



## The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias

### god-fearers\_aphrodisias\_1.jpg



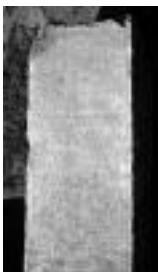
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### [god-fearers\\_aphrodisias\\_2.jpg](#) [2]



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### [god-fearers\\_aphrodisias\\_3.jpg](#) [4]



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Subscription list of an organised group of Jews in Aphrodisias (Asia Minor) including proselytes and god-fearers.

**Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):** Subscription list

**Original Location/Place:** Discovered in the preparations for the construction of the Museum of Aphrodisias.

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** Entrance of the Museum of Aphrodisias (Geyre, Turkey)

**Date:** 300 CE to 500 CE

**Physical Characteristics:** Pillar block with faces smoothed and inscribed with two different hands. Damage on the top and bottom of the stone. Two holes on face a. Letter forms can appear without guide-lines and designed freehand. Some lines were erased.

**Material:** Marble

**Measurements:** 280 centimetres high, between 45 and 42 centimetres wide. Letters are between 3 and 2 centimetres tall.

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Roman, Greek, Jewish

**Publications:**

SEG 36.970 [*IJO* II.14; *I.Aphr.*2007 11.55]



**Commentary:** This inscription from [Aphrodisias](#) [6] in Asia Minor is one of the most important – and complex – documents illustrating the Jewish diaspora in the Roman Empire. From its publication in 1987, it has generated numerous debates and corresponding bibliography which this brief commentary can only summarise (see e.g. Llewelyn, *New Documents*, p. 73-81; and Williams, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman Environment*, p. 218-219).

The typology of the long block can easily be identified as a subscription list. This means that a group of people contributed to a specific purpose and their names were inscribed below. The list of these subscribers (or ?????????/hypotetagmenoi) starts in line 9 and extends over two faces of the stone carved with two different – and not necessarily contemporary – hands. The first and major issue consists in determining when this epigraphic record was set up. Reynolds and Tannenbaum very carefully argued for a date in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE and their initial suggestion was widely accepted (*Jews and God-fearers*, p. 19-23; Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying*, p. 45-47). They based their dating mostly on onomastic grounds, noting that none of the individuals listed showed *Aurelius* as a result of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. This argument, however, should be invalidated because not a single Roman *praenomina* is recorded and, therefore, the nomenclature sequences are abbreviated and do not indicate Roman citizenship (see Blanco-Pérez, “Nomenclature and Dating”). Using other evidence such as the high occurrence of indeclinable biblical names, professional qualifications and references to the curial class or ?????????/bouleutai (cf. Iulius Eugenius below), it has more recently been determined that the inscription should date to Late Antiquity, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (see Chaniotis, “The Jews,” p. 213-218). Such a chronological change has huge implications in our interpretation of the document because Jewish inscriptions are more exceptional in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century than after 300 CE. Moreover, the imperial context of both periods is dissimilar. The Severan dynasty vastly relied on the structures of Roman imperialism and religion instituted by Augustus and his successors, while the 4<sup>th</sup> century saw the transformation of Christianity into the state religion (see e.g. Maximinus Daia and the Christians).

Regardless of the exact chronology of this inscription, the presence of Jews in central Asia Minor is already reported in Hellenistic times, the New Testament and Flavius Josephus (see Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*). In Aphrodisias, we also know that the “Hebrews” (???????/Hebraioi) had seats reserved in the city’s Odeon (*IJO* II.15-16) and a menorah graffito was carved too (see Chaniotis, “The Jews,” p. 219-232). In this sense, the setting up of the subscription list is not surprising. Yet the absence of more related evidence complicates the interpretation of the exceptional content of the text. The inscription opens with an invocation to the assistance (???????/boēthos) of a single god (???????/theos); a formula that is not restricted to Jewish communities but rather commonly used by Christians in the eastern Mediterranean (e.g. *SEG* 46.673, *I.Eph.* 1285.14; *IGLSyr* 2.356). Indeed, both religious groups could be inspired by the same Psalm (17:2). It is important to bear in mind that the inscription of Aphrodisias does not record the self-identification of any Jews or the adjective ????????/Ioudaios, so the attribution to them is based on certain names and titles that will be analysed below. Visual symbols are also lacking and, as emphasised above, the production of subscription lists is not exclusive to any religious affiliation. A good example from a region not far from Aphrodisias is provided by the association of *Xenoi Tekmoreioi* which also produced long pillars with the names of contributors to a local cult involving ritual meals, possibly with a Phrygian origin (see Blanco-Pérez, “Mên Askaenos,” p. 123-141). In one of their texts, they offered a ritual dish (or ????????/patella) to Artemis (*I.XenTek.* 2). This is exactly the same word recorded in the first line of the inscription from Aphrodisias. The difficulty resides in explaining how it was used by the Jews and what precisely did it mean. With no other parallels available, the most accepted position connects it to the Mishnah and Tosefta in which the word *tam?uy*, which refers to a tray or plate for various dishes or portions, can also denote a communal charitable institution for the distribution of food to the poor (m. Pe’ah 8.7; Pes. 10. 1; t. Pe’ah 4.9-10). Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 40 even proposed the preparation of a soup-kitchen for the poor. This distribution could be referred to in the inscription if the sequence ??? at the end of the first line is related to the verb ????????/didōmi (“to give”). Alternatively, it may be a derivative of ????????/domos, so the house in which the charity took place.

Similar problems of interpretation shroud the denomination used by the subscribers: ????????/dekania. A derivative of the number 10 (???????/deka), its use must be close to that of the Latin *decuria*, and has been linked with the quorum of 10 men that was required for some Jewish congregational activities such as prayers. The term is attested in a Jewish catacomb of Rome (*CIJ* I.11 = *JlWE* 2 440) and the first editors could not rule out the existence of burial association (see Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 28-30). The subscription list makes it clear that more than 10 members belonged to the group and that they had a hierarchic structure resembling that of religious associations. They called themselves learned men (???????????/philomatheis) which comply with the Jewish precept of acquiring scholarly knowledge of the sacred Law. They could have constituted a centre of learning (see Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 32-33) also devoted to blessing the



Lord, most likely through prayers (???????????/panteulogein). The altruistic nature of the association would finally be confirmed by the use of the word ?????????/apenthêsia, which is not attested elsewhere in Greek sources and derives from the adjective ?????????/apenthêtos (cf. LXX Mac. 5.10); so their purpose was to provide some sort of relief against misfortune for the group (???????/plêthos; cf. IGLSyr 4.1320). Finally, the opening sequence of the inscription closes with the verb ????????/ektisan – meaning “they built” – and the reference to a monument (???????/mnêma) which they financed with their own funds. According to the last sequence, Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae*, p. 91-92 has argued that the association through its subscription list mainly aimed at commemorating this setting up instead of the aforementioned charitable meal. Whatever the case may be, a structured organisation was needed before the project could come into fruition.

The ?????????/prostatês Jael would have acted as head of the group and he was assisted by his son Joshua, who is referred to as magistrate (???????/archôn). When the Jewish community of Berenice (in Cyrenaica) set up a donors' list for their synagogue, ten *archons* are recorded (SEG 17.823), so the *dekania* of Aphrodisias does not seem to have included all the Jews in the city (Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 32). In this association, Samuel (l. 13) also occupied a prominent position, probably as ????????????/archidekanos. Most importantly, he is referred to as ????????????, a proselyte. Two other subscribers named Ioses and Joseph are recorded as such in the list and this is important for our understanding of Jewish converts in Late Antiquity (see Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, p. 17-19). The original editors following their dating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (see above) compared the inscription of Aphrodisias with previous imperial legislation concerning circumcision, most significantly, Hadrian who banned it, Antoninus Pius who restricted it to born Jews and Septimius Severus who sought to prevent conversions (see Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 43-44). Proselytes are only scarcely attested in the available epigraphic sources (SEG 17.785, 33.1279; *JIWE* 1.52, 2.392, 2.489; SB 1742,7) and almost all are restricted to funerary contexts. Hence the text of Aphrodisias is exceptional in illustrating that this group were not barred from important positions in the local Jewish community; indeed, they contributed to it and adopted its biblical names. Such a degree of acceptance and interaction complies with most of the views expressed in the rabbinic sources (see Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period*, Braude, *Jewish Proselytism*, and Porton, *The Stranger within Your Gate*). In the Aphrodisias community, Jews from outside the city could also participate and even acted as priests (???????/hiereus) if the reading of the erased line 27 is correct and the name of Samuel, the old man (???????????/presbeutês) from Perge – for Jews of this Pamphylian city see Acts 13:13, 14:25 – was later added to one side of the stone.

The carved faces of the block continue with a long series of subscribing individuals who are not recorded in a homogenous way. For some, the names are followed by patronymics – i.e. name of their father in genitive, but the addition of professional titles and even qualifying adjectives is also recurrent. For example, Eussabathios in line 16 is referred to as a foreigner (???????/xenos) and he is followed by the younger (????????/neôteros) Oxycholios. For Joseph and Ruben in line 26, on the other hand, it is said that they were involved in confectionary activities (???????????/pastillarios). This variety complicates the interpretation of certain words such as ?????????/palatinos which could be both a personal name and the denomination of a palace officer (see Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 42-43). Beyond such a degree of precision, what should remain clear is that biblical names dominate the list up to line 33 (see Reynolds, Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 97-111 and Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae*, 96-112). The stone face has then a visible gap (or *vacat*) and line 34 is introduced by ??? ???? ?????<?>???/kai hosoi theoseb<e>is = “and as many as (are) god-fearers.” The format of the inscription does not change, individuals are listed with either patronymics or qualifying adjectives, but there is a remarkable difference in the number of persons showing indeclinable Semitic nomenclature. Likewise, the first 9 (Zenon, Tertyllos, Diogenes, Onesimos, Zenon (of Longianos?), Antipeos, Antiochos, Romanos, and Aponerios) are all referred to as ?????????/bouleutês, that is members of the local council. Both their names and position fit in the civic tradition of a Greek city such as Aphrodisias, which enjoyed a privileged autonomous status after the Roman triumviral period and became capital of the new province of Caria in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, with a robust political and urban life continuing into Late Antiquity (see Roueché, *Aphrodisias*). This contrast in the subscription list is therefore fundamental for understanding what the controversial term “god-fearers” meant. From the first edition, it was clear to Reynolds and Tannenbaum (*Jews and God-Fearers*, p. 48-66) that these *theosebeis* had to be identified with the gentile sympathisers of Judaism who were alluded to by Juvenal as *metuentes* (*Satyres*, XIV.96-106) and ?????????/sebomenoi or ?????????/phoboumenoi in the Book of Acts (10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18.7). In the rabbinic sources, they could appear from ca. 300 CE as *yirei shamayim* (“those who fear heaven”), although the exact characteristics this category were largely unknown before the discovery of the Aphrodisian inscription. Throughout these lines, one can see that it did not only involve top members of Aphrodisias' civic class, but also people with more modest occupations such as



craftsmen, tradesmen, a painter and even an athlete. In other words, the god-fearers were heterogeneous and their participation in initiatives promoted by the Jewish association of the *dekania* was not prohibited. Furthermore, two *theosebeis* named Emmonios and Antonios appear in the face a) of the inscription (l. 19-20), which appears to have been reserved for people with a prominent position in the group such as the aforementioned archons and the *prostatês*.

The analysis of this inscription shows that – even if the exact nature of their initiative cannot be unravelled and some elements should still remain debated – the Jewish community of Aphrodisias could share activities with proselytes and sympathisers. The former normally adopted biblical names like those of the genuine Jews, while the latter largely kept its gentile nomenclatures and continued to occupy positions in the city council. The absence of the title *bouleutês* among the Jews is noteworthy, especially after Septimius Severus had legislated in favour of their participation in civic life (*Digest* 50.2.3.3). Nevertheless, it should be more interesting to observe that the listed occupations of both Jews and god-fearers resembled, with bronze-smiths (*chalkotypos*) attested in the two groups, for example (l. 25, 53, 46). Professional qualifications did not distinguish Diaspora Jews from the society they lived in. The denomination of their association *dekania* is not foreign, their invocation formula is not unique and even the object of their dedication – the *patella* – can be found in pagan cults of nearby regions. The indeclinable Semitic names are more distinctive, but not exclusive to either Jews or Christians. These shared features naturally make the identification of Jewish inscriptions in gentile contexts much more difficult. Accordingly, not only this text from Aphrodisias, but also those from Sardis, Hierapolis and Stobi should be more appreciated for what they actually conveyed rather than dismissed for the lack of other parallels.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords:

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- [occupation](#) [36]
- [Late Antiquity](#) [37]
- [building](#) [38]

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**Other sources connected with this document:** Inscription

## [A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis](#) [54]

A god-fearer called Aurelius Hermogenes donates a menorah to the synagogue of Sardis in response to (the gifts of) providence.

- [Read more about A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis](#) [54]

Inscription



## [The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis \[55\]](#)

A funerary inscription sets fines to the community of Jews residing in Hierapolis (Phrygia). A copy was to be deposited in the archive of the Jews.

- [Read more about The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis \[55\]](#)

Inscription

## [Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[56\]](#)

A Roman citizen is considered “father of the synagogue” in Stobi (Macedonia) and donates rooms after conducting his life “according to Judaism.”

- [Read more about Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[56\]](#)

Inscription

## [Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias \[57\]](#)

Octavian requests the Ephesians to return a statue of Eros dedicated by his father Julius to Aphrodite in the city of Aphrodisias

- [Read more about Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias \[57\]](#)

Inscription

## [Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian \[58\]](#)

The free and autonomous city of Aphrodisias sets up a monument in Ephesus commemorating the grant of *neokoria* by Domitian

- [Read more about Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian \[58\]](#)

Inscription

## [A Roman Curator and the Games of Aphrodisias under Commodus \[59\]](#)

A local agent sent by the Roman administration discusses the financial viability of Greek games and its impact on the city of Aphrodisias in the reign of Commodus.

- [Read more about A Roman Curator and the Games of Aphrodisias under Commodus \[59\]](#)

Inscription





## [Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla \[60\]](#)

Septimius Severus and Caracalla confirm the privileged polity and laws of Aphrodisias, a city that celebrated their dynastic victories and was closely related to the empire of Rome.

- [Read more about Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla \[60\]](#)

Inscription

## [Nomenclature and Constitutio Antoniniana in Aphrodisias \[61\]](#)

A funerary text inscribed on a sarcophagus of Aphrodisias records the change of nomenclature caused by the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

- [Read more about Nomenclature and Constitutio Antoniniana in Aphrodisias \[61\]](#)

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