested but non-converted Gentiles in the buildings in which the inscriptions were placed. If we had only the synagogue inscriptions as evidence, there would be nothing to suggest that such a thing as a God-fearer had ever existed.

3) The symbolism used in the buildings is directed toward the Jewish community, with no apparent attempt to communicate with persons who come from outside this tradition. The evidence from Dura is best known in this regard, but other sites make the same impression.

4) The functions of the synagogues need also to be considered. Each is probably the only building owned by the city’s Jewish community, and is the center of its religious and social life; as such it is more significant for its community than any synagogue in Palestine might have been. It is not accidental that at least four of these six were dominated by a Torah Shrine; their importance as Jewish centers is paramount.

5) Contact with Christians is rare, though such contact is assumed to be common from the accounts in Acts. To judge from the material remains, the gentile world in which these Diaspora Jews lived is considerably more pagan than Christian. In third-century Dura the synagogue is much more elaborate than the Christian building. The Stobi synagogue is displaced by a church building, but not before the fifth century; and two synagogues had been erected in Stobi before that. And at Sardis there is no archaeological evidence for a significant impact by Christianity on Jews at any point in Late Antiquity.

To summarize: the terms in question do not occur in the synagogue inscriptions. There is nothing in the excavated buildings to suggest the presence of a kind of Gentile "penumbra" around the Diaspora synagogue communities. There is no hint in these data that these Jews are reaching toward their Gentile neighbors with any sort of religious message.

If interested Gentiles in some numbers had been an accepted part of Diaspora synagogue life, something should have shown up in the excavations. To this date, nothing has.
These results from archaeology prompt a re-investigation of the older literary evidence. It quickly becomes apparent that Acts is the key. The most vivid descriptions of God-fearers are based on this book. We would not know the term "God-fearer" if it were not for Acts. The other evidence commonly used—epigraphy, and literature both classical and rabbinic—is almost always "explained" with reference to Acts.\(^\text{14}\)

But recent studies of Acts are revealing the extent to which it is first of all a literary composition—or, perhaps, theology in narrative form—rather than an historical record.\(^\text{15}\) Luke's concern is to tell an edifying story of the way Christianity began. His revisionist treatment of Paul is the best known example of this element in his writing; neither the theology\(^\text{16}\) of Paul nor the chronology\(^\text{17}\) of his career, as found in Acts, can be made to line up with the Pauline epistles.

New Testament redaction criticism has provided many other examples of Luke's alteration and amplification of his sources, in the service of the story he wishes to tell. His way of presenting Christianity is narrative. For too long he has been taken as an historian in the modern sense; a distorted picture of the religious situation of the first century has been the result.

Luke's literary creativity served the best of purposes; but at the same time it requires us to be cautious in attempts to use Acts as an historical source, especially when conclusions from Acts are not independently supported by other evidence.\(^\text{18}\)

Put the suggestions of the literary critics together with the archaeological data, and the function of some major elements in the plot of Acts becomes immediately apparent:

1) The theme of "missionary preaching in the Diaspora synagogues"—The word *synagogue* is used in Acts chiefly to designate the place where Diaspora Christian missionary preaching begins; with one exception (Apollos, 18:26) Paul is the synagogue preacher. After his Conversion (9:1-19) Paul's first act (as the "Apostle to the Gentiles"!) is to preach in a synagogue (9:20). This is particularly striking in view of the fact that the term *synagogue* is not used once in the letters written by Paul. Luke's point is clear: Christianity's path to the Gentiles was through the Jews.
2) The hero "Cornelius the God-fearer"—Cornelius, whose story is told in 10:1-11:18, is the first God-fearer met in Acts; three of the eleven references to God-fearers in Acts are found in this story. And Cornelius is the best kind of Gentile! He is a Roman citizen and an army officer. He prays to God *dia pantos*. He is pious, and so is the soldier who assists him. He has the full approval of the Jews. Most important, his conversion is accomplished at the direct command of God through a vision to Cornelius himself and a triple vision to Peter. A chapter and a half of Acts is devoted to the story of Cornelius. After him, no other God-fearer in Acts is given as much as a single sentence of description. Only two others are even named: one is Titius Justus (18:7), the other—in line with another of Luke’s emphases—is a woman, Lydia (16:14). But Cornelius is the archetype; he defines the God-fearer for Acts. When other God-fearers are brought in after chapter 10, we know about them already; they are like Cornelius. The Lukan pattern has been clarified further: the path to the Gentiles through the Jews was also through that *tertium quid*, the God-fearer.

3) "The three programmatic renunciations of the Jews"—When Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, becomes a Christian missionary, he immediately begins his work in a synagogue. Then the Cornelius story makes Paul’s work legitimate via Peter. But almost immediately there is a strain on this procedure, and it is caused by the Diaspora Jews. Luke’s Paul is provoked into three formal and programmatic renunciations of (Diaspora) Jews in favor of a mission to the Gentiles. These statements are set in three major zones of the Gentile world, in progression toward the west: 13:46 in Asia Minor, 18:6 in Greece and 28:28 in Rome.19

The first Renunciation (13:46)20 takes place in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, among Jews and God-fearers. The final break with the Diaspora synagogue is at 19:9 in Ephesus, when Paul withdraws from the most Jewish of teaching sites, the synagogue, to the most Gentile, the *scholē*. But this break is anticipated in Corinth in the second Renunciation (18:6),21 which is followed immediately by the last reference in Acts to a God-fearer (18:7). After nine more chapters in which no God-fearers are mentioned and no one enters a synagogue, the third formal Renunciation of the Jews occurs at 28:28;22 two verses later, Acts ends.
4) "The disappearance of the God-fearers"—the God-fearers disappear altogether, rather than coming to the fore, when Paul withdraws from the synagogue. After 19:9 Paul spends two years each in Ephesus, Caesaria (Cornelius!?) and Rome, but they never appear again as the faith is spread in these Gentile cities. It is no accident that we have no more God-fearers after 18:7 and no more "going into the synagogues" after 19:8; these two themes go together, and after 19:9 neither one has any further use.

The God-fearers are on the stage as needed, off the stage after they have served their purpose in the plot. Acts cannot be used as evidence that there ever were such groups in the synagogues of the Roman Empire.

It is a tribute to Luke's dramatic ability that they have become so alive for the later Church, but the evidence from Paul's own letters and now from archaeology makes their historicity questionable in the extreme.

But since I have questioned the historical value of this part of Acts, I have the obligation to say what more important point Luke was trying to make with this theme. I suspect that with his references to synagogues and God-fearers Luke is trying to tell both good news and bad news. The bad news is that most Jews in Palestine and the Diaspora have rejected Christianity despite the missionaries' repeated efforts; this is part of the point of the three formal renunciations in 13:46, 18:6, and 28:28 with their Old Testament proof-texts. Luke has concluded that the time has passed when Jews in some numbers might be expected to come into the new religion.

The good news is symbolized by the God-fearers, the Gentiles whom the Jews had begun to attract before Christianity came on the scene. Thanks to Peter and especially to Paul, these Gentiles came into Christianity in far greater numbers. Christianity is becoming more and more a Gentile religion; that outreach to the Gentiles is legitimated by the "existence" of the God-fearers, examples of an earlier outreach to Gentiles by the Jews.

The God-fearers are a symbol to help Luke show how Christianity had become a Gentile religion legitimately and without losing its Old Testament roots. The Jewish mission to Gentiles recalled in
the God-fearers is ample precedent for the far more extensive mission to Gentiles which Christianity had in fact undertaken with such success. Once that point has been made, Luke can let the God-fearers disappear from his story. That is just what they do, and that is why there is no further reference to them in the New Testament and no clear independent record of them in the material evidence from the classical world.

IV

Perhaps it can not be demonstrated conclusively that there never was a circle of God-fearers associated with ancient Judaism. The hypothesis of this paper is rather that, at least for the Roman Diaspora, the evidence presently available is far from convincing proof for the existence of such a class of Gentiles as traditionally defined by the assumptions of the secondary literature.

The new evidence required to falsify this hypothesis would have to be substantial; one clear inscription using the term phoboumenos or sebomenos precisely as in Acts would be helpful, but not sufficient, since at most it might prove God-fearers for that particular synagogue community.

Consider a parallel example, the Christian Gnostics: they are a slippery group; despite a substantial amount of ancient evidence, the social location and the various forms of this piety remain difficult to define. They were self-admittedly, perhaps by choice, a small fraction of that tiny minority of the first- and second-century world called Christians. By some accounts cited here, e.g. the Encyclopaedia Judaica, the population of God-fearers in the Roman world at that time would have been higher than the number of Christian Gnostics. It does not seem unreasonable to expect something comparable in substance to the kind of evidence which was available for Christian Gnostics before the Nag Hammadi discoveries, before we place some faith in the existence of another social group of perhaps comparable size.

There are important implications of the hypothesis of this paper for the history of Christianity and of Judaism; to begin with Christianity:

1) The distance between Palestinian Jewish Christianity and Diaspora Jewish Christianity has probably been over-stressed by
earlier scholarship, for the first century at least. They did not exist in sealed compartments. Movement back and forth between Diaspora and Holy Land was not difficult. Christianity could reach the Diaspora directly via Jewish Christian missionaries; the God-fearer is not needed as a go-between.

2) The percentage of Jews in the Christianity of the late first and early second centuries may have been higher than is usually assumed. But these Jewish Christians spoke the religious language of the Diaspora well because more and more they were Diaspora Jews, e.g. Paul of Tarsus; the first expansion of Christianity in the Gentile world is perhaps due more to them, and less to Gentile Christians than we usually admit.

3) Acts' straight-line picture of the expansion of Christianity runs: Jew — God-fearer — Gentile. But that is a simplified version, for the purposes of Luke's story. Rather, Christianity expanded over a broad front; it used several religious "languages" at the same time — with inevitable internal conflicts, attested as early as Paul's letters.

For the history of Judaism

1) The figure of the God-fearer has often been used to demonstrate the inadequacy of Judaism in the Greco-Roman period, what Hengel termed its stooping "to constant and ultimately untenable compromises" in order to make a place for itself in an alien world. But the New Testament provides no evidence for such failure, if the God-fearer texts are properly understood.28

2) When this understanding of Acts is coupled with the new evidence from excavations, we conclude that the Jews of these synagogue communities need not have felt alien to the Diaspora; we need not assume that they were "never really at home" there. At Stobi Jews were "at home" for generations, constructing a series of synagogues for their community; it was only at the end that Christianity became strong enough to change things for the worse. The assaults which destroyed the Dura synagogue in the middle of the third century fell no less heavily on Gentile buildings. The Ostia evidence is incomplete but nothing suggests either a ghetto there, or a ghetto-mentality.
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But the clearest example of a Jewish minority "at home" in a Gentile world is Sardis. This community was a very old one. Generations of Sardis Jews were native Anatolians, not refugees, immigrants or slaves from the troubled lands farther east. By the time the synagogue and the city were sacked by the Persians in the seventh century the Jews had lived there for nearly a millennium, perhaps more; and almost from the beginning they apparently enjoyed some standing with the various Gentile authorities.29

3) Missionary activity conducted from these synagogues30 may have been much less extensive than was once thought to be the case. The only reference to a proselyte in the New Testament outside Acts31 is Mt 23:15: the scribes and Pharisees "traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes one [they] make him twice as much a child of hell as" themselves. The polemic of the verse is obvious (nothing similar appears in the parallel texts of the other two Synoptic gospels); in the absence of other evidence from the Roman Diaspora, it is of little or no value for the reconstruction of the historical situation.

4) In the past we have surely exaggerated the control of one segment of ancient world-Judaism over another. Almost as soon as there was a "diaspora," Judaism in the west began to develop in parallel with the older communities of Syria-Palestine and farther east;32 each had its local alliances, its own social organization and to some degree its own theology.

5) But at the same time this does not mean that those in Diaspora synagogue communities were Jews any less. They acted as though their form of Judaism was authentic; the burden of proof is on those who would argue that is was otherwise.

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1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented in Oxford at the Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies in April, 1978, and to Prof. George Caird's seminar on Acts in May, 1978; at the University of Kansas in April 1980, and at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in Dallas in November, 1980. Earlier drafts were read by Caird, P. J. Cuff, T. R. W. Longstaff, Dennis Nineham,
Jerome Quinn and David Tiede; though none of these is responsible for the conclusions reached here, this essay is much the better for their help.


8. See the commentaries to Acts and the standard histories of the New Testament period. Translations of Acts which conflated the two Greek terms appear to be one source of the problem, to judge from the research presently being conducted by Paul F. Stuehrenberg (Ancient Studies, University of Minnesota) into the medieval and later understanding of the God-fearer.


11. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. There is no lack of evidence, e.g. magical papyri and gems, for individual instances of the conflation of Jewish and pagan pieties by gentiles or Jews about whom nothing else is known. But in the standard reconstructions, the God-fearers are a substantial social sub-class; the existence of such a group cannot be proved with scattered gems or charms, rarely if ever associated with excavated synagogues, indeed usually lacking any clear social context whatever.

12. Kraabel, “‘Diaspora Synagogue’” (see above, note 9).
Generally B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (Cahiers de la RB 7; Paris, 1967).

And arguments for the historical value of these elements in Acts may become circular, for example: "The picture which Acts gives of Paul's visiting synagogues and preaching there has been rejected as unhistorical on the ground that, by Paul's own account, his apostleship was specifically to the Gentiles, not to the Jews (Gal. i.16, ii.7-9; Rom xi. 13f.). But the apostle to the Gentiles was a sufficiently good strategist to know that he could find an excellent bridgehead for the discharge of his commission in the God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue worship in the cities of the Diaspora," F. F. Bruce, "Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?" BJRL 58 (1975-76) 293 note 2.


In a chapter titled "Narrative World and Real World in Luke-Acts," Peterson argues that "the rejection of God's agents by God's people in connection with God's sanctuaries (synagogues and temple) is the plot device by which the movement of the narrative as a whole is motivated," *Literary Criticism* 83. Drawing on the parallels between Luke and Acts already identified by earlier commentators, he shows that the "narrative world" of Luke-Acts is constructed in such a way that Jesus, Peter and John, Stephen, and Paul all have the same "experience": expulsion from Temple or synagogue at the hands of "God's people," the Jews. Thus for Peterson at least themes 1 and 3 below are not peculiar to Acts but reflect major plot-lines running through the entirety of the two-volume work, Luke-Acts. Acts' picture of Paul as synagogue-preacher is central to Peterson's analysis, cf. his summary of the discrepancies between Acts and Paul's letters on this point, 82f.

The renunciations and the artificality with which they are introduced into the story have been noted by many commentators, e.g. M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1956) 149f.

"It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you...behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (+ Isa 49:6).

"Your blood be upon your heads!...From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

(Isa 6:9f. + ) "...this salvation has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

With the exception of the third renunciation (28:28), all texts relevant to these four themes, and all references to the God-fearers, are found in the central third of Acts, between 9:20 and 19:9. A study of the terms for God-fearer, and in connection with the other words associated closely with them in this section of Acts, will be published elsewhere.

Luke's freedom to rewrite a part of early Christian history in this fashion surely says something about his distance from the events, that is, about the date of the writing of Acts.

The abruptness with which they vanish is difficult to account for if the historicity of the circle of God-fearers is assumed, and even more difficult if Luke himself is thought to be a former God-fearer, as is held by M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1980) 107.

The closest yet to such a text is the inscription from Aphrodisias in Caria to be published by Joyce Reynolds, cf. M. Mellink, "Archaeology in Asia Minor," *AJA* 81 (1977) 306; the term it uses is theosebes. At the least, this text is evidence for
(from?) a Jewish community in Aphrodisias, one which probably had a place of meeting, i.e. a synagogue. More tantalizing but much less helpful for reconstructing the life of Diaspora Jews are inscriptions such as IG III² 13209, 13210 = SIG 1239 (from Athens) and SIG 1240 (from Chalcis in Euboea), in which curses resembling those in Deut 28:22, 28 are used to protect the graves of well-to-do sophists of the second century; for a recent study of the possible connections, see L. Robert, "Malédictions funéraires grecques," CRAI (1978) 241-289, especially 241-252.


28 If Paul’s contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, had been previously unknown and the *de Vita Mosis* or the *Legum Allegoria* were suddenly to be discovered in 1980, their author would inevitably be called a God-fearer; the traditional understanding of Diaspora Judaism would have no place for such a *Jew.*


31 In Acts the term occurs three times, at 2:11 and 6:5, and in a notorious *crux interpretum* at 13:43. Logical inconsistencies resulting from the use of the New Testament to define Diaspora Judaism are of course not new; that striking history-of-religions category, the "semi-proselyte," was also the product of an uncritical reliance on the God-fearer texts in Acts, cf. Strack-Billerbeck (note 7 above) *ad* Acts 13:16.

32 Thanks to the work of Jacob Neusner and his students the particularity of the rabbinic world view has taken on a new vividness and detail in the last two decades; see e.g. his "The History of Earlier Rabbinic Judaism: Some New Approaches," *HR* 16 (1977) 216-236.