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Gods and the One God

In antiquity, all monotheists were polytheists.

Consider these three texts from the ancient Mediterranean world:

1. A third-century B.C.E. inscription declares the manumission of a slave on the orders of two deities, who revealed that this was their will in a dream to one Moschos, son of Moschion.[1]

2. A treatise from the mid-second century C.E. explains that the universe was created not by the High God but by "another god" (*heteros theos*), and that this lower god was the chief divine personality described in the Jewish Bible.

3. Another late antique inscription, in hexameter verses, hymns the Highest God and speaks of subordinate divine personalities as "his angels."[2]

All three texts are in Greek. Their respective authors, however, belonged to different religious communities. The first, Moschos, identified himself as *Ioudaeos*, that is, as a Jew. The second, Justin Martyr, was a philosophically educated Gentile Christian. The third was an anonymous pagan. Yet all three were monotheists.

What did it mean, in ancient times, to "believe in" one god? Such belief did not entail doubting the existence of other gods. Long before Moschos had his dream, the sacred texts of his people referred, easily and unselfconsciously, to other gods as well. The most powerful and most important God, claimed the Bible, had revealed himself to Israel; but other nations had their own gods, presumably lower deities. To pick one example: The prophet Micah says that "all the peoples walk each in the name of its god; but we [Israel] will walk in the name of the Lord *our* God forever and ever" (Micah 4:5, Revised Standard Version [RSV]). The deities of other nations were "real."

When Jews in the diaspora, sometime between 300 and 200 B.C.E., translated their scriptures into Greek (creating the Septuagint), their word choice, and consequently the message of the biblical text, reflected their Greek world. Diaspora Jews lived in Hellenistic cities and participated very fully in the culture of these cities. The translators of the Septuagint took this into account. In their hands, the Hebrew "Do not revile God (*elohim*)" (Exodus 22:28) became "Do not revile the gods (*tous theous*)."

The world was filled with other gods, and ancient Jews knew this. Paul complains about their negative effect on his mission. Astral forces (*stoicheia*) previously enslaved his formerly pagan Gentiles in Galatia (Galatians 4:8). "The god of *this* cosmos" blinded unbelievers so that they cannot see "the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Paul writes, "For although there may be so-called gods 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" (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Paul and his Gentile readers do not doubt the existence of many gods. They just do not worship them.

What did it mean, in ancient times, to "believe in" many gods? Such a belief did not entail doubting the existence of a single supreme god. Ancient philosophers had argued for a sole highest god, whom they referred to as "the One" or "the Father" or "the Being." Indeed, when the translators of the Septuagint rendered Moses' dialogue with God into Greek, they availed themselves of this philosophical sobriquet. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*—"I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14 RSV)—became *ho ho*—"I am the Being"—exactly what anyone, Jew or Greek, with a decent liberal education would expect the High God to say.

The hexameter verses cited in the third example above reflect this philosophical monotheism: one highest god at the top tier of a hierarchy of superhuman entities. But such beliefs were not restricted to intellectuals. A tide of epigraphical and archaeological data concerning the pagan cult of *theos hypsistos*, "God Most High," attests to the broad expression of this sort of piety. Whether such pagan cult evinces the influence of Judaism or of Christianity is currently the subject of scholarly debate. But as a social fact, the widespread worship of this god points to the vigorous existence of a popular, cultic form of pagan monotheism.

What then of Justin Martyr, who argued that another god, *not* the High God, was the deity revealed in the Septuagint? He pitched his argument against other Gentile Christians who also had good Greek educations. Justin's Christian opponents, the Gnostic Valentinus and the theologian Marcion, shared Justin's conviction that the god of the Bible, the god of the Jews, was not the High God. Valentinus and Marcion, however, held that this lower god *opposed* the High God and his Son, the Christ. Justin argued that the lower god described in the Bible *was* the divine Son, the Christ: His Father, the High God, was unknown and unknowable until his Son, the lower god, had revealed him. The Jews, being poor philosophers, Justin explained, just had not realized this.[3]

Much later, in the fourth century, imperially sponsored church councils would generate creeds softening this distinction between divine Father and Son. But at the same moment, a different lower god entered the Christian pantheon: the emperor. Gentile Christians had long balked at emperor worship when the emperor was pagan and when his worship entailed making offerings. (Jewish Christians, as Jews generally, were exempt from such demands.) Once Constantine sponsored the church, he forbade the blood sacrifices. The imperial cult, however—complete with priests, processions, temples, images of the ruling family, sacred days, gladiatorial combats and

continues on page 49

copious footnotes printed within the body of the text allows the main argument to flow easily, while keeping the reader informed about scholarly disputes and relevant documentation.

Zevit's extensive use of transliteration, while appropriate in academic circles, will make the book difficult for the lay reader, since he does not supply English equivalents for transliterated words and passages. This makes the chapters on inscriptions and theophoric names particularly challenging for general readers. Furthermore, Zevit's analogies, which run the gamut from hamburgers, chess, rock music and ashrams to Jews and Christians in Europe over the course of 1,600 years and more, are sometimes more confusing than helpful.

Although readers may not always agree with Zevit's conclusions, they will find his arguments stimulating and worthy of consideration. *The Religions of Ancient Israel* is the product of decades of study and research. It brings together an extraordinary amount of data, both textual and archaeological, much of which is not otherwise easily accessible. Zevit's firsthand knowledge of the archaeological data combined with his mastery of the textual material, both biblical and extrabiblical, make *The Religions of Ancient Israel* well worth a read–or two!

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Fredriksen

continued from page 12

incense–all continued. Christian imperial law directed attention to protocols for honoring the emperor's divine aspect, his *numen*. And a fifth-century church history mentions that Constantine was still worshiped in his capitol as a god.

No ancient monotheist was a modern monotheist. Divinity expressed itself along a gradient, and the High God–be he pagan, Jewish or Christian–hardly stood alone. Lesser divinities filled in the gap, cosmic and metaphysical, between humans and God. Heaven's divine population had to wait for the Renaissance, and the beginnings of modern science, to be seriously pruned. Antiquity's universe, by comparison, was filled with gods. Monotheists directed their particular worship to the being they termed the high god, while dealing with the others as they would. To make the same point differently: While not every ancient polytheist was a monotheist, all ancient monotheists were, by our measure, polytheists.

[1] J.B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, vol. 1, prol. P. 82; discussion in Emil Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, ed. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar (Edinburgh: Clark, 1973-), vol. 3, p. 65.

[2] George Ewart Bean, *Journeys in Northern Lycia 1965-67*, Deut. Akademie Wein philosophisch-historische Klasse 104 (1971) 20-22, no. 37.

[3] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 56 (Christ as the "other god" who actually frames the cosmos; according to his reasoning, all seeming theophanies in the Old Testament are actually Christophanies, ch. 56-62).

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Hendel

continued from page 10

the United Monarchy is Albrecht Alt's classic essay, "The Formation of the Israelite State in Palestine," in Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967; German original, 1930). The current controversy convinces me that this essay is still the finest treatment of the subject.

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