

Epigraphic Evidence for Proselytism in Ancient Judaism

by Pau Figueras

Jewish proselytes and proselytism are mentioned several times in the New Testament (Mt. 23:15; Acts 2:19, 6:5 and 13:43). In the periods of the late Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud, Jewish proselytism is a well established fact. Scholarly literature on the subject is rich.¹ This literature is based partly on historical accounts, such as those of Josephus on the conversion of Adiabene's royal family to Judaism in the first century C.E.² It also draws on the halakhic texts of the Mishnah and the Talmud. The extra-canonical talmudic tractate Masekhet Gerim is devoted completely to the subject.³

Internal evidence of actual proselytism in ancient Judaism is complemented by external sources, notably epigraphy. A good number of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek inscriptions explicitly mention the term "proselyte." Most of these inscriptions leave no doubt about the true meaning of the terms *ger*, *giora*, *proselytos* and their feminine and plural forms. They convey the concept of a person who was not a Jew by birth, but who became one through conversion.

That simple and obvious interpretation, however, has sometimes been contested. Led by their a priori Christian or Jewish-Christian interpretation of the archaeological context, scholars have occasionally attributed the term "prose-

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1. See, among others, S.L. Buterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (Westport, 1951); H.J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia, 1960); B.J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (New York, 1968); M. Stern, "The Jewish Diaspora," in S. Safrai and M. Stern eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 1 (Assen, 1974), pp. 117-183.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:2:3-4.
3. H.L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York, 1974), p. 74, n. 7.

lyte" to a Jew converted to Christianity, not to a gentile converted to Judaism.⁴ This identification requires scrutiny.

To be sure, the inscriptions do attest to defections of Jews from Judaism. Some participated in clearly syncretistic practices,⁵ while others openly professed a new faith, such as Christianity.⁶

The inscriptions also attest to the presence of Jewish sympathizers among the pagan population, the so-called "God-fearers": in Latin *metuentes*, in Greek ΘΕΟΦΕΒΕΙC. Not all interpreters agree about the precise reference of this term. Most scholars think the persons it designated were sympathizers with Judaism to the point of accepting the Jewish faith, but not the commandments of Jewish law.⁷ Others believe that in some cases epigraphists applied the term to Jews, hence it must be considered as a synonym for "Jew."⁸

Although proselytism by Jews occurred throughout the Roman Empire, the epigraphic evidence so far discovered is restricted to very specific areas. Examples are Italy (particularly the epitaphs found in the Roman Jewish catacombs),⁹ North Africa,¹⁰ the Land of Israel (inscriptions on ossuaries)¹¹ and Dura Europos at the easternmost point of the Empire.¹² Inscriptions concerning Jewish sympathizers have been found in Italy, North Africa, the Greek Islands, Asia Minor and even the Crimea.¹³ Syncretism is found among Egyptian Jews¹⁴ and in Dura Europos.¹⁵ Epigraphic evidence for Jewish conversion to Christianity comes from northern Italy and North Africa.¹⁶

4. Thus all references to proselytes on ossuaries from the Land of Israel are interpreted as Jewish proselytes to Christianity by E. Testa, *Il simbolismo dei giudei cristiani* (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 512, and B. Bagatti, *Alle origini della Chiesa*, vol. 1 (Vatican, 1981), pp. 213 f. See below, inscr. nos. 1–5.

5. Below, inscr. nos. 23–24, 26–28.

6. Below, inscr. nos. 29–31.

7. On sympathizers, see L. Feldman, "Jewish Sympathizers in Classical Literature and Inscriptions," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 81 (1950), 200–208; B. Lifshitz, "Du nouveau sur les sympathisants," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 1 (1970), 77–84; J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers in Aphrodisias* (Cambridge, 1987).

8. Below, inscr. no. 19. Some ancient texts seem to prove that also Christians were sporadically called "God-fearers." See S. Pines, "The Iranian Name for Christians and God-Fearers," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2:7 (1967), 143–152.

9. Below, inscr. nos. 6–13.

10. Below, inscr. no. 14.

11. Below, inscr. nos. 1–5.

12. Below, inscr. no. 15.

13. Below, inscr. nos. 16–22.

14. Below, inscr. nos. 23–24.

15. Below, inscr. no. 28.

16. Below, inscr. nos. 29–31. Needless to say, our main source for Jewish inscriptions has been J.B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, 2 vols. (Vatican, 1936), here quoted as Frey, CIJ, followed by the inscription number. But this collection has been substantially augmented by a number of discoveries such as Jewish ossuaries in Israel and epitaphs in Asia Minor and North Africa.

This article will discuss thirty-one inscriptions that can shed light on the issues mentioned. They are categorized as follows: 1) conversion to Judaism; 2) Jewish sympathizers; and 3) Jewish syncretism and defection to other religions.

Conversion to Judaism

Inscriptions on Jewish Ossuaries from the Land of Israel

No. 1: שלום הגרייה = "Shalom [or Salome] the proselyte"

From the Jewish necropolis at the Franciscan property Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem.¹⁷ The term *gerit*, here used for the more common *gioret*, is not attested in sources other than Jewish ossuaries (see next inscription).

No. 2: מריה הגרייה הדולקח = "Maria [or Miriam] the fervent proselyte" or "the proselyte, the candle-lighter."

From a Jerusalem necropolis.¹⁸ The term *ba-doleqet* has been discussed by various scholars, each arguing for one or other of the two proposed translations. Apparently, the epithet in question is an active participle of the verb *d-l-q*, rarely found in the Bible in the *pa'al* form, and having the two-fold meaning "to burn" in an intransitive sense¹⁹ and "to persecute."²⁰ It also appears in the *bif'il* form, meaning "to persecute" (Is. 5:11).

Accordingly, it is unclear what *ba-doleqet* means as an epithet for the proselyte Maria. While Clermont-Ganneau understood it as indicating a pious, "fervent" proselyte, to Judaism of course,²¹ D. Kaufman interpreted it as a "fervent proselyte" to Christianity.²² The same interpretation has more recently been advocated by Frs. Testa and Bagatti.²³ On the other hand, J.B. Frey, following S. Klein,²⁴ understood it as a Jewish proselyte whose job before her conversion to Judaism had been that of lighting the Sabbath candles.²⁵ It could be that the epithet had been given to her because she was known as practicing the typical Jewish custom of lighting lamps (on Friday evening) even before she became a full proselyte.

No. 3: ΔΙΟΓΕΝΗΣ ΠΙΟΧΑΥΤΟΣ ΖΗΝΑ = "Diogenes the proselyte [son of] Zena[?]"

17. B. Bagatti and J.T. Milik, *Gli scavi del Dominus Flevit*, vol. 1, *La necropoli del periodo romano* (Jerusalem, 1958), p. 59, n. 31.

18. Frey, CII, no. 1390.

19. Obad. 18; Lam. 4:19; Prov. 26:23; Ps. 7:14.

20. Gen. 31-36; 1 Sam. 17:52; Ps. 10:2.

21. Frey, *ibid.*

22. D. Kaufman, *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1886, p. 143, as quoted by Frey, *ibid.*

23. Testa, *op. cit.* (note 4 above), p. 512.

24. Klein quotes mShabbat 2:6 and translates: "Marie die Proselytin, die Anzünderin" (*op. cit.*, pp. 24 f., n. 52).

25. "Sans doute, la personne dont parle notre inscription s'était-elle acquittée de cet office" (i.e., lighting the candles for the Sabbath) "jusqu'au jour où elle devint proselyte juive, et on continue à l'appeler, comme auparavant, l'allumeuse" (Frey, *ibid.*).

From Dominus Flevit, Jerusalem.²⁶ Unlike the two preceding inscriptions, the proselyte in question bears a pagan name. With no Jewish name added to it, this was certainly his original name. "Zena" most probably represents the name of his father, perhaps as an abbreviation, but it also could be the geographic name of his place of origin (see next inscription).

No. 4: ΙΟΥΔΑΝ ΠΡΟΧΑΥΤΟ[Σ] ΤΥΡΑ = "Judah the proselyte from Tyre."

From Dominus Flevit, Jerusalem.²⁷ One cannot accept the translation offered by the first editors: "[Ossa] di Yehuda il giovane, proselito, fabbricante di formaggio." This, however, was later changed into "Giuda, figlio di Giuda, proselito di Tiro."²⁸ They interpreted the letter N after ΙΟΥΔΑ as an abbreviation of ΝΕΟΤΕΡΟΥ, and ΤΥΡΑ as referring to the Greek term for "cheese." There is, however, at least one other epigraphic example of an ossuary with an N added to the personal name ΙΟΥΔΑ,²⁹ and the understanding of ΤΥΡΑ as referring to Tyre was already made evident by the late B. Lifshitz.³⁰

No. 5: ΙΟΥΔΑΤΟC ΛΑΓΑΝΙΟΝΟC ΠΡΟΧΑΥΤΟΥ = "[Ossuary] of Judah son of Laganion, the proselyte."

Inscribed on a lateral face of an otherwise undecorated ossuary at the archaeological museum of St. Anne, Jerusalem, cat. no. 32. The second word, ΛΑΓΑΝΙΟΝΟC, was assumed by the publisher, E.L. Sukenik, to be the name of the father of Judah the proselyte.³¹ But Laganion is not a common personal name, and it could also be interpreted as a geographical indication. It might also be that, if Laganion is the father's name, the adjective "proselyte" should refer to him rather than to Judah, the son. In all the preceding cases, indeed, the epithet "proselyte" came immediately after the (first) name.

Some authorities among Italian archaeologists follow the erroneous theory that all the so-called Jewish ossuaries should be considered to belong to the Jewish-Christian community.³² It has been claimed, accordingly, that all the preceding epitaphs of Jewish proselytes are those of converts, either Jewish or gentile, to Christianity.³³ But their arguments for the Christianity of the ossuar-

26. Bagatti and Milik, op. cit., p. 89, n. 21.

27. Ibid., p. 84, n. 13.

28. Ibid.

29. Though this name appears here inversely written, ΝΑΔΟΥΙ, under Semitic influence. Other cases of Ioudan for the Hebrew name Yehudah appear on Greek inscriptions from Galilee (Beit Shearim, Merot, etc.).

30. B. Lifshitz's interpretation in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästinavereins* 78 (1962), p. 79 is *Ioydan proselytos Tyroy*.

31. E.L. Sukenik, *Jüdische Gräber um Christi Geburt* (Jerusalem, 1931), p. 18, plate 3. See also Frey, *CJ* 2, p. 318, no. 1385, who translates: "[Ossuaire] de Judas, [fils] de Laganion, le proselyte."

32. Arguments for such a theory may be found in B. Bagatti, "Scoperta di un cimitero giudeo-cristiano al Dominus Flevit," *Liber Annuus* 3 (1952-53), 148-194, and in E. Testa, op. cit. (note 4 above), pp. 426-513 (Ch. 8, "Christianità dei segni e degli ossuari").

33. M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*, vol. 4 (Rome, 1978), pp. 440-444.

ies are invalid, as I have already had occasion to prove.³⁴ As for the question of a Jewish name for a proselyte, nothing is more natural, as it is customary for proselytes to receive a Jewish name on their admittance to “the covenant of Abraham.” Unmistakable cases of such a procedure have been recorded in rabbinic literature.³⁵

Inscriptions on Jewish Epitaphs from Italy and Africa

No. 6: ΩΔΕ ΚΙΕΙ]ΤΑΙ ΑΝΑΚΤΑΚ[Ι]C ΠΠΟC[H]Λ[Υ]ΤΟC = “Here lies Anastasia [or Anastasia?], the proselyte”

From the Jewish cemetery at Venosa (Apulla), Italy. Painted in red, very much erased. The last word has been variously interpreted, but Frey’s version, presented here, makes good sense.³⁶

No. 7: [...ΙΟ]ΥΔΕΑ ΠΠΟC[H]Λ[Υ]ΤΟC... Θ]ΕΟCΕΒ[ΗC...] = “[Here lies...] the Jewish proselyte [and G]od-fearer....”

From the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini, Via Appia, Rome. Frey (CIJ 1, no. 202) interprets the last word as a proper feminine name, Theosebes, but I believe it means “God-fearer,” in the sense of the specific denomination for a gentile who has accepted “the God of the Jews,” as we shall see below.³⁷ In the present inscription, where both denominations “proselyte” and “God-fearer” apply to the same person, we have evidence that these two epithets are not always clearly differentiated. Actually, most proselytes had previously been God-fearers. We can also notice here the strongly Jewish character of the inscription: Jewess, proselyte, God-fearer (see likewise the next inscription).

No. 8: ΕΙΡΗΝΗ Θ]ΠΕ<Z>ΠΤΗ ΠΠΟCΗΥΤΟC ΠΑΤΡΟC ΚΑΙ ΜΗΤΡΟC ΕΙΟΥ-ΔΕΑ ΙCΡΑΗΛΙΤΗC ΕΖΗCΕΝ [Ε]Τ[Η] Γ’ Μ[Η]ΝΑC Ζ’ ΗΜΕ]Ρ[Α]Ν Α’ = “Irene, infant, a proselyte by her father and her mother, a Jewess, an Israelite, lived three years, seven months, one day.”

From the Jewish catacomb at Villa Torlonia, Rome.³⁸ This is a strange case of epigraphical evidence for Jewish proselytism. This small child, aged three and a half years, died shortly after her parents’ conversion. Despite her Jewish name, Irene (which is the Greek equivalent of Shelomit or Salome), she was

34. P. Figueras, *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (Leiden, 1983), pp. 82–86; “Jewish Ossuaries and Secondary Burial: Their Significance for Early Christianity,” *Immanuel* 19 (Winter 1984/85), 41–57.

35. Cf. in the Talmud: “Judah, the Ammonite proselyte” (bBerakhot 28a).

36. While Frey transcribes the last lines: 4. CHC ΠΠΟC, 5. ΙΤΙ, and reads *pros[e]l[y]t[os]* [?], De Rossi (ms. 16353), n. 6 has for line 5: ΑΗΤΙ, and Ascoli finds in it the word ΠΠΟCΤΑΤΗC (both quoted by Frey, CIJ 1, p. 576). Cf. also J.B. Frey, “Inscriptions inédites des catacombes juives de Rome,” *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 7 (1930), 250–256, no. 23.

37. The term in question is also used in the New Testament in its obvious sense (Jn. 9:31), while a more explicit formula is used in Acts 16:14 (Lydia, the purple-maker who was a God-fearer, *sebomene ton theon*) and in Acts 13:16–26 (where Paul specifically distinguishes between “Israelites” and “God-fearers,” *hoi phoboumenoi ton theon*).

38. Frey, CIJ, no. 21. Also published by R. Paribeni, “Catacomba giudaica sulla via Nomentana,” *Notizie degli Scavi* 17 (1920), 143–155, no. 44 on p. 151; H. Lietzmann, *Die jüdische Katakomba der Villa Torlonia in Rom* (Berlin, 1930), no. 44 on p. 37 and plate 18; Frey, “Inscriptions inédites” (note 36 above).

probably born before the formal conversion of her parents, and thus she was considered, like them, to be a proselyte. It should be recalled that the Mishnah has special regulations regarding a female that becomes a proselyte before the age of three years and one day.³⁹

No. 9: Beturia Paucla [f]ilia] — or [f]eliciter? — domi [a]eternae [c]lo[n]stituta, quae [v]ixit an[nos] LXXXVI, me[n]ses VI, proselita [s]ic an[nos] XVI, nomin[us] Sara, mater synagogarum Campi et Bolumni. EN [E]IPHNH [H] [K]OIMHCIC AYTH[C]. = “Veturia Paucla, happily established in the everlasting home,⁴⁰ who lived eighty-six years [and] six months, a proselyte for sixteen years, Sara by name, mother of the synagogues of Camp [of Mars] and Volumnius. Let her rest be in peace!”

From Rome.⁴¹ The curious title “mother of synagogues” may designate the lady proselyte in question either as the very founder or as a conspicuous contributor to the maintenance of those Jewish institutions.⁴² In any case, besides the exact number of years she had lived as a Jewess, we find also the obvious addition of a Jewish name to her former Roman names. She could not easily renounce those names if she belonged, as it seems, to the nobility. But as a Jewess, the community is proud to record also her new name, Sara.

No. 10: Felicitas proselyta ann[orum] VI NVENN, peregrina, quae vixit ann[os] XLVII. Patronus [b]enemerenti. = “Felicitas, a proselyte for six years, Naomi by name [?], a stranger, who lived for 47 years. The patron to the well-deserving [deceased].”

From Rome, Via Portuense, on a marble slab, today at the Lateran Museum.⁴³ Here too we probably have a double name, Felicitas and Naomi, though the latter is not clear in the text.⁴⁴ The years she lived as a Jewess are also recorded. Yet while Sara, in the previous case, was a rich Roman *matrona*, Naomi was only a poor foreign slave, whose patron had taken care of her tomb. This fact seems to exclude the assumption that she had been freed on the occasion of her conversion. As a matter of fact, freed slaves and proselytes are often treated by the Jewish Halakhah as liable to the same rights and obligations.⁴⁵

No. 11: Cresce[n]s Sinicerius, Iud[aeus] proselytus, vixit ann[os] XXXV, dormitione[m] accepit. Mat[er] dull[cissimo] fil[i]o suo fec[it] qu[od] ips[us] mihi deb[uit] facere. VIII K[a]ll[endas] Ian[uarias]. = “Crescens Sinicerius, a Jewish proselyte, lived thirty-five years, and went to sleep on the eighth of the cal-

39. mKetuvot 1:4; 3:1.

40. For many other written expressions of this concept in ancient Judaism, see Figueras, *Decorated Jewish Ossuaries* (see note 34 above), pp. 91 f.

41. Frey, CIJ, no. 523, according to De Rossi, MS 16151.

42. Up till now the title in question has not been properly interpreted. See A. Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs of Ancient Rome* (Stuttgart, 1986); B.J. Broton, *Inscriptional Evidence for Women as Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Harvard, 1982).

43. Frey, CIJ, no. 462.

44. NVENN = Nue[mi] [for Noemi] n[omi]n[e], according to Frey (ad loc.), who quotes *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6, 2431.

45. mShekalim 1:6; mYevamot 6:5 and 8:2.

ends of January. Mother has done for her sweetest son what he should have done for me.”

From Rome, Via Nomentana, on a marble slab.⁴⁶ Most probably, the addition *iudaeus* to *proselytus* is not intended to distinguish the person in question from a possible Christian proselyte, as the cemetery to which this tomb belongs is entirely Jewish. I would rather see here the epithet *proselytus* as stressing the distinction always made by Jews in the community between Jews by conversion and Jews by birth, which is apparent throughout the halakhic texts.

No. 12: Nikete proselyto digno et benemerenti Dionysas patrona fecit = “To Niketes, the proselyte, worthy and well-deserving, Dionysas the patroness made [this monument].”

From Rome, in the Jewish catacomb at Via Appia, on a green marble slab.⁴⁷ A seven-branched menorah appears engraved among the letters of this inscription. Although both persons mentioned, the patroness and the deceased, bear only typically Greek names, it is probable that Niketes had embraced the religion of his patroness and only thus had he obtained freedom. If this was the case, however, as above, no. 10, we wonder by what relations and obligations a patron or patroness was bound to his or her former slaves.⁴⁸

No. 13: Mannacius sorori Crysidei dulcissim[ae], proselyt[ae] = “Mannacius to his sweetest sister Crysis, the proselyte.”

From Rome, Via Appia, on a marble slab.⁴⁹ It is difficult to establish whether the relative who takes care of burial and monument, Mannacius in our case, is a proselyte or not. The fact that this is not indicated in the inscription does not prevent us from taking it for granted that both of them were proselytes, by comparison with nos. 10 and 11. Indeed, it is unthinkable that those “patrons,” if they were not Jews, would take care of their old slaves, who later converted to Judaism. Only if both patron and slave were Jews, one perhaps by birth and the other by conversion, is it understandable that the first had taken care of the second. In our present case, moreover, it is probable that Mannacius represents a Jewish name such as Menashe.

No. 14: ΙΩΧΗ ΚΡΙΣΠΟΥ ΙΒ', ΚΟΙΝΤΟΚ ΚΟΙΝΤΟΥ Λε', ΑΥΚΑ ΓΑΙΟΥ Λη', CAPPΑ ΠΠΟΧΑΥΤΟΚ Λη' = “Josés [son] of Crispus, four [years old]; Quintus [son] of Quintus, fifteen [years old]; Luke [son] of Gaius, fifty eight [years old]; Sar<r>a, the proselyte, eighteen [years old].”

From Cyrenaica in Africa, on a marble tomb-slab.⁵⁰ The publishers of this inscription⁵¹ point out that Sara was either a slave or an adopted daughter of

46. Frey, CIJ, no. 68. First published by Paribeni, op. cit. (note 38 above), p. 152.

47. Frey, CIJ, no. 256.

48. This point is not dealt with by Frey in the introduction to his *Corpus*: “L’Ancien Judaïsme, spécialement à Rome, d’après les inscriptions juives” (CIJ, pp. LIII ff.).

49. See also Garrucci (Diss., p. 106. no. 23), Vos and Diehl.

50. G. Lüderitz, *Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaica* (Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B, Nr. 53; Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 26, no. 12.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 27. Lüderitz quotes Vattier de Bourville, *Revue Archéologique* 5 (1848), 150–154.

the Jewish family where she became a proselyte. Only then was she given a new, Jewish name.

Inscriptions from the Dura Europos Synagogue

No. 15: (line 7) ושמואל [בר ס] פרה

(line 8) [ויאך שך] גיורה

= "...Samuel [son of S]afra and [Arshach], the proselyte...."

On a tile from the ceiling of the famous synagogue at Dura Europos in Syria, in Aramaic.⁵² Names can be restored from the parallel Greek text recovered from the same spot. As J. Naveh points out, the name Arshach, which is typically Parthian (the Greek text has APCAXOY), fits quite well to a stranger to Judaism in that region. As a matter of fact, only Arshach, the proselyte (*giora* in Aramaic), has a foreign name, while the other men mentioned in the same inscription bear typical Jewish names, such as Abraham, Samuel, etc.

Jewish Sympathizers Among the Gentiles

I have already mentioned above (no. 7) the rare case of a Roman woman described at the same time as a "proselyte" and "God-fearer." Seven other cases from various sites have been recorded here, attesting to the fact that "God-fearers," who can also be called Jewish sympathizers, formed a particular institution in late Roman society throughout the empire.⁵³ This becomes clear particularly from the famous Milet inscription (below, no. 18). Our knowledge of the percentage and status of this group in relation to the Jews proper, as well as to the proselytes of a given community, has recently been enlightened by the following inscription, which has received much scholarly attention.

No. 16: Found in Aphrodisias, Asia Minor, in 1976, inscribed in Greek on the two sides of a huge marble block, c. 3 m. high and 45 cm. wide. The text is too long (86 lines) to be reproduced here, and most of it is a list of 125 names, of which 68 are called "Jews" (ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ), 54 "God-fearers" (ΘΕΟΦΕΒΕΙΟΙ) and three "proselytes" (ΠΙΠΟΧΑΥΤΟΙ). All of these people contributed to a charitable institution of the local synagogue, probably the soup-kitchen for the poor, as interpreted by the editors.⁵⁴

The importance of this inscription consists particularly in the high percentage of "God-fearers" in relation to the other two groups and their character as an established institution. We should not forget, however, that we can only compare the numbers of those who donated, not the absolute numbers of the members constituting each group. One gets the impression that the group

52. From J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Tel Aviv, 1978), p. 127, no. 88, ll. 7 and 8 (Hebrew).

53. See the bibliography in note 7 above.

54. Published by Reynolds and Tannenbaum (note 7 above). See also R.F. Tannenbaum, "Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphroditē," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12:5 (1986), 54–57; P.W. Van den Horst, "Jews and Christians in Aphrodisias in the Light of Their Relations in Other Cities of Asia Minor," *Nederlandse Theologische Tijdschrift* 43:2 (1989), 106–121.

of “God-fearers” was composed of rather wealthy people, readily able to contribute to charitable causes (see also the next inscription).

No. 17: [Γ]Η ΑΓΙΟΤΑΤΗ [Σ]ΥΝΑΓΩΓΗ ΤΩΝ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΕΥΣΤΑΘΙΟΣ Ο ΘΕΟΕΒΗΣ ΥΠΕΡ ΜΝΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ ΕΡΜΟΦΙΛΟΥ ΤΟΝ ΜΑΚΚΑΥΑΗΝ ΑΝΕΘΗΚΑ ΑΜΑ ΤΗ ΝΥΜΦ[Η] ΜΟΥ ΑΘΑΝΑCΙΑ = “In the most holy synagogue of the Hebrews, I, Eustathios the God-fearer, in memory of my brother Hermophilos, have set the laver-basin together with my betrothed Athanasia”

From Deliler, near ancient Philadelphia in Lydia, Asia Minor.⁵⁵ One will notice the contrast between the strongly non-Jewish character of the names of the people involved in the donation here recorded and the object itself, which would probably serve for the Jewish ritual in “the most holy synagogue of the Hebrews.” Obviously, if “God-fearer” is the term officially used by a Jewish community to designate a gentile person closely sympathizing with it, that designation is accepted by the sympathizer himself as a title of honor.

No. 18: ΕΥΦΡΟΣΥΝΑ ΘΕΟΕΒΗΣ ΧΡΗCΤΑ ΧΑΙΡΕ = “Euphrosyna the God-fearer, the worthy, farewell!”

From Rhodes, on a rectangular tomb-slab of black marble.⁵⁶

No. 19: ΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΕΒΙΩΝ [*sic*] = “Place of the Jews and the God-fearers.”

From the theater at Milet, Asia Minor, indicating seating accommodation for spectators.⁵⁷ The opinions of scholars are divided over whether the epithet “God-fearers” is to be read here as referring to the Jews⁵⁸ or to the distinct group of Jewish sympathizers.⁵⁹ For this second interpretation, which seems obvious to me, it would be grammatically more correct to read ΚΑΙ ΤΩΝ instead of ΤΩΝ ΚΑΙ.

The tenor, place and function of this inscription, which is actually a practical indication for good order in the theater, do not allow us to suppose that the pagan council of a Roman-Hellenistic city such as Milet paid religious respect to the local Jewish community. Thus, we must certainly see in this inscription a testimony to both the number and the social relevance of such a group as the Jewish sympathizers.

No. 20: ΚΑΙ ΑΦΙΗΜΙ ΕΠΙ ΤΗΣ ΠΡΟΕΥΧΗΣ ΕΛΠΙΑΝ ... ΟΠΟΣ ΕCΤΙΝ ΑΠΑΡΕΝΟΧΛΗΤΟΣ ... ΕΠΙΤΡΟΠΕΥΟΥCΗΣ ΤΗΣ CΥΝΑΓΩΓΗΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΝ CΕΒΩΝ = “I release in the synagogue Elpias...; he shall remain undisturbed...; the community of the Jews and the God-fearers will be guardian....”

Part of an inscription from Kertsch, Crimea, today in the museum of that city.⁶⁰ Even more obviously than in the previous case, it seems that Jews and

55. B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives* (Paris, 1967), p. 31; L. Roth-Gerson, “On the Donation of a Laver-Basin to a Synagogue” (Hebrew), *Qadmoniyot* 10 (1979), p.79.

56. Lifshitz, in Frey, *CIJ* 2, p. 89. Cf. L. Robert, *Etudes Anatoliennes* (Paris, 1937), p. 441, n. 5.

57. Frey, *CIJ*, no. 748.

58. Thus Deissmann, as quoted by Frey (*ibid.*).

59. Thus Schürer, who reads *kai ton* instead of *ton kai*, according to Frey (*ibid.*).

60. Frey, *CIJ*, no. 683. Lifshitz, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Also published in *Corpus Regni Bosporani*.

God-fearers developed their religious, cultural and social life within the same organization, namely, the local synagogue.

No. 21: Marcus teuseues [*sic*] qui vixit annu[s] quindecim hic receptus est in pac[e] = “Mark the God-fearer, who lived fifteen years, has been received here in peace.”

From a tomb in the north-west gallery of the burying-vault at Venosa, northern Italy.⁶¹ I agree with the publisher’s interpretation of the word *teuseues*, which can only be a popular Latin transcription of the Greek term ΘΕΟCEBHC.⁶² Lifshitz notices that this boy Mark is actually the first known God-fearer in a Jewish cemetery, and that “the epitaphs of the *metuentes* (the Latin term for ‘God-fearers’) were found outside the Jewish catacombs.”

No. 22: ...[fidel]is metu[ens] = “...a faithful <God->fearer.”

From North Africa, according to recent research undertaken by Y. Le Bohec on ancient Jews and Judaizers in Roman Africa.⁶³

Jewish Syncretism and Defection to Paganism and Christianity

No. 23: ΘΕΟΥ ΕΥΛΟΓΙΑ ΘΕΥΟΔΑΤΟΣ ΔΩΡΙΩΝΟΣ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΥ ΚΩΘΕΙΣ ΕΚ ΠΕΛ[ΑΓ]ΟΥΣ = “Glory to God! Theodotos [son] of Dorion, a Jew, rescued from the sea.”

From Edfu, in the temple of Pan.⁶⁴ Their location in a pagan temple built in Middle Egypt during the Ptolemaic period is the only strange thing about this and the following inscriptions. Such a setting turns the mention of “God” into an invocation to a Hellenistic god by a Jew. Theodotos can be considered as a probable Greek translation of Matatiah or Netanel. If it is true that, because of his name, Pan was considered to be a “universal” god, then it is more understandable to find some Jews ready to pay him honor and thank him as rescuer.

No. 24: ΕΥΛΟΓΕΙ ΤΟΝ ΘΕΟΝ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΥ = “Ptolemaios [son] of Dionysios, a Jew, thanks [or blesses] the god.”

From the same site as no. 23.⁶⁵ An interesting feature of this and the preceding texts is the fact that the offerers of these votive inscriptions want to be recorded officially as Jews. Their religious syncretism does not make them want to hide their ethnic background, even though the latter could involve social consequences (see also the next inscription).

61. Lifshitz, op. cit., p. 47.

62. Others had read *Hauseues* (for *Eusebes*), a proper name. See W. Frenkel, *Nella patria di Q. Orazio-Flacco: Guida di Venosa*, s.a. Cf. also B.P. Bagnetti, “Les Inscriptions juives de Venosa et le problème des rapports entre Lombards et l’Orient,” *Comptes-rendus Académie Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1954, pp. 193–202, inscription on p. 194, n. 2a; B. Lifshitz, *Rivista di Filologia* 40 (1962), p. 638.

63. Y. Le Bohec, “Inscriptions juives et judaïsantes de l’Afrique romaine,” *Antiquités Africaines* 17 (1981), 165–207; “Juifs et judaïsants dans l’Afrique romaine — remarques onomastiques,” *ibid.*, 209–229. I am most grateful to Prof. Dr. H. Castritius for drawing my attention to this important research.

64. Frey, *CJ*, no. 1537.

65. *Ibid.*, no. 1538.

No. 25: ΟΙ ΠΟΤΕ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ ΜΥ[ΡΙΑΔΑ] Α' = "Those who once were Jews [gave] ten thousand [drachmas]."

From Smyrna, on a marble slab of 45 lines, today at Oxford.⁶⁶ It is a list of citizens who gave gifts to the city. As Frey, its publisher, points out, we realize that there were some Jews in Smyrna who preferred to renounce Judaism and thus acquire citizenship. Nobody can tell us for sure if such Jews who were called (probably only by other citizens) "those who once were Jews" had an organization of their own within the pluralistic Hellenistic society of the Asian cities in Roman times.

No. 26: ΜΟΧΧΟΝ ΦΡ[ΥΝΙΔΑC...] ΤΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΕΙΝΑΙ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΝ ΜΗ[ΔΕΝΙ ΜΗΔ]ΕΝ ΠΡΟCΚΟΤΑ.... ΜΟΧΧΟC ΜΟΧΧΙΟΝΟC ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟC ΕΝΥΠΝΙΟΝ ΙΔΩΝ ΠΡΟCΤΑΞΑΝΤΟC ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ΑΜΦΙΑΡΑΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΤΗC ΥΓΙΕΙΑ. ΚΑΘΑCΥΝΕΤΑΞΕ Ο ΑΜΦΙΟΡΟC ΚΑΙ ΥΓΙΕΙΑ ΕΝ CΤΗΑΗΙ ΓΡΑΨΑΝΤΑ ΑΝΑΘΕΝΑΙ ΠΡΟC ΤΩΙ ΒΩΜΩΙ = "...Phrynidas [will release] Moschos to be free, dependent on no man.... Moschos son of Moschion the Jew having seen a dream, at the command of the god Amphiaraios and Hygieia, according to what Amphiaraios and Hygieia have ordained to be written on a stele and set up by the altar."

From Oropos, Boetia, Greece.⁶⁷ This inscription is the first act of enfranchisement found in the local temple of Amphiaraios, and is dated to the first half of the third century B.C.E. Accordingly, the Moschos mentioned herein is the earliest known Jew from the Greek mainland. Here too, we see that, despite his religious Hellenization, this man is recorded as a Jew.⁶⁸

No. 27: ΘΕΩΙ ΥΨΙCΤΩΙ ΠΑΝΤΑΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΙ [sic] ΕΥΛΟΓΗΤΩΙ, ΒΑCΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟC ΒΑCΙΛΕΟC ΡΗCΚΟΥΠΟΡΙΔΟC, ΦΙΛΟΚΑΙCΑΡΟC ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΥ ... ΝΕΟΚΛΗC ΑΘΗΝΟΔΩ[ΡΟΥ ΑΦΙΗΜΙ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡ]ΙΟΥC ΥΠΟ ΔΙΑ, ΓΗΝ, ΗΛΙΟΝ... = "To the God most high, almighty, blessed, under the reign of King Rescuporis, loyal to the emperor and friend of the Romans... I Neocles [son] of Athenodoros set in liberty under Zeus, Ge, Helios [the slaves]..."

From Gorgippia, Anapa, Russia. Its publisher, the late Prof. Lifshitz,⁶⁹ pointed out that "it is clear that the epithet *pantocrator* and *eulogetos* are not pagan and cannot be assigned to any local or Hellenistic deity." This proves that Neocles son of Athenodoros was a Jew. He also remarked that the verb *aphiemi*, "to set in liberty," with the names of Zeus, Ge and Helios was "an indispensable juridical formula in acts of enfranchisement." This, however, does not free Neocles from an obvious religious syncretism.

No. 28: דכירין אנשיא די צירין תנן קדם בל וירחבל ועגלכול וארצו

505 דכירין אל השמש בר צלת ותא[מ]א בניה די צרו צורחא הד[א] בסבת שנת

= "Be remembered and be blessed the men who have been painted here, before Bel, Yarhbol, Aglibol and Arsu. And be remembered Elhashemesh son of Selat and Thomas Benaiah who have painted these pictures on [the month of] Tevet of the year 505 [=194 C.E.]."

66. Ibid., no. 742. See the extensive bibliography on this text in *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, no. 3148, where it is also recorded.

67. Lifshitz, op. cit., p. 82, n. 711b.

68. D.M. Lewis, "The First Greek Jew," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 2 (1957), 264-266.

69. Lifshitz, op. cit., pp. 67 f., n. 690a.

From Dura Europos, Syria, third century C.E.⁷⁰ The Jewishness of the inscription lies on the name of the second painter, Thomas Benaiah. This is a case of practical syncretism, as the subjects that he and his companion painted are none other than the Palmyrean gods and their worshipers.⁷¹

No. 29: Hic requiescit Petrus qui Papario fil[ius] Olympi Iudaei solusque ex gente sua ad XP[ist]I meruit gratiam pervenire et in [hanc] s[an]c[t]am aulam digne sepultus est sub d[ie] pr[i]d[ie] id[us] iul[ias] indictione] quarta = "Here reposes Petrus who is [called also] Papario, son of Olympus the Jew, and who alone of his family [or: his people] has deserved to attain the grace of Christ and was suitably buried in this holy aula on the fourteenth day of July in the fourth indiction."

From Aquileia, northern Italy, IV century.⁷² As the term *gens* may mean "people" as well as "family," scholarly opinion is divided concerning the correct interpretation of this being a case of a Jew converted to the Christian faith. In any case, as has been rightly remarked, Petrus was certainly neither the first nor the last to do so.⁷³

No. 30: MOCE[C] = "Moses"

From North Africa, on a tomb-slab, being no. 1 in Le Bohec's collection (see above, no. 22). This inscription, like the next one, is accompanied by the typical Christian sign called "chrismon," consisting of the two interlaced Greek characters X and P. However, in the editor's opinion, to which I subscribe, the name Moses betrays the Jewish origin of the deceased, who certainly had accepted the Christian faith.

No. 31: Sabbat[i]olus q[ui] et Iubentinus positus in [pace] = "Sabbatiolus, who was also [called] Iubentinus, has been laid down in peace."

From North Africa, on a tomb-slab, also accompanied by a "chrismon."⁷⁴ Again, the Jewish character of the deceased is betrayed by his name, here Sabbatiolus, a name derived from the Hebrew root "Shabbat." Le Bohec's arguments for regarding this and similar names as typical of Judaizers⁷⁵ are not convincing, as they may be attributed simply to Jews. Some oil lamps with one of these Jewish names on their reverse are also thought by him to belong to Judaizers owing to the pagan or neutral character of the representations they display. Yet we have seen that orthodoxy was not necessarily to be found among Jewish craftsmen (above, no. 28).

70. Frey, CIJ, no. 825.

71. The sarcophagus of a Jew who was a *zoographos* by profession (i.e., "a painter of living things") is well known. See H. Strauss, "Jüdische Vorbilder frühchristlicher Kunst?" in *Acts of the IX Congress of Christian Archaeology* (Brandenburg, *Überlegungen*), pp. 68–77.

72. L. Ruggini, "Ebrai e orientali nell'Italia settentrionale," in *Studia et Documenta Historiae et Juris* 25 (Rome, 1959).

73. Ruggini, *ibid.*

74. Le Bohec, *op. cit.* (note 63 above), n. 66.

75. *Ibid.*, nn. 17, 77, 81.

Conclusions

My purpose in collecting the foregoing epigraphic material was not to prove a specific thesis. It was simply to illustrate the fact that during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Jews were the subject of religious proselytism as well as its object. Historians have discussed these issues at length, but inscriptions have no substitute for verifying facts and names, be they epitaphs, dedications or ex-votos.

Our review of a short but significant collection of such inscriptions should be followed by a careful examination of the eloquent but often hazy language of the pictorial symbols with which Jews of all times have decorated their tombs and synagogues. Those decorations have been the subject of intense discussion, but with great disagreement among scholars on the way religious ornament in Judaism is to be approached. It is so great that the far-reaching implications of the right understanding of religious ornament are usually neglected by historians.

Returning to the inscriptions themselves, such terms as *ger*, *giora*, *proselytos*, *theosebés*, *metuens*, were found together with accompanying Jewish and foreign names, pagan gods and even Christian formulae. It all provides sufficient evidence to show that the Judaism of the first four centuries of the Christian era was neither a static, self-centered religion nor one whose members invariably resisted the temptation of assimilation. Yet, as we have seen, even in cases of conversion Jews did not deny their origins, but continued to view themselves ethnically as Jews. The implications of such an identification are important, especially in terms of early Jewish-Christian relations or of those between Jewish and gentile Christians.

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