Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish "Monotheism"*

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Memoriae Larry Hurtado *sacrum*

Abstract

Many gods lived in the Roman Empire. All ancient peoples, including Jews and, eventually, Christians, knew this to be the case. Exploring the ways that members of these groups thought about and dealt with other gods while remaining loyal to their own god, this essay focuses particularly on the writings and activities of three late Second Temple Jews who highly identified *as* Jews: Philo of Alexandria, Herod the Great, and the apostle Paul. Their loyalty to Israel's god notwithstanding, they also acknowledged the presence, the agency, and the power of foreign deities. Reliance on "monotheism" as a term of historical description inhibits our appreciation of the many different social relationships, human and divine, that all ancient Jews had to navigate. Worse, "monotheism" fundamentally misdescribes the religious sensibility of antiquity.

Keywords

monotheism, gods, Jews, Paul, *pneuma*

* Special thanks to Clifford Ando, for help with gods; to David Frankfurter and Joseph Sanzo, for help with magic; to Jonathan Price, for help with Jewish inscriptions; to Sarah Pearce, for help with Philo; to Carl Holladay and Stanley Stowers, for generous bibliographical guidance; and to the anonymous colleagues who reviewed my initial submission with salubrious critical attention. I dedicate this essay to the memory of my beloved friend Larry Hurtado, colleague *praeclarissimus*, who disagreed with every word of it, thereby (knowingly) helping me to strengthen and to clarify my arguments.

HTR 115:1 (2022) 23–45

Judaizing, Jews, and Gods

In the late first century CE, the emperor Domitian indicted his kinsman Flavius Clemens, Flavius's wife Flavia Domitilla, and unnamed others for the crime of ἀθεότης, "atheism." As Cassius Dio explains, these high-ranking Romans were so charged because they had drifted into "Jewish ways" (τὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἤθη; *Hist. Romana* 67.14.1–2).

How did "Jewish ways" constitute "atheism"? After all, Mediterranean culture was very commodious, with outsiders not infrequently adapting and adopting aspects of the social, cultural, and ritual practices of others.[1] True, Greek and Roman cultural patriots deplored the pollutions of foreign rites,[2] though the record of their disapproval might give us an indirect measure of how common this Mediterranean mixing could be. "Judaizing" in particular, however, as Domitian's action suggests, seems to have attracted special opprobrium, presumably because it could lead to what we call "conversion."[3] And the problem with male "conversion to Judaism" was that it in principle entailed the radical Judaizer's renunciation of his own ancestral customs and cult. Juvenal's *Satire* 14 gives a perfect snapshot of this progression, wherein the satirist lambasts the Judaizing father who keeps the Sabbath because, eventually, the man's sons take to circumcision and commit further to other Jewish practices while abandoning Romans ones. Such men, complains Tacitus, desert their native obligations to family, fatherland, and gods (*Hist.* 5.5.2).[4]

[1] Antiquity's habit of ethnic "verbing" gives a linguistic register of this openness to adapting and adopting another group's cult and culture, taking the name of an ethnic group and adding a verbal ending (-ΐζειν): to Persianize, to Hellenize, to Judaize, and so on. See esp. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 46–50; specifically on "Judaizing," Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (HCS 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 185–92; also Steve Mason, "Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007) 457–512.

[2] Classical ethnographers were equal-opportunity stereotypers: finding a Greek or Roman writer with a kind word to say about ethnic others can be a challenge. For a breakdown of classical authors' ethnic slurs by specific people-groups, Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); on Jews in particular, Menachem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Dorot Press, 1974–1984), hereafter *GLAJJ*.

[3] "Conversion" implies that religious orientation is a personal option. That idea suits the modern context but not the ancient one, when an individual's particular social-ethnic identity (family, citizenship, people-group, what we call "ethnicity") entailed maintaining relations with particular gods. On the ethnic embeddedness of ancient divinity, and the family relationships between peoples and their gods, Christopher P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Paula Fredriksen, "How Jewish Is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul's Theology," *JBL* 137 (2018) 193–212; also, below, n. 7. When expressing what we call "conversion," ancient authors speak of forging new political alliances (thus Philo, *Spec.* 4.34.178: incomers join the Jews' πολιτεία), or of abandoning one's native laws (Juvenal, Tacitus, nn. 4 and 5 below; so too Josephus, on Tiberius Julius Alexander, *Ant.* 20.100).

[4] If the father observes ("fearing") the Sabbath (*metuens sabbata*), worships the sky, and avoids pork, the sons eventually circumcise and revere "the law that Moses handed over in his arcane scroll." That is, Juvenal complains, the sons of a Judaizing father will eventually

In other words, in the view of such observers as Juvenal and Tacitus, and implicit in Domitian's accusation, the potential problem with Juda*izing* and the actual problem with Juda*ism* was the exclusiveness of Jewish belief: Jews were monotheists.

But how "monotheistic" was Jewish "monotheism"? How "exclusively monotheist" were ancient Jews? What, indeed, do we mean when we use "monotheism" as a term of historical description?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the word "monotheism," introduced in the 1660s, means the belief that there is only one god. So similarly its cognates: "polytheism" means belief that many gods exist (cf. Philo, *Opif.* 170–171; *Mut.* 205); "atheism," belief that no god exists.[5] These "theisms," however, sit athwart the religious sensibility of ancient peoples. The first problem is with the idea of "belief." The second is with the idea of "only one god."

"Belief" as moderns construe and enact it is first of all a mental operation. It indexes conviction, the intellectual assent and psychological and emotional commitment to a proposition. (One "believes" sincerely or strongly.) This idea of "belief" in turn coheres with and accommodates modern definitions of "religion," embodied socially as institutions and communities that one can move into and out of. Modern religion is a detachable aspect of individual identity.[6]

Ancient "religion"—a people's relations with their god(s)—was configured differently. Συγγένεια, "kinship," bound members of a people-group together with each other (both synchronically and, across generations, diachronically)

"convert" (the marker being circumcision; *Sat.* 14.96–102). Note, again, that Juvenal has no word for "conversion," instead using the language of deserting *romanas leges* for foreign ones, the *ius* of Moses, ll. 100–101; for extensive discussion, *GLAJJ* 2.102–7, No. 301; also Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (3 vols.; rev. ed.; ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, Matthew Black, and Martin Goodman; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014) 3:150–76 (hereafter *HJP*). The earliest lesson that proselytes receive, grumbles Tacitus, "is to despise the gods, to disown their own country (*patria*), and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account" (*Hist.* 5.5.2; *GLAJJ* 2.19, 39–41). From the other side, Philo seems to confirm these points of pagan critique, praising "incomers" for "forsaking the ancestral customs (τὰ πάτρια) in which they were bred" (*Spec.* 1.309; cf. 1.52). More on sympathetic pagans (also known as "god-fearers"), content to Judaize while continuing in their native allegiances, below and n. 43.

[5] Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods* (New York: Knopf, 2015), explores ancient philosophical atheism. The word qua term of derogation, however, most often indicates allegiance, not to *no* divinity, but rather to the "wrong" divinity. This seems to be the problem at issue with Domitian's move against Flavius Clemens; cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.148; also, the polemical back-and-forth between Polycarp and the crowd of pagan spectators in Smyrna, *M. Poly.* 9.2.

[6] Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 106–59. For an exhaustive examination of the range of ancient definitions of *fides* or πίστις, ancestors of our word "belief," Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: "Pistis" and "Fides" in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On modernity's gradual development of "monotheism" (Cambridge Platonists), together with the "disenchantment of the universe" (Weber) and the post-Cartesian emphasis on individual religious sensibility ("faith"; Schleiermacher), see Stanley K. Stowers, "Gods, Monotheism and Ancient Mediterranean Religion" (paper presented in the Brown University Seminar for the Culture and Religion of the Ancient Mediterranean, 11 September 2012) 18–21.

as well as with their gods.[7] For this reason, terms describing what we call "religion"—protocols for showing one's god(s) deference, loyalty, affection, and respect—bespeak inheritance, specifically patrimony: τὰ πάτρια, παραδόσεις τῶν πατέρων, *mos maiorum, fides patrum*. Words that we frequently translate as "belief" (πίστις, *fides*) and as "piety" (εὐσέβεια, *pietas*) in their ancient context meant "loyalty to" or "faithfulness to" or "deference to" or respectful "confidence in" these ancestral customs, which choreographed inherited observances, food ways, cult, calendars, and rituals whether domestic, civic, or imperial. Ancient intellectuals in particular valued "right thinking about the gods." But "right" theological thinking, these same intellectuals argued, *manifested* as "right" ritual behaviors; it did not displace them.[8] Actions, not mentation, coordinated heaven and earth.[9]

What about monotheism's other defining aspect, the idea of "only one god"? The elasticity native to ancient usages of θεός/*deus* complicates the concept. "Divinity" was a register of power, traveling along a graded continuum between gods and humans in antiquity's geocentric universe, even for those ancient Jews and, later, Christians whom we habitually identify as "monotheist."[10] Israel's god, further, was

[7] Mediterranean gods were local in two senses, attaching both to peoples and to places. Divine/human attachment, συγγένεια, could be construed as biological lineage: gods took human sexual partners, from which unions might issue rulers, citizens of a given city (described as a γένος, a kinship-group), or whole peoples. Ancient Greco-Roman diplomats, appealing to these lineages, built and stabilized political treaties. Intercity relations rested upon shared divine descent, on which see Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy* (n. 3 above). The Jewish god's sexual solitude forced Hasmonean rulers to improvise: through an encounter of Heracles with a granddaughter of Abraham's, they constructed diplomatic συγγένεια between Judea and Sparta (1 Macc 12:21; 2 Macc 5:9; cf. Josephus, *Ant.*1.240–241; 12.226). The family language of lineage also linked Jews to their own god: God was their "father" and Israel his "sons," Davidic kings especially so (on which, see esp. M. David Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012] 109–15). But this family connection was affective and covenantal rather than biological, hence Paul's scrupulous use of υἱοθεσία, "sonship" through adoption, when characterizing the relationship of his συγγενεῖς with their god (Rom 9:4).

[8] For "right thinking" as a functional equivalent of "belief," Teresa Morgan, "Belief and Practice in Graeco-Roman Religiosity: Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 376c," in *Christianity in the Second Century* (ed. James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 200–213. Morgan brings examples from Plutarch, Quintilian, and Cicero (202–9); cf., e.g., Justin, *1 Apol.* 26, on bad behaviors as the consequence of muddy theological thinking (said here against other gentile Christians).

[9] On the prioritizing of individual internal convictions ("belief" or "faith") over external actions ("ritual")—one of the scholarly sequelae of Reformation anti-Catholic rhetoric—and the ways that this affects modern historiography on ancient Judaism and Christianity, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990). On Roman religion and this scholarly "mépris du ritualisme," John Sheid, *Quand faire, c'est croire. Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris: Aubier Flammarion, 2011) 7, with further bibliography. On vows, actions, and votive offerings as expressing the "religion of everyday social exchange" between humans and nonhuman powers or social agents, Stanley K. Stowers, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences and Textual Mysteries," in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (ed. Jennifer W. Knust and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 35–56.

[10] On "god" as a category of power, e.g., Mark Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (FAT 57; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 14–15. For

never the only god, not even in his own book. Jewish scriptures teem with other deities. In situations of war, they contest with YHWH. But they also converse with him. They attend his heavenly court. They bow down to him. They serve as the gods of the nations. Eventually, ancient Jews generated myths domesticating these other superhuman powers as errant angels or as rather dim political subordinates. Those Jews (and, later, gentile Christians) of sufficient (pagan) philosophical education might argue for these powers' ontological contingency on the One God. In biblical narrative, however, these other divine forces are often simply there.[11]

Greek gods, the essays assembled in *What Is A God? Studies in the Nature of Greek Divinity* (ed. Alan B. Lloyd; Swansea, UK: Classical Press of Wales, 2009). "Power was the essence of divinity," Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986) 98. See, too, Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion in the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; 2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 1:34–45. Further, on taxonomies, various *numina*, and grades of "god-ness," Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 41–57, 263–72. For "power" and Israel's god, see n. 11.

[11] A small sampling: Exod 12:12, "On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments"; 15:11, "Who is like you among the gods?"; 18:12, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all [other] gods." Ps 97:7, "All the gods bow down to him." Deut 32:43, "Worship him, all you gods." Ps 82:2, "In the midst of the gods he gives judgment." Mic 4:5, "All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god; but we will walk in the name of the Lord *our* god forever and ever." Jer 43:12, God captures the gods of Egypt; 46:25, he brings punishments upon these gods; 49:3, he sends the Ammonite god into exile. Isa 8:19 and 1 Sam 28:19 also refer to the dead as "gods." In a now-classic essay, A. Peter Hayman issued a summons to rethink scholarly vocabulary in "Monotheism: A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *JJS* 42 (1991) 1–15. See, too, William Horbury, "Jewish and Christian Monotheism in the Herodian Age," in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North; Early Christianity in Context; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 16–44 (esp. 20–21, for many primary references in Jewish sources to "gods"). Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), reviews the complexities of ancient Jewish theologies; and, closer to our period, Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). See, too, Benjamin D. Sommer's lengthy appendix covering "monotheism and polytheism in Ancient Israel" in idem, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 145–74. Sommer urges that the Bible's insistence on God's absolute control of the world (including of its other gods) renders "monotheist" an appropriate descriptive term: "Although the Hebrew Bible mentions the existence of other gods, those other gods never appear in biblical narrative as independent actors" (171). One wonders, then, why God "executes judgments" on them or battles them. In light of this divine superfluity, biblical declarations of God's unique supremacy (e.g., Deut 4:35, 39; Isa 43:10–11; 44:6; 45:14), like corresponding pagan statements to similar effect (such as exclamations of εἷς θεός), should be understood as an index of his or her people's cultic and affective loyalty. For both groups, "unique divinity" declaims the *power* of the divinity in question, not his/her solitary existence.

On this "rhetoric of power" in Jewish texts, and misreadings of it as "monotheism," Saul M. Olyan, "Is Isaiah 40–55 Really Monotheistic?" *JANER* 12 (2012) 190–201. On the Jewish god's "oneness" and the Bible's divine multiplicity, Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 229–47. On the vocabulary and polemical logic of Jewish texts coping with categorizing these superhuman powers while concerned "to assert the incomparable power of the high God" of Israel, Emma Wasserman, "'An Idol Is Nothing in the World' (1 Cor 8.4): The Metaphysical Contradictions of 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1 in the Context of Jewish Idolatry Polemics," in *Portraits of Jesus: Studies in Christology* (ed. Susan E. Myers; WUNT 2/321; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 201–27, quotation from 227; further, eadem, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

Once Jews moved into the Hellenistic city—itself a pagan religious institution—foreign gods took on a higher cultural tone. In ways different from their earlier Canaanite and Philistine colleagues, Greek gods were deeply integrated into the life of the polis. Through the literary canon that shaped Hellenistic culture, these gods dominated education itself. And much of the life of the polis pulsed around public displays of respect to these gods. This was simple prudence: gods superintended the well-being of their cities.[12]

Jews in the western diaspora acknowledged the existence of these other gods, as our inscriptions attest. After all, they now lived within these gods' territories. Jewish ephebes honored the gods of their gymnasia, and as citizens must have improvised demonstrations of respect to the gods of their cities of residence as well (though cf. Josephus, *Ap.* 2.65). Jews, like their pagan neighbors, called upon gods to witness synagogue manumissions. Jews both watched and funded events dedicated to these gods and, if contestants, also participated in them.[13] Jewish town councilors, actors, and athletes, soldiers and gladiators, though in principle not active participants in public cult (a point to which we shall return), would at least have been respectfully present when such cult was enacted. By way of analogy, we might note the pass given by that great ideologue of separation, Tertullian—in *De*

[12] For Greek and Hellenistic education, the great study of H. I. Marrou, *The History of Education in Antiquity* (trans. George Lamb; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). On citizen efforts to keep city gods in a good mood, David Potter, "Roman Religion: Ideas and Actions," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (ed. D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 113–67; Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 27–101 (especially to divert divine anger); John Scheid, *The Gods, the State, and the Individual: Reflections on Civic Religion in Rome* (trans. Clifford Ando; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). On these gods as local powers, fellow residents, citizens, and *decuriones* of their cities: Cicero, *Leg.* 2.26; Tertullian, *Nat.* 2.8.7; Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 123, 162–64; also Christian Marek, with Peter Frei, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods: A History of Asia Minor in the Ancient World* (trans. Stephen Randall; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) 509–18.

[13] Some examples of Jewish acknowledgment of Greek and Roman gods: 1) Moschos Ioudaios son of Moschion placed his inscription in a local temple on account of a dream at "the command of the gods Amphiaraos and Hygieia," 3rd cent. BCE, in Greece (*Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis* 1, Ach45); 2) Niketas from Jerusalem gave 100 drachmas in support of the Dionysia festival, c. 150 BCE (*IJO* 2, 21; *CIJ* 2, n. 749); 3) a synagogue manumission inscription calls upon the witness of sky, earth, and sun: Zeus, Gē, Helios, a legal formula (*IJO* 1, BS20); 4) Glykon (in Phrygia) names both Jewish and pagan festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Kalends (*IJO* 2, 196); 5) The names of ephebes Jesus son of Antiphilos and Eleazar son of Eleazer appear on a stele dedicated to Heracles (brawn) and to Hermes (brain; Lüderitz *CJZC* 6–7). For discussion of many of these sources, see Margaret H. Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); also Pieter W. van der Horst, *Saxa iudaica loquuntur: Lessons from Early Jewish Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) esp. ch. 2 ("Early Jewish Epigraphy: What Can We Learn?"). Further on the ethnicity and the religious Jewishness of these inscriptions, Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 366–70. On Jews in pagan places and pagans in Jewish ones, Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) 32–60. *HJP* 3.1:1–176 provides a still valuable survey of diaspora communities.

idololatria no less—for Christians to be passively present at celebrations, including sacrifices, of domestic cult (*Idol*. 16).

Even for Jews, then, God was not the only god. Like their pagan and, later, Christian contemporaries, ancient Mediterranean Jews organized their cosmos hierarchically. "One god"—for Jews, the god of Israel; for pagan "monotheists" and hypsistarians, their own particular "highest" god—reigned "on top," with as many others as cosmology, local culture, and personal experience required ranging beneath. In brief, *all* ancient "monotheists"—be they pagan, Jewish, or, eventually, Christian—were, by modern measure, "polytheists." Israel's god, the θεὸς ὕψιστος of Greek Jewish scriptures, was famously idiosyncratic on the issue of sacrifices, insisting that he be the sole object of his own people's cultic worship (λατρεία). This demand could and did cause complications for Jews in their diaspora cities of residence (so Josephus, regarding Alexandria, *C. Ap.* 2.65; cities in Ionia, *Ant.* 12.125–126). But Jewish cultic exclusivity did not preclude other sorts of lower-level engagements between Jewish humans and non-Jewish deities, as our amulets, inscriptions, and papyri attest. Antiquity's universe was a god-congested place. Jews knew this as well as did the next ancient person.[14]

At issue was not "belief," but rather a commonsense construal of divine (thus, ethnic and local) multiplicity: different peoples and places had different gods. Of course, therefore, more than one god existed. One's own god, however, was the best. Angelos Chaniotis has observed that even the phrase εἷς θεὸς ἐν οὐρανῷ, "one god in heaven," asserted superiority, not singularity. For this reason I like the alternative formulation that he suggests: "megatheism," not "monotheism."[15]

[14] Apotropaic charms and amulets show that Jews, whether as clients or as adepts, attributed much power to gods, angels, and *pneumata*, especially in local, multireligious contexts: e.g., the Sicilian amulet that calls on angels to help Judah escape the negative attentions of a Greek goddess: "Artemis, flee from Judah!" #33, ll. 13–14, in Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 1994); cf. Mika Ahuvia's analysis of an incantation bowl, "An Ancient Jewess Invoking Goddesses: Transgression or Pious Adaptation?" *AJS Perspectives* (Spring 2017), *http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/transgression-issue/an-ancient-jewess-invoking-goddesses-transgression-or-pious-adaptation*; also eadem, "Gender and the Angels in Ancient Judaism," *JSQ* 29 (2022) 1–21. Gideon Bohak addresses the ambiguous invocation of gods' names in the PGM in *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 247–57. Further on the local variations and quotidian practicalities of Jewish "reciprocal exchanges" with lower divinities (designated in his article by the etic term NEBs, or "nonevident beings"), Stanley K. Stowers, "Why 'Common Judaism' Does Not Look Like Mediterranean Religion," in *From Strength to Strength: Essays in Appreciation of Shaye J. D. Cohen* (ed. Michael L. Satlow; BJS 363; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018) 235–55, esp. 247–51.

[15] Angelos Chaniotis,"Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults," in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 112–40. See also, in the same collection, the essay by Nicole Belayche, "*Deus deum . . . summorum maximus* [Apuleius]: Ritual Expressions of Distinction in the Divine World in the Imperial Period," 141–66, on divine hierarchy and plurality; also, eadem, "*Hypsistos*: Une voie de l'exaltation de dieux dans le polythéisme gréco-romain," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7 (2005) 34–55. Current work in ancient pagan "monotheism" expresses what earlier scholars deemed "henotheism," one god

My god is bigger than your god; but your god of course also exists, and has real effects, both cosmic and social.

Some modern scholars have problems with ancient Jews. Jewish magicians, or Jews who went to pagan magicians, must have been the exceptions, not the rule. Those whose synagogue inscriptions call both on the Jewish god and on other gods, or who honor pagan holidays as well as Jewish ones, were not themselves Jews, or possibly they were exceptionally assimilated Jews. Perhaps, say these scholars, all of our ancient evidence for ancient Jews' normal participation in god-filled Roman antiquity is actually nonrepresentative of how a truly conscientious, "loyal" Jew would think and act. "Good" Jews or "true" Jews, in this modern view, were "strictly monotheist." "Assimilated" or "acculturated" Jews were only messily "monotheist" (indeed, they were low-grade "polytheists"), believing despite their own tradition in the existence of other gods.[16]

Such an appraisal of the ancient evidence, in my view, tells us more about the religious sensibilities of the modern scholar than about those of their ancient subjects. And part of the problem, surely, is the reliance on the idea of "belief" and the assumptions entailed by the term "monotheism." To see how this is so, I would like to consider three Jews of the early imperial period who themselves highly identified *as* Jews. First, and briefly, Philo of Alexandria, on nonhuman and on human gods; then, again briefly, Herod the Great, on human gods. Finally, and at greater length—because of the insistence on first-century "pure Jewish monotheism" current among some New Testament scholars—we will look at the apostle Paul.[17]

among many: see, most recently, Christian Gers-Uphaus, "Paganer Monotheismus anhand der θεὸς ὕψιστος- und εἷς θεός-Inschriften," *JAC* 37 (2017) 5–82; but "henotheist" describes ancient Jews and Christians as well. Pagans who invoked *theos hypsistos* need not have had the LXX's god in mind, on which, Dorothea Rohde, "Die religiöse Landschaft einer Hafenstadt im Wandel," in *Juden-Christen-Heiden?* (ed. S. Alkier and H. Leppin; WUNT 400; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 197–217, esp. 210; cf. Christian Marek, "Nochmals zu den Theos Hypsistos Inschriften," in ibid., 131–48. As Marek points out, commenting on the Oenoanda inscription, Apollo—one of the Olympian gods—demotes himself to the status of messenger ("angel") vis-à-vis the highest, self-existing god, 143–44. By contrast, Clement of Alexandria speaks of "gods" and "angels" as two distinct and nonhierarchically arranged categories of superhuman powers in *Strom.* 7.3.20.4; discussion in Marek, *Thousand Gods*, 501–8. Cf. Celsus's ranking of these entities as the greatest god, gods, angels, daemons (which can be good or evil), and heroes; Origen, *Cels.* 7.68. In sum: "god" was a flexible and a graduated category.

[16] Thus, e.g., Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), who assesses diaspora Jews' behaviors in terms of their (orthodox?) levels of "observance"; cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), on the anachronism of assignments of "orthodoxy" and of "deviance," 83–102. Barclay's own analytical categories, "assimilation, acculturation and accommodation," however, can also seem to essentialize what counts as ancient "Jewish" behaviors, while (in his view) rendering Paul always the exceptional outlier, 381–96.

[17] The current vogue in early *very* high christology—an insistence that Paul and his Christ-following contemporaries, anticipating Nicea and Chalcedon by several centuries, "identified" Jesus *as* God— requires the construct of such a "pure Jewish monotheism." In this line of thought, Israel's god is uniquely divine, uncreated; everything else is created, a strict binary that allows for

My goal is to trace the ways in which these three men each acknowledged gods other than the "highest," Jewish god. Their respective social locations, of course, were wildly different. Philo was a wealthy aristocratic philosopher, an intellectual, and a sometime diplomat. Herod was king of the Jews (or at least of the Judeans as well as assorted gentile others). And Paul was a wandering charismatic teacher, prophet, and wonder worker, proclaiming to ex-pagan assemblies the impending—and Jewishly conceived—end of history. As part of their working day, however, all three men took account of other gods as well. Paul in particular, I will argue, depended upon these gods to define Jesus as the eschatological Davidic messiah, Jesus Christ.

Gods and the One God

A. Philo of Alexandria

Throughout his writings, Philo routinely repeats the standard tropes of Jewish anti-pagan rhetoric, repudiating the gods of the nations as dumb images and as lifeless idols (e.g., *Mos.* 38.205). Nonetheless, referring to Exod 22:28 LXX, he endorses the sacred text's injunction not to revile "the gods," θεούς. (The Hebrew biblical text had had אֱלֹהִים, "Do not revile God.") Why? "Because reviling each other's gods," observed the philosopher, "always leads to war" (*QE* 2.5). Mere good manners? Social prudence? Theological politesse? Philo's sacred scripture, in its Greek voice, did not disclose Moses's reasoning, only his directive, endorsed by Philo, to treat the gods of the nations with some degree of respect.[18]

The translator(s) of Exod 22 had themselves made new room for these other θεοί. The translator(s) of Psalms took a different tack. The Hebrew of Ps 96 had denounced the gods of the nations as "idols." Ps 95:5 LXX, however, said that these gods were not mere images, but δαιμονία. This is a distinction with a difference.

no divine intermediaries. Christ's resurrection, according to these scholars, (somehow) revealed to his earliest followers that he, too, was "uncreated." This construct of "monotheism" depends on the late Middle Platonic philosophical idea—born well after Paul's lifetime—of *creatio ex nihilo*. For the philosophical sources, George Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); for discussion, Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 259–81. For a recent florilegium of these christological arguments, see the essays assembled in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (ed. Matthew V. Novenson; Leiden: Brill, 2020); Novenson reviews the current debate in his introduction, 1–8. Contra this construct, my own essay, "How 'High' Can Early High Christology Be?" in ibid., 293–319, esp. 299–305; earlier, Frances Young, "*Creatio ex Nihilo*: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *SJT* 44 (1991) 139–51. As she notes, "Creation out of nothing was not just a doctrine about the world. It was a doctrine about God," 150.

[18] On the LXX's rendering of Exod 22:28(27) and its "liberal" interpretation by Philo and by Josephus, see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Thou Shalt Not Revile the Gods," *SPhilo* 5 (1993) 1–8. Philo may be cautious just about these gods' peoples, and not the gods themselves; but, as we shall shortly see, Philo, like his pagan contemporaries, also names sidereal intelligences, cosmic intermediaries, and special humans as "gods." For a brisk overview of Philo's literary corpus, *HJP* 3.2:809–68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816022000049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

An "idol" is a material representation of a god. A δαιμόνιον is a "lower" god, the power itself. Any human can destroy an idol. No human can destroy a god. This translation and transition from the Hebrew "idols" to the Greek "godlings" did double duty, at once elevating and demoting foreign deities. The very vocabulary granting that they were more than mere statuary nonetheless placed them, qua δαιμονία, in positions subordinate to the Jews' "highest god" on Hellenism's own theo-cosmic map.[19]

Philo the Middle Platonist also reflects this idea of real-though-subordinate multiple divinities in his commentary on Genesis, *De opificio mundi.* Reviewing the days of creation, Philo observes that, when establishing the firmament, God created "the most holy dwelling place of the manifest and visible gods" (θεῶν ἐμφανῶν τε καὶ αἰσθητῶν, *Opif.* 7.27). This cosmic realm is made of "the purest οὐσία," as befits its holy tenants, the stars and planets. These celestial beings, he says here, are divine intelligences (θεοί in Philo's Greek); elsewhere, he notes that they providentially guide humans across land and sea (39.114).[20]

Philo's assertion that these higher cosmic gods are both "visible" and "manifest" also works in two ways. Though acknowledging their divinity (presumably meaning their power, beauty, and immortality), he at the same time and through the same

[19] That is, according to this biblical verse, these superhuman powers truly exist. They are simply demoted ontologically (in terms of power), spatially (they are closer to the earth than are the "high" gods, like stars and planets), and (according to some Jews, like Paul) ethically (they are only evil, never good). For Plato, centuries before our period, these divine beings function as cosmic intermediaries, an ethereal World Wide Web enabling communications between higher gods and humanity; *Symp.* 202E–203A. On the "idiosyncrasy" of Plato's *daimōn* as its own category, John D. Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 22–27; cf. Acts 17:18 NRSV (rightly translated as "gods"). Further on demonic divinity, e.g., Origen, *Cels.* 5.5 (they are always evil); Augustine, *Civ.* 9.23 ("gods" and "demons" are different terms for the same entities); Maijastina Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360–430* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 172–81; eadem, "Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism: Monotheism in the Debates between 'Pagans' and Christians in 380–430," in *Monotheism Between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen; Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 167–79.

[20] It might be objected that Philo deliberately "Hellenized" his discourse in order to interpret Judaism to pagans, and that he deployed such language to build a bridge to pagan intellectual salons. But Philo's Greek biblical text, read weekly in community, itself spoke of multiple deities. Also, since Tcherikover, scholars have seen Philo's works—and especially his biblical commentaries—as addressed primarily if not exclusively to other Jews. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, argued otherwise, e.g., 318–19 on Philo's intended audience; but Feldman still labored under the idea, since put to rest, that Hellenistic Judaism was a "missionary religion." Ellen Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 17–21, suggests that, for his commentaries on biblical books, Philo's intended audience was "most likely . . . Jews like himself" (19), though perhaps pagans might number among his hearers of the political writings, *Flacc.* and *Legat.* Further on Philo's Jewish audience, Sarah Pearce, "Philo of Alexandria and the Memory of Ptolemy II Philadelphus," in *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (ed. Alison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce, and Miriam Frenkel; Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 110; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 216–58, at 227–28 and nn. 75–79, against Feldman's reconstruction.

means demotes them relative to Israel's god. Middle Platonism's highest god was utterly incorporeal, therefore invisible, outside of space and place. As "visible" and "manifest" entities, then, these astral and planetary deities are at the same stroke characterized as "lower," both locally and metaphysically, to the highest god who, in Philo's view, is Israel's god.[21] Indeed, traditional Jewish aniconism—expressed liturgically in the temple, with its empty inner sanctuary; and in the synagogue, devoid of both a cult image and sacrifice—when interpreted through the lens of philosophical paideia, prompted even some pagan commentators to associate the Jewish deity with philosophy's "highest god."[22]

So elastic was the idea of ancient divinity, so easily admitting of degrees, so variously applicable, that Philo can comfortably speak of God's demiurgic lieutenant, the λόγος, as "angel" (*Somn.* 1.228–239; *Cher.* 1–3), as God's first-born "son" (*Conf.* 63), and as a "second god" (*QG* 2.62; *Leg.* 3.207–208; *Somn.* 1.229–230). Even more remarkably, Philo also attributes this supramundane quality to a human figure, Moses. On account of his moral and spiritual excellence, Philo writes, Moses "was named god (θεός) and king of the whole nation."[23]

How can the same demiurgic entity be at once the divine λόγος, the divine son, an angel, and another god? Such a claim caused no problem for Philo nor, about a century later, with reference to Christ, would it agitate Justin.[24] But humans? How could they be gods? Variously, but there they are, across Mediterranean populations, even "monotheist" ones: Moses was θεός for Philo; David and Paul were, for Origen, "gods."[25] In this connection, pagans

[21] For a clear exposition of the criteria of philosophical deity, see John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); for the sources, Boys-Stones, *Platonist Philosophy,* cited n. 17 above.

[22] That educated Hellenistic Jews—"Aristeas," Aristobulus, Philo—regarded their own god as "the highest" comes as no surprise. But some pagans also elevated the aniconic Jewish deity to philosophy's (de-ethnicized) highest god, e.g., Tacitus, *Hist.*5.5.4 (aniconic worship—presumably in diaspora synagogues—as *mente sola*; cf. Rom 12.1, λογικὴ λατρεία). The idea that high gods neither want nor need sacrifices, but lower gods do, was originally pagan, hence Porphyry's reference to Theophrastus, *On Abstinence* 2.27.1–3. Hellenistic Jews' philosophical reformatting of YHWH, combined with their aniconic worship and, in the diaspora, the virtual absence of sacrificial cult, prompted some pagans to identify Jews themselves as a nation of "philosophers." The roll call of these admirers (Theophrastus, Megasthenes, Numenius, and so on) may be found in any treatment of Hellenistic Judaism (e.g., Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 201–32); where fragments exist, they can be consulted in *GLAJJ.* So too Origen, *Cels.* 5.43, the lowest Jew worships the high God; 5.50, even pagans call "the god of the Hebrews" the supreme god; cf. Julian, on Jerusalem's temple as dedicated to the worship ὑψίστου θεοῦ, *Ep. et leg.* No. 134 (Bidez and Cumont).

[23] Philo, *Mos.* 1.158, consistent with the text of Exod 7.1 (Moses vis-à-vis Pharaoh); cf. *Somn.* 2.189; *Sacr.* 9–10; *QU* 2.29 and 40; *Leg.* 1.40. Further on Philo's views on Moses's divinity, M. David Litwa, "The Deification of Moses in Philo of Alexandria," *SPhilo* 26 (2014) 1–27.

[24] Justin, too, will name Christ "another god" and an "angel" (*Dial.* 56.4, 59.1; *1 Apol.* 63.15) as well as λόγος (61.1).

[25] David and Paul, says Origen, "sine dubio non erant homines sed dii"; *Comm. ad Rom.* 2.10, 18 (*SC* 532, 438).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816022000049 Published online by Cambridge University Press

too distinguished between gods who had (always) been immortal and gods who were (currently) immortal. Deities in that latter category had begun life as humans. Ancients of all persuasions, it seems, accommodated the ideas of multiple divinities, and of varying degrees of divinity, for human as well as for nonhuman gods.[26]

B. Herod the Great

Philo's Moses was wreathed in antiquity, his singular status sanctioned by scripture and tradition. Herod the Great, king of the Jews, had a much more contemporary, visible, and manifest deity to deal with: the emperor Augustus. If the normal polytheism of ancient "monotheism" can be a difficult concept to grasp, antiquity's comfort in designating very special human contemporaries—that is, emperors—as "gods" is no less so.[27] Modern scholars often regard this attributed status with some skepticism. It was just a Greek way of flattering Roman power, say some.[28] Or, the claim was manifestly metaphorical, since emperors die, whereas gods by definition are immortal.

This last observation—that human mortality told against human divinity—misconstrues the issue.[29] No one in this period ever claimed that human flesh was immortal, thus divine. Soul or spirit was the immortal part of human being. Death in

[26] On various kinds of divinities (gods both "not made" and "made"), Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 41–50, 158–61. This latter status—gods who were formerly human—could have tax consequences. The Roman senate, deciding on the local holdings of the god Amphairaus, ruled that these could be taxed, since Amphairaus, though indeed a god, had begun life as a mortal; Cicero, *Nat. D.* 3.49; Ando, *Gods,* 3–10.

[27] On imperial divinity in the early empire, Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 31–49; on the sanctity and numen both of the emperor (whether pagan or Christian) and of his image, Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 53–87; further, Keith Hopkins, "Divine Emperors, or the Symbolic Unity of the Roman Empire," in idem, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 197–226. Emperor worship, minus blood sacrifices, continued under Constantine and his successors; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey* (2 vols.; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) 1.93 (with comments on Constantine's personal approval of various dedicated cultural competitions and gladiatorial games under the supervision of an imperial priest); G. Bowersock, "Polytheism and Monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997) 1–10; Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth through Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 34–39, on the cult of the Christian Roman emperor. The point about the (robust) Constantinian imperial cult is that even the man who convened and oversaw the Council of Nicea was perfectly happy—as were his bishops—to regard himself, and to be regarded, as endowed with numen*,* in some special way "divine."

[28] Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 213, holds that the imperial cult enacted a respectful *façon de parler*; Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), urges that these ancients be taken at their word: the emperor was divine.

[29] As Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 149, seems to: "Kings are not gods: they die." Far from being a disqualification, death facilitated deification: cf., e.g., G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?" *Past & Present* 26 (1963) 6–38, at 10.

fact propelled further the emperor's divine status, through apotheosis. The immortal part of the emperor ascended *ad astra,* where the other gods dwelt, while his flesh of course stayed put where it belonged, in the sublunar realm. Perhaps surprisingly, the cult of the emperor continued under and after Constantine. As late as the fourth century, in the opening of his work in praise of Constantine, Eusebius described the deceased monarch in such elevated terms that his language slips elusively between Constantine and Christ. I assume that the rhetorical ambiguity was deliberate.[30]

Cultic etiquette honored imperial deity. Offerings before images, incense, priesthoods, festal days, public liturgies, ubiquitous portrait busts that were themselves invested with numen and regarded as places of sanctuary: if somebody thought that emperors were not divine, no one was acting as if they thought otherwise.[31] The idea seems less strange if we recall, again, that *ancient divinity was a category of power*, dispersed along a gradient spanning heaven and earth. Though on a lower register than some other θεοί and *dii*, emperors themselves—as Moses for Philo; as David and Paul for Origen; as Amphairaus for the Roman senate—were also gods.[32]

Rome did not mandate imperial cult. Provincial cities, rather, petitioned the emperor that they be permitted to establish the cult locally. Wealthy aristocratic patrons underwrote the costs, which could be considerable. And these same aristocrats served as its priests. The imperial cult, in short, was an elaborate and expensive Mediterranean way of cementing good patron-client relations with the ultimate terrestrial *patronus*, the current imperial ruler. The hope was that establishing the cult would ingratiate one's city and province to the emperor. The city would worship the divine emperor; and he, in turn, would direct his benevolent gaze toward the city. Initiative had its rewards.

Builder of Jerusalem's beautiful temple complex, Herod the Great also erected temples to the god Augustus, though not in his Jewish areas.[33] His option would

[30] Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 1.1-5. As late as the 5th cent., Constantine was venerated in Constantinople "as a god"; Philostorgius, *HE* 2.16. On the complications of imperial divinity in the Christian era, Jonathan Bardhill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); for the continuing numen of Christian emperors, Maijastina Kahlos, "The Emperor's New Images: How to Honour the Emperor in the Christian Roman Empire?" in *Emperors and the Divine: Rome and Its Influence* (ed. M. Kahlos; Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2016) 119–38.

[31] Note, too, Philo's cautious remark on the divinity of rulers "who, say the poets, are of the same seed as the gods," *QE* 2.5, the same passage referenced above and in n. 18.

[32] Further on "power," divinity, and ruler cults, see Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 47–50.

[33] See Josephus, *Ant.* 15.328–330 and 16.157–159 for Josephus's disapproving account of these honors that Herod lavished on the emperor (and, perhaps, wished for himself). Monika Bernett, "Der Kaiserkult in Judäa unter Herodischer und Römischer Herrschaft," in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz and Stephanie Gripentrog; Leiden: Brill 2007) 205–53, examines the cult within its 1st-cent. BCE/CE political context, distinguishing Herod's Hellenistic-style politics from Jewish tradition. She conjectures that Herod's elaborate building program at Jewish sites (Hebron, Mamre, and especially, spectacularly, in Jerusalem) deliberately offset his imperial-pagan one, 227.

have been to do what Caligula later tried (and failed) to do: to integrate imperial cult within the temple of Judea's high god. But sacrifice in Jerusalem could be offered to Israel's god alone: the Maccabean revolt had settled that issue some two centuries earlier.[34] So Herod built imperial temples off-site, in his gentile or mixed-ethnic areas. Caesarea held one. So did Sebaste, in Samaria; so, also, Caesarea Philippi.

It all made good sense. By building dedicated temples, Herod ensured and protected the interests of his own kingdom, all the while ingratiating himself to Rome. Interestingly, though obliging imperial cult in this way, Herod did *not* observe one of its usual protocols: neither he nor any of his extended family—Judea's premier aristocrats—served as imperial priests. Nor on this account did Augustus take offense. He evidently was acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of Jewish ancestral custom. In the sacred citadel of Israel's god, meanwhile, prayer and sacrifice were offered *for* the emperor, not *to* him. Augustus—a long-distance god-fearer of a very special sort—endowed these sacrifices himself (so Philo, *Legat.* 157 and 317).[35] In 66 CE, it was the refusal to continue making these offerings *for* the well-being of the emperor (at the time, Nero) and of the empire that marked the outbreak of the first Jewish revolt.

For Herod, then, was Augustus a (type of) god? On the evidence, the king's behavior certainly implies as much. He built imperial temples. He endowed priesthoods. He bankrolled sacrifices *to* the emperor. Such behaviors bespoke Herod's *fides* and *pietas* toward Augustus and, thus, to Rome. We might be tempted to view this sponsorship cynically, as evidence of Herod's compromised religious identity and his pliable politics—though we would then have to extend that same interpretation to the multitude of Nicene priests and prelates who continued to enact rituals of respect for the numen of Constantine and his imperial image. Herod, however, construed his *pietas* toward imperial cult consistently with his other commitments as king of the Jews. Neither he nor any member of his family personally supervised offerings made to Augustus. And the Jewish god's temple itself remained untouched by such worship. In Jerusalem, sacrificing *on behalf of* the emperor was nothing like sacrificing *to* the emperor.[36]

[34] On which, E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International 1992) 15–20. Cultic etiquette vis-à-vis the emperor, colliding with the Jewish god's monopoly in Jerusalem, turned Pilate's installation of imperial shields when visiting the city into a notable diplomatic gaffe: Philo, *Legat.* 299–305; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.169–174. On Caligula's efforts to forcibly introduce the imperial cult of Zeus/Gaius in Jerusalem, Philo, *Legat.*; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.203 and *Ant.* 18.305–307.

[35] But cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.77, who maintains that Jews covered these expenses. As Miriam Pucci ben Zeev points out, "Philo and Josephus may simply be viewing the matter from different angles, if the cost . . . was actually defrayed out of the provincial taxes"; *Jewish Rights in the Roman World* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 74; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 472; on Jews and the imperial cult, 471–81. See also below, n. 43, on pagan "god-fearing."

[36] Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods,* 192, seems confused on this point: he states that sacrifices were offered *to* Nero in Jerusalem. They were not.

C. Paul the Apostle.

Of our three late Second Temple Jews, however, it is Paul who speaks most emphatically about the social agency, the presence, the power, and the cosmic (thus, religious) significance of pagan gods. These gods played a defining part in Paul's vision of his own role as Christ's emissary to the nations. And these gods also served in crucial ways to shape the apostle's christology.[37]

As he traveled the eastern Mediterranean spreading his εὐαγγέλιον, Paul perforce dealt with these gods at close quarters: after all, he roamed in their territories. For example, corresponding with his gentile community in Corinth, he complained that "the god of this age" had blinded the minds of unbelievers (θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, 2 Cor 4:4). Modern commentators will insist that by "god" in this sentence, Paul must intend "the Devil," that is, Satan. But that is not what Paul says. He is perfectly capable of naming Satan when he wants to: 1 Thess 2:18 (cf. 3:5); 1 Cor 5:5, 7:7; 2 Cor 2:11, 11:14, 12:7; Rom 16:20. His frequent recourse to "Satan" in fact makes Paul's use of θεός in 2 Cor 4:4 that much more striking, because deliberate. Which particular god did Paul have in mind? He does not say.

Elsewhere, Paul simultaneously sounds the biblical tropes of denial and defiance when speaking of these gods. Thus, at 1 Cor 8:4–6, instructing his ex-pagan gentile assembly, he states: "We know that 'an idol has no being in the world' and that 'there is no god but one.' For even if there are so-called gods either in heaven or on earth—*as indeed there are many gods and many lords*—yet *for us* there is one God, the Father, . . . and one lord, Jesus Christ." Verse 6 does not deny the truth of verse 5, which plainly acknowledges the theological congestion of the first-century cosmos. Rather, it situates Paul's hearers within their newly *Judaized* cosmos: the existence of these many gods and other deities (κύριοι) notwithstanding, Paul's people are to adhere solely to Paul's god, enabled to do so through the spirit of that god's son, the messiah (χριστός).[38]

Who are these many "gods" and "lords"? We might look, first, to the stars and planets encircling the earth, divine intelligences for all ancient peoples.[39] In his letter to Rome, Paul names hostile heavenly intermediaries (ἄγγελοι), principalities

[37] I will consider here material drawn from only six of the seven undisputed epistles. Philemon—basically a memo about the return of a runaway slave—is irrelevant to our topic. See J. Albert Harrill, *Paul the Apostle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012) 18.

[38] 1 Cor 8:5, ὥσπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί: note the indicative mood of the verb. On gods as "lords," Nicole Belayche, "*Kyrios* and *Despotes*: Addresses to Deities and Religious Experiences," in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics* (ed. Valentino Gasparini et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020) 87–113; though, as Harrill points out, "kyrios" also functioned regularly as a term of respectful address to any social superior, human or divine; *Paul the Apostle*, 88.

[39] Thus Philo, as we have seen, *Opif.* 7.27. For a clear pagan statement of this common idea, Sallustius, *Concerning the Gods and the Universe* (ed. and trans. Arthur Darby Nock; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966) 6–7; for an earlier Christian statement, Origen, *On First Principles* (2 vols., ed. and trans. John Behr; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 1.7; 2.9.3–8. Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 154–57, discusses classical sources on celestial divinity and *pneuma*.

(ἀρχαί), and powers (δυνάμεις; Rom 8:38). Communicating with his assembly in Philippi, he invokes the divine plenum of celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean superhuman beings (Phil 2:10). The nations wrongly sacrifice to such godlings (δαιμονία; 1 Cor 10:20), while the celestial "rulers of this age" (ἄρχοντες τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) had crucified the divine son of Paul's god (1 Cor 2:8).[40] Cosmic elements (στοιχεία), themselves "not gods by nature (φύσει)"—though once considered and worshiped *as* gods by those in Galatia—had previously "enslaved" Paul's ἔθνη ("gentiles") before he had brought them to the exclusive worship of his own god (Gal 4:3–9). And, as we have seen, "the god of this age" often got in Paul's way (2 Cor 4:4).

How had Paul and his gentile communities ended up on the wrong side of these gods? Why, given the extremely uneven distribution of power, did he and his people think that they could possibly prevail? And in what ways did pagan gods actually *confirm* Paul's conviction that Jesus was indeed the final, Davidic christ?

To answer these questions, we need to glance backwards, briefly, to Jesus of Nazareth, and to events in and around Jerusalem some two-plus decades prior to Paul's letters. An itinerant prophet, exorcist, and healer, Jesus had gathered around himself a core group of followers. And he deputized them to work the same acts of power as he himself did, and through which he established his own authority to pronounce his message. For, like his mentor John the Immerser before him and like Paul his apostle after him, Jesus too proclaimed the imminent approach of God's kingdom. "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" (Mk 1:15).[41]

Whatever other end-time hopes Jesus may have attached to this message, the coming resurrection of the dead must have figured prominently. The intensity of his followers' expectation of this event alone accounts for their behavior in the wake of

[40] Are the ἄρχοντες of 1 Cor 2.8, qua cosmic powers, responsible for Christ's crucifixion? In *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), building a case for Paul's naming the Romans as Jesus's executioners, Dale C. Allison Jr. refutes this reading at length, citing much supporting secondary literature, 395–98, esp. 396 n. 41; and Rom 13:3 clearly refers to human governments. Nonetheless, those entities currently combatting Paul, soon to be overwhelmed by the victorious Christ, are clearly super- or nonhuman powers, interpreted as such by an early deutero-Pauline pseudepigraph, Eph 6:12: "For our conflict is not against blood and flesh [i.e., human opponents], but against the principalities, against the powers, against the cosmic rulers of the present darkness, against evil pneumatic beings in the heavens" (ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἡ πάλη πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα, αλλὰ πρὸς τὰς αρχάς, πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας, πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου, πρὸς τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις). Planetary "rulers" cohere with this cosmos. For definitions of ἀρχή, ἐξουσία, and δύναμις as independent cosmic forces (that is, "gods"), see BDAG; for discussion, Litwa, *Being Transformed*, 177–79.

[41] For two recent studies repatriating Jesus and the later traditions about him to their native (thus, foreign-feeling) 1st-cent. context of contesting spirits, demonic possession, and mortiferous impurities, see Giovanni B. Bazzana, *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christ Groups* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) 1–101; and Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

Jesus's crucifixion as "King of the Jews."[42] They were convinced, despite his death, that Jesus lived on. Their community relocated permanently to Jerusalem, terrestrial epicenter of the coming Kingdom (Rom 11:26). From the largest court of the Temple Mount, they continued to proclaim Jesus's message, linked now to their belief that Jesus would himself play a defining role in its establishment. Within a few years, some began to fan out, continuing to promulgate their messiah's message to Israel via the networks of synagogue communities ringing the Mediterranean—Joppa and Caesarea in Roman Judea; Damascus and Antioch further abroad.

It was there, within the Jewish communities of ethnically mixed cities, that sojourning apostles encountered a social reality that their earlier itineraries through Jewish villages in the Galilee and Judea had not prepared them for: the presence of interested pagans, "god-fearers."[43] Some of these synagogue-going pagans, too, responded positively to the apostles, who in turn welcomed them into the assemblies of Christ-followers forming within the synagogues' penumbra. But joining the Christ-assembly came with a radically Judaizing demand, one that urban synagogues themselves had never made of local pagan sympathizers. Christ-following non-Jews, insisted the apostles, had to break, completely, with their native gods.

This drastic requirement—universally demanded, so far as we know, by all factions of the Christ-movement—gives us another measure of its intense anticipation of God's kingdom. The nations' repudiation of their "false" gods and their turning to the "living and true god" (1 Thess 1:9) was an apocalyptic trope featured prominently in Jewish end-time prophecies.[44] By mid-century—the point

[42] "Easter faith may have been born after the crucifixion, but it was conceived before. Schweitzer saw the truth: the 'resurrection experiences' are 'intelligible' only if they were 'based upon the expectation of the resurrection, and this again as based on references of Jesus to the resurrection.' Without antecedent expectation of the imminent resurrection of the dead in general, there would have been no proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus in particular"; Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 59, citing n. 129 to Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001 [orig. 1906]) 343.

[43] The centurion Cornelius, fictive or not, provides a ready example (φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν; Acts 10:22); cf. Juvenal's *metuens Sabbata*, above, n. 4. Confusion still characterizes scholarly references to "god-fearers." These pagans were not "halfway" converts, nor had they renounced idolatry, nor did they represent some formalized category of adherents. They were ad hoc, voluntary Judaizers: non-Jews who assumed some interest (to some degree or other) in Jewish practices; active pagans who added the god of Israel (to whatever extent) to their native pantheons. For a review of the inscriptional evidence, beyond the studies of Williams and of van der Horst cited above, n. 13, see also Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (BAFCS 5; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 51–82. Emphasizing such persons' continuing "paganism," Paula Fredriksen, "If It *Looks* Like a Duck, and It *Quacks* Like a Duck . . . : On *Not* Giving up the Godfearers," in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer* (ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey et al.; BJS 358; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2016) 25–34; eadem, *Paul*, 54–60, 73–77.

[44] A brief sample: At the End, the nations will stream to Jerusalem and worship together with Israel (Isa 2:2–4); they will together eat on the Temple Mount the feast that God will prepare (Isa 25:6). Gentiles will accompany Jews at the ingathering (Zech 8:23); they will themselves carry exiles back to Jerusalem (Pss. Sol. 7:31–41). Gentiles will bury their idols and direct their sight to uprightness (1 En. 91:14). Many nations will come from afar to the name of the Lord God, bearing

by which, with Paul's letters, we begin to have written evidence—various apostles of Christ disagreed heatedly over *how* to integrate (male) ex-pagan gentiles into their movement. (Circumcision? Immersion alone? Immersion plus circumcision?[45]) But no one seems to have disputed gentile inclusion per se. Indeed, the phenomenon itself was another confirmation of the movement's core message: if gentiles voluntarily repudiated gentile gods, then the Kingdom must indeed be at hand.

How did their gods feel about this? Temperamental at the best of times, gods were quick to take offense. And offended gods acted out. Earthquake or flood, fire or famine, disease or violent death: ancient people were all too familiar with these expressions of divine displeasure. Greco-Roman cities represented intricate religious ecosystems whose dynamic equilibrium was maintained by human solicitude: attention to traditional repertoires of showing respect to the gods. The phenomenon of gentile "god-fearing"—a typical Mediterranean both/and model of dealing with divine diversity—enabled Jewish diaspora communities to settle comfortably within these ecosystems. And why not? Absent apocalyptic aspirations, the paganism of majority culture was entirely normal. The nations of course had their own gods. Israel had theirs (see Deut 32:8–9).[46]

The gospel message—spreading from itinerant apostles to resident gentiles via diaspora synagogues; turning the local synagogue's pagans into ex-pagans—disrupted this careful balance of relations between heaven and earth. Little wonder, then, that Paul experienced so much push-back: from anxious synagogue authorities, from angry urban mobs, from Roman magistrates attempting to keep the peace (e.g., 2 Cor 11:24–29, 12:10), and, as we have seen, from the gods themselves.[47] Yet he

gifts (Tob 13:11), and, after the temple is rebuilt, all the nations will turn in fear to the Lord, and bury their idols (14.5–6). Once God restores Jerusalem, "all who are on the earth" will know that he is the Lord God (Sir 36:11–17). At the coming of the Great King, the nations will bend knee to God (Sib Or 3:616), going to the Temple, they will renounce their idols (715–24), and from every land they will bring incense and gifts to the Temple of the great god (772). For a review of these traditions—and an appropriate refusal to attempt to systematize them—see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

[45] Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), argues not only that Paul was a strict constructionist on the timing of covenantal circumcision (that is, on the eighth day of the male infant's life, cf. Phil 3:5), but also that Paul was against proselyte circumcision, not because he thought that gentiles *should not* "become" Jews, but because he thought that gentiles *could not* become Jews: only spirit, not "flesh" (the site of circumcision) adequately altered gentile "nature"; 15, 117 n. 3.

[46] Condemnations of pagan worship abound in Jewish literature (though Deut 4:19 allots worship of celestial bodies, not of their images, to the nations); but in the normal course of events, absent apocalyptic commitments, "all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god" (Mic 4:5). The insistence that all other peoples will acknowledge the monarchy of Israel's god characterizes (only) end-time visions, an apocalyptic expectation that informs the improvisations of the early Christ-movement's "policy" toward incorporating non-Jews; see Fredriksen, *Paul*, 30–31, 73–93.

[47] On fear of heaven as the fundamental reason for pagan hostility both toward Jewish apostles and toward Christ-following gentiles, see Martin Goodman, "Galatians 6:12 on Circumcision and Persecution," in *From Strength to Strength* (ed. Satlow), 275–80. That "neglect of the traditional

and his gentile ἐκκλησίαι continued to defy their opposition, whether human or divine. Paul and his people were bound together—literally and materially—by a stronger power: the holy *pneuma* of Christ, and of Israel's god.[48]

Paul assigns god-like attributes to Christ, despite his notable reticence about calling him a god *tout court*. Rather, he insists, Christ is a "human being," albeit "from heaven" (ἄνθρωπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, 1 Cor 15:47). In his supramundane state, Christ had been in "god-form" before his descent into "slave-form" (μορφὴ θεοῦ/μορφὴ δούλου, Phil 2:6–7), that is, into a body of flesh and blood. Presumably, in his postmortem manifestations—the only way that Paul would have experienced him—Jesus appeared in or as his pre-descent, god-form, a σῶμα πνευματικόν (which was the sort of body that characterized ancient divinity more generally). Transformation into pneumatic body, Paul taught, was guaranteed to believers whether living or dead: flesh and blood ("which cannot inherit the Kingdom of God") would transition into spirit (1 Cor 15:50, cf. v. 44; Rom 8:29).[49]

Paul's phrasing sometimes implies that the risen Christ presented as a visual object (Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν ἑόρακα, 1 Cor 9:1; Χριστὸς . . . ὤφθη, 15:5–8). More often, though, he uses locative language: Christ or his spirit is "in" Paul, "in" the body of the believer, "in" the assembly at large (e.g., Gal 1:16, God revealed his son ἐν ἐμοὶ; 1 Cor 6:12–19, spirit is "in" the body both of the individual and of the group). Christ's indwelling spirit manifests by enabling charismatic acts: works of power, divinatory expertise, prophecy, angelic speech, exorcisms and healing. In effect, this sharing of spirit binds the assembly into "one body," or specifically into Christ's body (e.g., 1 Cor 12:12–13, 27–31).[50]

The key indices of πνεῦμα for Paul the Pharisee, however, were ritual and ethical. Christ's πνεῦμα had enabled his pagan ἔθνη to become those long-prophesied "eschatological gentiles" who (finally!) worshiped the right god in the right ways despite their naturally sinful φύσις. Paul's ex-pagans were thus nothing less than a "new creation," reformatted through pneumatic infusion to live according to

observances" offended "against the gods and therefore against the state" accounted for this hostility was seen already by de Ste Croix, "Why Were The Early Christians Persecuted?," 32–33. This diaspora urban context of angry and anxious pagans (human and divine) and vulnerable resident Jewish communities accounts for Paul's experience with "persecution," both giving and getting: Fredriksen, *Paul*, 61–93.

[48] On Paul and *pneuma* (which is constituted of fine "matter," not of *not* matter), esp. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[49] For Paul's views on bodily (though not fleshly) redemption, see esp. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem,* 129–60. On Christ's god-form preceding his slave-form, see Fredriksen, *Paul*, 133–41; see, too, Paul Holloway's comments on this passage in his *Philippians* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017) 114–24.

[50] For two recent and generative redescriptions of "spirit" in Paul's letters, see esp. Bazzana, *Spirit*, 103–205, interpreting Paul's language and these performative phenomena by appeal to cross-cultural studies of spirit-possession; and Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), situating such taxonomies of empowerment within their broader Mediterranean context of divine/human reciprocity and allegiance (*pistis*).

(idealized) Jewish standards. Their newly Judaized conduct in fact gave the empirical measure of πνεῦμα's efficacy. Worship only Israel's god; no other gods; no idols; chaste marriages; settle disputes within the assembly; contribute funds for the group back in Jerusalem; and a lot of other Jewish community behaviors, summarized by Paul as "fulfilling the Law." Spirit had separated Paul's gentiles from those ἔθνη who did not know God, uniting them with Abraham's σπέρμα ("seed"), the "eldest of many brothers," Christ (Rom 8:29). Spirit effected gentile υἱοθεσία into God's family, making them "sons" and thus heirs, together with Israel, of God's kingdom. How long could these ex-pagan ἅγιοι ("holy ones") keep on keeping on? Until Christ manifested to the cosmos as God's Davidic son. The happy elect few, chosen both from Israel and from the nations, already knew that "the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). Soon everybody would know (Rom 16:20, 26).[51]

Scholarly analyses of Paul's letters often view the first generation of the Jesus-movement as a series of accomplished or anticipated punctiliar events. "The" baptism of Jesus. "The" mission of Jesus. "The" resurrection. "The" apostolic community in Jerusalem. "The" gentile mission. "The" Parousia. But as Paul's letters imply, as the depictions in the later gospels and Acts suggest, and as the physics of ancient material πνεῦμα would support, all of these events—Jesus's activities and exorcisms; his various and continuing postmortem manifestations;[52] the movement's settling in Jerusalem and then spreading abroad; its acceptance of ex-pagan gentiles; the commitments and behaviors of Paul, of his apostolic rivals and colleagues, and of his ex-pagan assemblies—do not describe a series of discrete moments. They *define a zone, a single kinetic arc of eschatological divine empowerment and redemption,* soon to transform the cosmos at and as the Kingdom. The medium of that empowerment—continuous from Jesus's immersion by John (Mk 1:10 –12 and parr; cf. Jn 1:32–33)—was divine πνεῦμα. Its eschatological means of conveyance was Christ.

[51] For spirit-infused ἔθνη—not the "church" in general—as καινὴ κτίσις ("new creation"), Gal 6:15, 2 Cor 5:17; this despite sinful gentile nature (φύσις) (Gal 1:15, cf. Rom 11:24 the ἔθνη grafted into the eschatological olive tree παρὰ φύσιν ["against (their) nature"]). On Christ as Abraham's "seed," Gal 3:16; pneumatic adoption and inheritance, Gal 4:4–7, cf. Rom 8 passim. On πνεῦμα's enabling ex-pagans to "fulfill the Law," Gal 5:14, cf. Rom 13:8–10. On pneumatic adoption, as opposed to fleshly circumcision, Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 129–60; Fredriksen, "How Jewish is God?" 205–9. On the ethnic specificity of Paul's ethics, eadem, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010) 232–52; also Stephen L. Young, "Ethnic Ethics: Paul's Eschatological Myth of Jewish Sin," *NTS* 2022 (forthcoming).

[52] Christ's followers call down his spirit when they are assembled. Ἐπικαλούμαι, the middle voice form of ἐπικαλέω ("to call upon") is extremely common in "magical" adjuration, used to summon the god; see Fredriksen, *Paul*, 238–39 n. 15. On the "performance" of such spirit-possession, see Bazzana, *Spirit*, 167–205. Empowerment by πνεῦμα, both that of the apostles and, eventually, of their hearers (the Jews first and also the Greeks), should not be underestimated as a cause of this movement's successes: Fredriksen, *Paul*, 145–48 and notes; Eyl, *Signs, Wonders,* esp. 87–169, detailing divinatory "taxonomies" and healings.

"Messiah"/χριστός was a term that could admit of many meanings.[53] Its application to the figure of Jesus testifies to that semantic versatility. But for Paul, Christ's function as *Davidic* messiah is surprisingly, recognizably traditional.[54] Manifesting in the quotidian to and in an elect few, those called from Israel and from the nations who are already being transformed (2 Cor 3:18), Jesus's status as God's son—thus, as the royal Davidic warrior—will be manifest *in power*, globally, when he raises, thus transforms, the dead (Rom 1:3–4; cf. 1 Cor 15:51–52).[55] But to do that, Christ first needs to get past the nations' gods.

Paul, like many other Jewish apocalyptic visionaries, foresees a final battle between the forces of good (Israel's god, his son the Davidic messiah, good angels and archangels) and evil (cosmic gods, "every ἀρχή and every ἐξουσία, and every δύναμις," and even death itself, 1 Cor 15:24–26). Paul's language in this passage of 1 Corinthians resonates with Davidic enthronement psalms: the messiah will reign "until he [God] has put all his [the Davidic king's] enemies under his feet" (15:25; cf. Ps 110:1).[56] In 1 Corinthians, Christ "destroys" or "abolishes" these cosmic forces.[57] In 1 Thessalonians, he descends from heaven "with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thess 4:16)—more martial imagery. In Phil 2, Paul's exalted Christ returns—presumably in his μορφὴ θεοῦ—to subjugate these gods: nonhuman knees, celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean, all "bend" to their messianic conqueror, ultimately acknowledging his father, the god of Israel (cf. Ps 97:7, "all gods bow down to him").[58]

[53] On the varieties of Jewish messianism, two recent fine studies by Matthew V. Novenson: *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[54] Though, as Novenson points out, "manifest diversity" describes even the specific subcategory of "Davidic messiah": "Paul has a Davidic messiah who dies and rises from the dead (Rom 1:3–4). 4 Ezra has a Davidic messiah who dies but does not rise from the dead (4 Ezra 7:28–9). The Qumran *Community Rule* has a Davidic messiah who is an accessory to a priestly messiah (1 QS IX, 11). The epistle to the Hebrews has a Davidic messiah who is himself a priestly messiah (Heb 7:11–17). Bavli Sanhedrin even has a Davidic messiah who judges cases by a divinely inspired sense of smell (b. Sanh. 93b). All of these texts represent defensible ancient interpretations of certain biblical house of David texts, but they do not remotely constitute a single model of the Davidic messiah"; Matthew V. Novenson, "The Messiah ben Abraham in Galatians: A Response to Joel Willitts," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 2 (2012) 163–69, at 165.

[55] On reading Rom 1:4 not as Christ's *own* resurrection *from* the dead but as "*the* resurrection *of* the dead"—which is what the Greek happens to say (ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν; cf. 1 Cor 15:12–21)—Fredriksen, *Paul*, 141–45; with thanks to Augustine, *Ep. ad Romanos expositio inchoata* 5.11; cf. Bazzana, *Spirit*, 121–24.

[56] Even though "messiah" does not appear in these lines, it occurs four times in the lines immediately preceding. As Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*, 146, concludes, "The Davidic messiahship of Jesus is not the point of 1 Cor 15:20–28, but it is axiomatic for the argument."

[57] 1 Cor 15:24, "At the End," Christ descends and "delivers the Kingdom to God the Father, ὅταν καταργήσῃ πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν."

[58] See, too, Rom 8, another collage of bodily transformation, pneumatic adoption, and cosmic conquest; cf. Eph 3:10, 6:12–13. On Phil 2:10 as presuming Christ's final, cosmic manifestation, Fredriksen, *Paul*, 133–41. Intriguingly, Paul's language here (mysteriously) echoes the fetial formula

In short: redemption, for Paul, is preceded by a cosmic theomachy. The pacification of the pagan cosmos will occur once the Redeemer manifests from the Temple Mount, Zion, to gather humanity—"the fullness of the nations and all Israel" (Rom 11:25–26). Then, transformed into bodies of πνεῦμα, Paul proclaims, the redeemed will enter their celestial commonwealth, ascending ἐν οὐρανοῖς above the lunar border, to God's kingdom (Phil 3:20–21; 1 Cor 15:20–44).[59] It was via his defeat of these other deities that biblically sanctioned royal lineage and Davidic valor came together to define Jesus as the eschatological Christ.

Cosmos and Theos

We have wandered far from Domitian's charging Flavius Clemens with ἀθεότης for having drifted into "Jewish ways." Whatever social and religious (or financial) motivations fed this imperial censure, Domitian's disapproval of an absence of "belief"—the definition of our term "atheism"—cannot have been among them. Flavius Clemens lived in the same universe the day after his assumption of "Jewish ways" as he did the day before, and that universe was still full of gods.

As we have seen from our brief review of Philo, Herod, and Paul—and our sideways glance at some Jewish inscriptions, incantations, and amulets—native Jews, too, were well aware of "the gods of the nations." The stars in Philo's firmament are divinities, created as gods by his god. Herod handsomely builds, supports, and bankrolls imperial cult. And besides skirmishing with offended lower deities in the course of his own mission, Paul narratively deploys them. They are essential to his christology. Pagan gods define Jesus's role as God's end-time champion. No opposition, no final battle; no final battle, no Davidic messiah. Paul's messianism is of course "Jewish." But that Jewish messianism sits within its defining, broader, and native first-century context, Greco-Roman paganism.

What set (most? many? some?) Jews apart from their pagan contemporaries was their (attributed) behavior, not their "beliefs."[60] Jews generally seemed to decline (or were thought to decline) to sacrifice to foreign gods, even if that god were the emperor. And this Jewish disinclination was respected, save by Caligula, because it was grounded in ancestral custom, the hallmark of respectable religion.

given in Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1:32.9–10 where, in a different sort of martial situation, highest gods are invoked together with all other gods, *omnes caelestes, vosque, terrestres, vosque, inferni.*

[59] For Paul's ideas on *pneuma,* star-bodies, and sidereal redemption, see esp. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 133–60. Believers will meet the returning Christ in the sublunar "air" (1 Thes 4:17) then, transforming into pneumatic body, they will ascend even higher, to the upper heavens (ἐν οὐρανοῖς, Phil 3:20).

[60] So too Larry W. Hurtado, "'Ancient Jewish Monotheism' in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4 (2013) 379–400. Note the scare quotes around "ancient Jewish monotheism." Hurtado acknowledges the difficulties with deploying this term in the ancient context (380–82) but defends its continued use by redefining it, emphasizing behavior rather than "belief." "Monolatry" in fact defines what his scare quotes signal.

Voluntary ex-pagan Jews were another matter altogether. It was their denial of their own native ἤθη, their new refusal to offer cult to those deities that were theirs by birth and blood, that made these "voluntary" Jews the particular objects of pagan umbrage.[61] But Jews, whether begotten or made, were clearly present at pagan cult. They filled the theaters, the council chambers, the gymnasia and stadia and schools of their Mediterranean cities. They availed themselves of the public baths and of mixed professional guilds. They served as soldiers and as gladiators, as actors and as athletes. They managed, doubtless variously, to do what they thought they could do or should do to attenuate cultic participation—though, as our inscriptions and papyri attest, they also directed attention to various divinities as circumstance required. It was their ascribed behavior regarding pagan civic and imperial cult—not their "beliefs," and certainly not a more generalized Jewish cultural self-segregation—that stimulated classical authors' rhetoric of ἀμιξία and ἀσέβεια. But Jews did "mix" (variously) with pagans, both human and, as we have just seen, divine.[62]

Our scholarly reliance on "monotheism" as a term of historical description occludes this vibrant and vital aspect of ancient Mediterranean religiousness.[63] It distorts much more than it putatively clarifies. It invites anachronism, allowing austerely monotheistic theologies to be imputed to Jews and, later, to Christians, theologies that our Jewish and (retrospectively) Christian texts themselves belie. And it leaves us as historians unprepared, even unable, to see what stands before us in our evidence: the many gods who look back at us from the stones of the eastern Empire, from the songs of the ancient Psalmist, from Philo's learned commentaries, and from the urgent epistles of the apostle Paul.

[61] No mechanisms were ever in place, before 250 CE, to monitor public cult acts, whether of Jews or of anyone else, including, eventually, gentile Christians. Decius's initiative to regularize cult for the protection of the battered mid-3rd-cent. empire resulted in an administrative nightmare, and in improvised efforts at certification (*libelli*): see esp. James B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of the Empire," *JRS* 89 (1999) 135–54.

[62] Accusations of antisocial behaviors were common coin for interethnic insult, as Isaac's *Invention of Racism* details (above, n. 2). Mixing was the rule, not the exception. No less a personage than Rabban Gamaliel—unclothed, one assumes, and in the immediate company of unclothed pagans—frequented the baths at Akko, mAZ 3:4; and, as the canons of the Council of Elvira (c. 300) reveal, Christians, pagans, and Jews of all sorts shared food, sex, public entertainments, and assorted liturgical acts involving various divinities. See, further, Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, "'Include Me Out': Tertullian, the Rabbis, and the Graeco-Roman City," in *L'identité à travers l'éthique. Nouvelles perspectives sur la formation des identités collectives dans le monde gréco-romain* (ed. Katell Berthelot et al.; Turnhout: Brepols, 2015) 117–32.

[63] Speaking of post-late antique/pre-Carolingian theological developments, David Brakke observes that "entire classes of lower gods and goddesses had either disappeared or suffered demotion" while "new faces"—human saints—"joined the celestial regions. . . . The once bustling community of diverse . . . *daimones* settled into a stable two-party system of angels and demons"; David Brakke, "Valentinians and Their Demons: Fate, Seduction, and Deception in the Quest for Virtue," in *From Gnostics to Monastics* (ed. D. Brakke, S. J. Davis, and S. Emmel; Leuven: Peeters, 2017) 13–28, at 13.