

## WHO WERE THE "FEARERS OF THE LORD" (*YIR'EI HASHEM*) IN PSALMS?

SHIMON BAKON

The term *yir'ei Hashem* ("those who fear the Lord") appears in four verses of the Psalms: *Israel, trust in the Lord! Their help and their shield is He. House of Aaron, trust in the Lord! Their help and their shield is He. Those who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord! Their help and their shield is He* (Ps. 115:9-11). *He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron; He will bless those who fear the Lord* (115:12-13). *Let Israel declare, 'His steadfast love is eternal.' Let the house of Aaron declare, 'His steadfast love is eternal.' Let those who fear the Lord declare, 'His steadfast love is eternal'* (118:2-4). *O house of Israel, bless the Lord; O house of Aaron, bless the Lord; O house of Levi, bless the Lord; you who fear the Lord, bless the Lord* (135:19-20). Due to a juxtaposition comparing the House of Israel, House of Aaron, House of Levi, and those *who fear the Lord*, commentators realized that *those who fear the Lord* must be a different category, separate from the Israelites. In their interpretations of Psalm 115:11 we find three different approaches. Radak and Malbim interpret *yir'ei Hashem* to mean Israelites of great wisdom and piety. Rashi explains that it refers to proselytes (*gerim*), whereas Ibn Ezra, Meiri and Metzudat David see the term as applying to righteous gentiles (*hasidei ummot ha-olam*). This opinion is also mentioned by Radak as a second possibility.

The first interpretation (men of great wisdom and piety) lacks pertinence: such men need no special call to bless the Lord for they praise Him at every opportunity. Rashi's interpretation is also hard to accept, since for all practical purposes there is no difference between a born Jew and a proselyte. However, the third interpretation (righteous gentiles) makes sense as they are a distinct group. The following verse indicates that the declaration of blessing takes place in the Temple: *Praise the name of the Lord; give praise, you servants of the Lord who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God* (Ps. 135:1-2). During the Second Temple period, there was an Outer Court on the Temple Mount where entrance was permitted for righteous gentiles who had adopted various Jewish practices, such as ob-

servance of the Sabbath, abstention from forbidden food, and the like.<sup>1</sup> The Mishnah (*Shekalim* 1:5) relates that non-Jews could bring certain types of offerings to the Temple.

#### NAAMAN: THE FIRST GOD-FEARING GENTILE

Unlike Ruth, whose firm declaration, *Your people shall be my people, and your God my God* (Ruth 1:16), makes her a true convert, Naaman, the Aramean army commander who was plagued with leprosy, fits the category of "those who fear the Lord." He follows the instructions of the prophet Elisha, bathes seven times in the River Jordan, and is miraculously healed. Although he does not formally adopt the Israelite religion, Naaman declares himself to be "one who fears the Lord" before returning to his native land. He stands before the man of God (Elisha) and exclaims: *'Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel! . . . for your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any god, except the Lord* (II Kgs. 5:15, 17).

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: A CALL TO ALL THE PEOPLES

Israel's message was a powerful one in the ancient world; it proclaimed a revolutionary faith in One God that demanded a high standard of moral conduct from its adherents. Among other religious practices, Israel had the Sabbath, a day of rest ridiculed centuries later by the "enlightened" Romans, which was ultimately adopted in part by Christianity and Islam. With the establishment of the Temple, Israel was ready to invite all peoples on earth to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

There are already sources for this invitation in the Bible. When David set up the Ark of God he called, *O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength* (I Chron. 16:28). Indeed, when dedicating the First Temple, King Solomon invited gentiles to participate: *If a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name – for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm – when he comes to pray toward this House . . . grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You* (I Kgs. 8:41-43).

Isaiah is equally explicit: *As for the foreigners who attach themselves (ha-nilvim) to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants. . . . I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa. 56:6-7).* Most of the commentators interpret *ha-nilvim* to mean foreigners who became true proselytes. However, the stress placed on *loving the Name of the Lord*, maintaining justice and righteousness (Isa. 56: 1), and keeping the Sabbath (Isa. 56: 2, 4, 6) leaves open the possibility that the term *ha-nilvim* refers to *yir'ei Hashem*.

#### THE ERA OF THE EXILE

In the pre-exilic era, calling on the peoples of the earth to worship the God of Israel remained a mere invitation. We have no record of gentiles heeding the call. However, in the exilic and post-exilic era, some drastic changes in religious life and an unprecedented expansion of Jewry occurred, all of which contributed to the phenomenon of *yir'ei Hashem* or *yir'ei shamayim*. First and foremost, idol worship came to a sudden end. It is astounding that the efforts made by a succession of great prophets had little influence on their contemporaries. Jeremiah, the last of the pre-exilic prophets, bitterly complains: *They placed their abominations in the House which bears My name and defiled it; and they built the shrines of Baal which are in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, where they offered up their sons and daughters to Molech . . .* (Jer. 32:34-35). Yet no such complaints against idolatry are heard from the post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Furthermore, Israel's expanding sacred literature and teaching, hitherto in the hands of the spiritual elite, now became the possession of the common man. This may well have appealed to idol worshippers seeking a different religious path.

Confirmation of Judaism's growing influence on people outside the Land of Israel can be found in the words of the prophet Malachi (fifth century BCE), who declared: *From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations* (Mal. 1:11). This statement, according to Zer-Kavod, alludes to the "God fearers".<sup>2</sup> Lastly, Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Judea and subsequent events led to expanding Jewish populations in Egypt and North Africa, Babylonia, Asia Minor, and (eventually) Rome. The number of these

expatriates grew to millions and, according to Salo Baron, a large number of proselytes and *yir'ei Hashem* contributed to this expansion.<sup>3</sup>

#### WHAT PROMPTED THE *YIR'EI HASHEM*?

The fact that, even in their dispersion, Jews staunchly maintained their belief in One God and a stable religious life style evidently impressed many sensitive gentiles, whose array of deities had lost all meaning and appeal. Dissatisfied with their old pagan way of life, they may have been drawn to the worship of One God and the Jewish system of morality with its strictly regulated conduct.

Nevertheless, Rome's emperors strove to shore up their crumbling idolatry. In that effort they were supported by Roman authors who ridiculed the invisible God of Israel, denounced the Jews as "atheists," scorned their day of rest, and mocked the Jewish aversion to eating pork. Even so, a number of prominent Romans became *yir'ei Hashem*. Emperor Nero's wife, Poppaea, is said to have worshiped the Lord, observed the Sabbath, and abstained from forbidden food.<sup>4</sup> Another Roman aristocrat who followed Jewish practices was Flavius Clemens, the nephew of Emperor Vespasian (TB *Gittin* 56b).

Judging by the NT's vitriolic attack on the Pharisees (Matt. 23:15), "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte," there must have been a Jewish mission to the gentiles. In fact, it is recorded that Ananias and other Jews converted Izates and other members of the royal house of Adiabene.<sup>5</sup> The Sages praised Queen Helena of Adiabene, who brought precious gifts to the Temple (Mishnah *Yoma* 3:10).

Although Poppaea, Flavius Clemens, and Queen Helena considered themselves to be Jews, it took some time for the rules governing the acceptance of proselytes (*giyyur*) to crystallize. The Talmud records a debate between two illustrious Sages, R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and R. Joshua, over the following issue: If a proselyte is circumcised but has not undergone ritual immersion in a *mikveh*, or if he has performed ritual immersion but is not yet circumcised, can he be deemed a genuine proselyte? (TB *Yevamot* 26a).

The propagation of *yir'ei Hashem* was halted by two developments. Firstly, Christian missionaries, who did away with the observance of Torah law and Jewish ritual, were more successful in appealing to gentiles than were the

Jews. Secondly, the Sages of the Talmud blocked Jewish efforts to make proselytes by enacting the following law: "A heathen who accepts all the laws of the Torah except one is not admitted as a proselyte" (TB *Bekhorot* 30b). The era of *yir'ei Hashem* thus came to an end.

#### NOTES

1. This area was bordered by the *soreg*, which indicated the point beyond which gentiles could not enter (*Middot* 2:3). See also Josephus, *Wars*, 5.5.2 [3b], 6.2.4.
2. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Malakhi* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 5.
3. Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 1: *Ancient Times to the Beginning of the Christian Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). See also Louis Feldman, *Jews and Gentiles in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *History of the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941); and Zvi Peretz Chajes, *Be-Sod Ammi* (Boston: Beth Midrash Lamorim, 1962).
4. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20:189-196, and the discussion in Steve Mason, "The *Contra Apionem* and Historical Inquiry in the Roman Rhetorical Schools," in L. H. Feldman and J. R. Levison, eds., *Josephus' Contra Apionem: Studies in its Character and Context* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) p. 191.
5. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20:17-96; *Genesis Rabbah* 46:111.



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