

Pagan Monotheism and
Early Christianity

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I was over 28 years at the Biblical Institute in Rome, which is the reason for my being here today. However, at the end of February, I returned to Milwaukee (naturally it was snowing), my native city. Milwaukee has a very great distinction. It was here that Golda Meir came from Kiev via Pinsk with her mother and father and two sisters, when she was only 8 years old. She lived and went to school not far from the Schlitz brewery, in an area in which there were many Jewish and Eastern Europeans immigrants. When she was 71 years old and Prime Minister of Israel, she visited the school, which was decked out with Israeli flags, while the children sang the Israeli national anthem. Tears came to her eyes. The only disconcerting note, she writes in her autobiography, was that some of the schoolchildren thought her last name was *Shalom*. The Fourth Street Grade School is now called the Golda Meir School for Gifted and Talented Urban

Children. Golda Meir herself had to fight furiously with her parents to continue her education. Only after running away from home for three years, was she able to finish North Division High School and, later, attend for one year the Milwaukee State Normal School for Teachers. The Normal School long ago was replaced by the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, which is proud of its magnificent, new Golda Meir Library. However, there is also something closer to my family. According to my mother, she and Golda were colleagues in a public school.¹ Golda's childhood dream was to become a teacher, but the plight of European Jews and her passionate conviction that the only solution was a Jewish state in Israel, caused her to sacrifice this dream and took her there. So she came, becoming prime minister, and, almost, mayor of Jerusalem.² She acknowledges in her autobiography her debt to the Socialist politics of Milwaukee and implicitly the excellence of the Milwaukee Public School system at the time. At any rate, I would like to dedicate this talk to her.³

¹ I have trouble squaring this with Golda Meir's autobiography. If true, it must mean that Meir was practice teaching at the school as part of her Normal School training, since my mother would have been four years older, and Meir would have fallen three years behind when she ran away from home.

² She lost because the Orthodox and others were against a woman for the post.

³ See her autobiography, Golda Meir, *My Life* (Jerusalem 1975), published also as *Mein Leben* (Hamburg 1975), and in paperback as *My Life* (New York 1975). See especially 21-24, 30-32 (paperback edition). She herself was probably unaware that an extraordinary superintendent of schools, William E. Anderson, had managed to vastly expand the school system and decisively upgrade the curriculum, not long before her arrival in Milwaukee.

Now to monotheism.⁴ One of the important religious and philosophical aspects of late antiquity was the victory of Platonic philosophy. It was the belief among many Christians, and possibly Jews too, that Platonism was essentially monotheistic, or at least could be used as a foundation for theology. The only monotheistic religious groups of the time, well known to us today, however, were Jews and Christians. It has been argued, though against increasing skepticism, that a relatively small but widespread religious group in Asia Minor, worshippers of *Theos Hypsistos* (the Highest God), was monotheistic. The locations of this group or groups seem to coincide well with places where Jews were known to have lived. On these grounds, the British scholar of Asia Minor, Stephen Mitchell, went so far as to claim that these were the “Godfearers,” or *Theosebeis* in Greek, Graeco-Romans who were attracted to Judaism and close to the synagogues, even if not becoming Jews.⁵ In general, knowledge of Judaic

⁴ For a recent description of monotheism, see Jan Assmann, “Monotheism and Polytheism,” in Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religions of the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004) 17-31, esp., 24-31. He sees Judaism and Christianity as “revolutionary” monotheism, as opposed to that of the pharaoh Akhenaten, which he calls “evolutionary monotheism.” See also Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich and Vienna 2003), discussed in Christoph Marksches, “The Price of Monotheism: Some New Observations on a Current Debate about Late Antiquity,” in Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, eds., *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010) 100-111. See also Timothy D. Barnes, “Monotheists All,” *Phoenix* 55 (2001) 142-153 (142-143); Nathan MacDonald, “The Origin of ‘Monotheism’,” in Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North, eds., *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (London and New York 2004) 204-215; Peter Van Nuffelen, “Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon,” in Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God. Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, 6-33; and Polymnia Athanassiadi, *The Gods Are Gods. Polytheistic Cult and Monotheistic Theology in the World of Late Antiquity*. (Coll. *Eranos* 14) forthcoming.

⁵ Peter Van Nuffelen in “Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon,” seems to reject Stephen Mitchell’s designation of this group as monotheistic or quasi-

religion on the part of non-Jewish Graeco-Romans, especially in the first three centuries, seems to have been woefully inadequate. The Greek intellectual, Plutarch, perhaps the best informed in comparative religion of his age, probably writing in the 90's of the first century, was miserably informed though quite sympathetic to Judaism in his writings. However, he oddly never mentions Jewish monotheism. The Roman senator and historian Tacitus, writing in the early second century, was viciously scornful of Jews. Yet, unlike Plutarch, he praised their monotheism and worship of God without images (*Histories* 5.5.4).⁶ By the fourth and fifth centuries, however, monotheism had triumphed and polytheism came to characterize the poorly educated country people, as reflected in the name "pagan," and those outside the Empire. A few centuries later, the Islamic conquests extended monotheism beyond the Roman Empire, and into smaller villages and the countryside, which had always been difficult for Christianity to penetrate.⁷

monotheistic, describing it, rather, as polytheism expressed in monotheistic terms (4). Although he believes that there is no indisputable evidence of a monotheistic pagan cult (24), he is open to the possibility that the cult of Theos Hypsistos had something to do with the "Godfearers" and associated with Judaism or under Jewish influence (31).

⁶ See now Joseph Geiger, "Plutarch, Dionysus, and the God of the Jews Revisited (An Exercise in Quellenforschung)," in Luc Van Der Stockt, Frances Titchener, Heinz Gerd Inenkamp, and Aurelio Pérez Jiménez, eds., *Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch's Works. Studies Devoted to Professor Frederick E. Brenk by The International Plutarch Society* (Logan, Utah and Malaga, Spain 2010) 211-220.

⁷ See here Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993); René Bloch, "Monotheism," in *Brill's New Pauly* IX (Leiden and Boston 2006) cols. 171-174; Clifford Ando "Introduction to Part IV," in Clifford Ando, ed., *Roman Religion* (Edinburgh, 2003) 141-146; Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord. Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (first edition, Philadelphia 1988, second edition, London and New York 1998); Jan Assmann, "Monotheism and Polytheism;" Mark Edwards,

In recent times, one can detect a number of approaches to the study of monotheism. One, that in Biblical studies in particular, searches for the origin and essentials of Judaic monotheism. Larry W. Hurtado is noted for his 1988 book, *One God, One Lord. Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*.⁸ One of his contentions was that, strictly speaking, one cannot call either Judaism or Christianity monotheistic, since their followers believe in spiritual beings other than God. At the same time, he argues, that the belief in angels and saints did not detract from the concept of a monotheistic God. He discovered, for example, that in Judaism there was virtually no evidence for worship of angels.⁹

“Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine,” in Simon Swain and Mark Edwards, eds., *Approaching Late Antiquity. The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford 2004) 211-234; Marilena Amerise, “Monotheism and the Monarchy: The Christian Emperor and the Cult of the Sun in Eusebius of Caesarea,” *JbAC* 50 (2007) 72-84; Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*; Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, eds., *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven 2010). In the volume, see esp. Maria Vittoria Cerutti, “‘Pagan Monotheism’? Towards a Historical Typology,” 15-32; Isabella Sandwell, “Pagan Conceptions of Monotheism in the Fourth Century: The Example of Libanius and Themistius,” 101-126; Niketas Siniosoglou, “From Philosophic Monotheism to Imperial Henotheism: Esoteric and Popular Religion in Late Antique Platonism,” 127-148; Crystal Addey “Monotheism, Henotheism, and Polytheism in Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles,” 149-166; Maijastina Kahlos, “Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism: Monotheism in the Debate between ‘Pagans’ and Christians in 380-430,” 167-181; Gillian Clark, “Augustine’s Varro and Pagan Monotheism,” 181-202; and the review of the book by Jane Heath in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2011.01.31. See also Frederick E. Brenk, “Mixed Monotheism? The Areopagos Speech of Paul,” in Charles Guittard, ed., *Le monothéisme. Diversité, exclusivisme ou dialogue?* (Paris 2010), 131-152, printed also in Frederick E. Brenk, *With Unperfumed Voice. Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background. (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 21)* (Stuttgart 2007) 470-490.

⁸ Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

⁹ Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, esp. 35-39.

A second line of approach takes as its point of departure Greek philosophical monotheism. The volume *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 1999, edited by Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede immediately comes to mind.¹⁰ The most interesting and controversial article among several here was that by Michael Frede, called “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity.”¹¹ Like almost all authors on the subject, he pointed to the difficulty of defining monotheism, something that was also true in antiquity. He cites the fourth century Neoplatonic Christian philosopher, Marius Victorinus, who wrote in the first paragraph of one of his works:

The Greeks, whom they call Hellenes or pagans, talk of many gods, the Jews or Hebrews of one, but we, as truth and grace have come later, against the pagans speak of one God, against the Jews, of the Father and the Son.¹²

Frede then sets out to tear this observation to shreds.

Frede’s position, that monotheism was widespread among the Graeco-Roman contemporaries of the Jews and Christians, in what he calls “late antiquity,” seems very radical. He was not treating pagans in general, though, but the “vast majority of philosophers in late antiquity,” to use his expression. Regarding the question of whether there is one God or many, one finds this very controversial statement:

¹⁰ Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1999).

¹¹ Michael Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” in Athanassiadi and Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 41-67.

¹² Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 41, citing Marius Victorinus, *De homoousio recipiendo*.

. . . it is extremely difficult if not impossible, to distinguish between the Christian position and the position of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and their followers in later antiquity, and thus the vast majority of philosophers in late antiquity.¹³

In another passage, he writes:

. . . the pagan philosophers we are considering, in particular the Platonists, were monotheistic in precisely the sense the Christians were.¹⁴

Regarding “many gods,” Frede points out, as does almost every modern author who writes on philosophical monotheism, that there is a certain ambiguity here by what you mean by “God.” The Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics believed in lesser gods. However, as Frede notes, they treated the supreme god as something different, calling Him, “God,” or “the God,” or “the Divine,” as if this god were the only thing worthy to be called God.¹⁵ The book, *Traditions of Theology. Studies in Hellenistic Theology. Its Background and Aftermath*, edited by Dorothea Frede and André Laks, 2002, was not meant primarily to treat monotheism, but some articles do touch on it.¹⁶ The article by David Sedley stirred much discussion. He argued that the concept of a Stoic god arose out of the teaching of the third and last scholarch, or head, of Plato’s Academy, Polemon, in the third century B.C.E.¹⁷ His position would have posited two general principles, God and matter, much like that of the Stoics, who followed him.

¹³ Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 41.

¹⁴ Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 67.

¹⁵ Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 55.

¹⁶ Dorothea Frede and André Laks, eds., *Traditions of Theology. Studies in Hellenistic Theology. Its Background and Aftermath (Philosophia Antiqua 89)* (Leiden 2002).

¹⁷ David Sedley, “The Origins of Stoic God,” in Dorothea Frede and André Laks, *Traditions of Theology*, 50-83 (esp. 41-42, 59-61).

As noted, Christians, following Jewish tradition, believed in a lower class of spiritual beings who were only divine in a less strict or derived sense, namely angels and demons. In Frede's view, Christians who admitted the presence of angels and devils (and, we could say, Christians who created the cult of martyrs and saints, including the cult of the Maccabean martyrs), would be on similar ground to the pagan philosophers who believed in God, but also admitted the existence of lesser gods. Thus, according to Frede, the saying, "the pagans believe in many gods, and Jews and Christians in one God," can be very misleading.¹⁸ It is difficult, then, to define monotheism, but most scholars today seem to dislike the simple definition that monotheism is the belief in one god, while polytheism is the belief in many gods. Some scholars have also introduced the term henotheism into the discussion, the belief in a supreme god, but one who is only marginally greater than the others, such as Zeus in the council of the gods in the Homeric poems. This, too, has not met with much favor.

Already in early Platonism, but particularly after the advent of Middle-Platonism in the first and second centuries, the nature of God became a matter of great interest. Among the questions asked, for example, were: What was His relationship to the Platonic perfect Good, to Being in itself, or to the One?; Was Plato's God literally the creator of the universe, creating the world in time?; Was there an aloof First God, and a Second God who created and oversees the universe?; or Was there even a Third God, the universe itself, that is, the soul or intellect of the universe? Summing up, Frede writes (erroneously) that the vast majority of philosophers in Late Antiquity, then, were in agreement that there is one God who enjoys eternal bliss, who is unique as the first principle, who

¹⁸ Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity," 41, 43, 55, 60-63.

providentially orders the world, and that there are subordinate beings who also enjoy immortality and are called divine.¹⁹

Missing from his exposition is that some philosophers like Plutarch identified or associated the intelligible Forms or Ideas of Plato, such as the Good and Beautiful, with God, though more commonly the Forms and models (*paradeigmata*) were identified with the thoughts or ideas of God. If one identifies God with the Ideas or Forms, then in Platonism God becomes the object of the “blessed vision,” the soul’s desire and for which it was created. Plato had spoken of this as a vision of the beautiful in itself, especially in the *Phaidros* and *Symposion*, but he had not identified the vision as one of God, only of the intelligible form of the Beautiful or Good in itself. This Good, in Plato’s *Republic*, had been compared to the sun, which in the phenomenal world transmits its goodness to the whole universe. As identical with the Form of the Good, or possibly just possessing the Form of the Good and Beautiful, God would be, therefore, the destiny or “*telos*” of the human soul and the source of eternal bliss.

According to Frede, the Christian response to the pagan philosophers involved some particular difficulties. Christians had trouble, for example, in explaining the Trinity without using the plural. This suggested three independent Gods, and thus polytheism. Moreover, Christians, and presumably Jews, had to defend Scripture, which spoke of gods in the plural. What does one do with expressions such as “the God of gods” (*Psalms* 29.1)? Surprisingly both Origen of Alexandria, the third century Church father, and the Latin Church father, Augustine, felt that it was unobjectionable to speak of gods.²⁰ Other Christians considered the gods to be the equivalent of Christian angels or to be

¹⁹ Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 49, cf. 55.

²⁰ Origen, *Against Kelsos* (Celsus) 5.4; Augustine, *City of God*, 9.23; see Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity,” 58.

daimones (that is, supernatural beings or spirits). One pagan philosopher responded that the whole debate over the gods was simply a matter of terminology. Augustine was willing to concur, provided these beings (the *daimones*) were good and virtuous. According to Frede, then, the focus of Christians like Augustine became not one of monotheism versus polytheism, that is, whether there were many gods or not. Rather, even in the case of Platonists, the debate centered on worshipping the true God or false gods. Added to this debate was another question, that is, even if the gods of the pagans were not false, should we worship them.²¹

The book *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* was fiercely attacked by Mark Edwards in the *Journal of Theological Studies* in 1999, and somewhat again in his article for Simon Swain and Mark Edwards' book called *Approaching Late Antiquity. The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford 2004).²² Though many readers probably saw *Pagan Monotheism* as largely convincing, Edwards considered it full of errors and an indirect attack on Christianity. He particularly singled out the article by Frede.²³ Edwards claimed, for instance, that his description was a vast misunderstanding of what Christians understood by God and overlooked the primary question of worship.²⁴ In his view, none of the

²¹ Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity," 61, but without exact references to the text of the *City of God*; cf. Frede, 62-64.

²² Edwards, review of Athanassiadi and Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*; and in particular of Frede's, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine," in the volume.

²³ Edwards, review of Athanassiadi and Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 340. Edwards cites similar pejorative statements about Christian monotheism by John North, in Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, eds., *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge 1998) 267, and by Simon R. F. Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge 1999) 11.

²⁴ This is also a primary criterion for Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, e.g., 126.

supposed monotheistic philosophies proposed its god as an object of cult. He argued that “pagan monotheism” was a contradiction in terms and non-existent.²⁵ Frede had made some distinctions but Edwards claimed he had underestimated them.

That the vast majority of philosophers at the time were monotheists certainly needs to be qualified. As Peter Van Nuffelen asks, in the book edited by him and Stephen Mitchell, *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, 2010, there is one supreme being in Later Platonism, but are there any religious consequences?²⁶ Edwards’ complete exclusion of Greek and Roman philosophical monotheism as pagan monotheism and the definition of monotheism in strictly Christian or Jewish terms, on the other hand, might seem excessive to many. Edwards’ criticism, however, is not lightly to be cast aside, and as recently as 2008, he strongly reiterated his assertions.²⁷ Like the Church Fathers, Edwards appears to be saying that a vague form of philosophical monotheism cannot be called monotheism. For Edwards, pagan monotheism never existed, that is, it contradicts his conception of monotheism, because, in his view, it is essentially different from Jewish or Christian monotheism. For example, he rightly notes that the “One” of the great third century Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinos, can

²⁵ Edwards, “Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine,” e.g., 316-317 and his review of Athanassiadi and Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000) 339-342. Reviews by Timothy D. Barnes, “Monotheists All,” in *Phoenix* 55 (2001) 142-153 (142-148), and of Simon Swain and Mark Edwards, eds., *Approaching Late Antiquity*, in *CR* 55 (2005) 638-640, were more favorable to Athanassiadi and Frede and less so to Edwards. However, Barnes seems to have been unduly influenced by Frede and Mitchell, e.g. regarding the cult of Theos Hypsistos.

²⁶ Peter Van Nuffelen, “Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon,” in Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God. Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, 16-33 (23).

²⁷ In comments made at the International Symposium on Lucian of Samosata, Adiyaman University, Adiyaman, Turkey, October 17-19, 2008.

neither think nor love, that its will is not directed outside itself, and that, according to Plotinos, it cannot even be credited with possessing being. For Edwards it should not be called "God."²⁸ He also rightly notes the failure of Frede to demonstrate that lesser spiritual beings in Christianity deserve worship.²⁹ Edwards, in fact, had expanded his observations on monotheism earlier in his 2004 article entitled, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine."³⁰ It explored in more detail the ways in which the Christian God was different from the God, gods, or First Principles of Platonists.

Frede returned to the fray, rearmed, in 2010 with an article entitled "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Greek and Graeco-Roman Antiquity."³¹ In it, he objects to defining monotheism in such a stringent way that only the God of Christians, or possibly, of Christians, Jews, and Muslims would qualify.³² In this sense, his article is a refutation of the objections of Edwards, whom he never mentions.³³ To make his case, he takes three philosophers: the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, of the fifth and fourth centuries; the Stoic Chrysippos, of the third century B.C.E.; and the physician and eclectic philosopher, Galen, of the second and third centuries C.E. Frede first objects that

²⁸ Edwards, review of Athanassiadi and Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 340-341.

²⁹ Edwards, in his review of *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, against Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Late Antiquity" 64, added, that the cult of saints could not be compared to the cult of heroes or lesser gods, since it was not widely developed in the first three centuries (341-342).

³⁰ Edwards, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine."

³¹ Frede, "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," in Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, 53-81.

³² "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 53, 56-57.

³³ But Edwards is mentioned by Van Nuffelen, "Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon," 21, note 21.

simply because they were philosophers rather than theologians, they should not be rejected out of hand. When he comes to the Stoic Chrysippos, however, his position seems rather shaky.³⁴ Chrysippos' God, like that of other Stoics is not only immanent in matter but always exists with a material component, called by the Stoics at first, fire and then later, *pneuma*, a kind of hot gas. Though one can intellectually abstract the Stoic divine *logos* from matter, in reality, this God always has a material component, which is the carrier of the *logos*. This God periodically dissolves the world back into Himself (or itself), and then recreates it from His spiritual and material component. He is not really Plato's World Soul, as Frede suggests, because He is not soul alone, but soul and body, much as a human being consists of soul and body.³⁵ Van Nuffelen, in the same book, attempts a middle course. He would see pagan monotheism not as monotheism in the strict sense. This would involve a cult, the rejection of all other gods, and so forth. Rather, the term "pagan monotheism" would be an overarching term for monotheistic tendencies in the Graeco-Roman world.

Oddly, none of the most recent studies of monotheism delve much into Kleantes' form of Stoicism, nor of Plutarch's approach to Platonism. Kleantes of the third century B.C.E., was considered to represent a religious kind of Stoicism. He is most famous for his *Hymn to Zeus*, which is not to Zeus at all, but to the Stoic God. Does this involve worship? If one defines worship as holding this God to be the only God and doing His will as the supreme act of human life, then it would be both worship and a kind of pagan religious monotheism. This poem was written as a hymn, and, therefore, seems to have an agenda, that is, to

³⁴ Chrysippos in "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 70-75.

³⁵ The World Soul, "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 72.

be treated as something religious, or a substitute for religion. Besides this hymn, a shorter poem of Kleantes is extant. Seneca translated it into Latin and used it in one of his most famous *Moral Letters* (108), changing, however, Kleantes' "Zeus" into "Father." Still, the nature of the Stoic God remains a difficulty. Stoics, at least philosophically, did not pay much attention to the popular gods, which are often considered to be symbolic or allegorical. For instance, Hephaistos (the Roman Vulcan) becomes fire. Hera, the wife of Zeus becomes "air." Epicureans denied the influence of the gods in this world, and some scholars even believe they denied the real existence of the gods. Yet, Stoics, and Epicureans were supposed to engage in the traditional religious ceremonies as a civic duty. Thus, a mentality had grown up over the ages in which a philosopher or member of the elite could separate his belief in the real nature of God, from belief in the gods of the traditional religion. One should note, also, that Greek or Roman authors of the first centuries C.E., when writing of supernatural intervention in history or in the lives of individuals used the term "God", or "the divine" (**τὸ θεῖον, τὸ δαιμόνιον**), rather than Zeus or the name of a traditional god, thus suggesting a split between traditional religion and a monotheistic concept of the supernatural.

Plutarch's handling of the conflict between traditional religion and philosophical monotheism is barely mentioned by these authors, though Edwards does allude to him equating the Platonic "One" with God.³⁶ An example of this technique of treating the gods allegorically or as symbols can be seen in Plutarch's essay on the Isis and Osiris religion. Plutarch offers an enormous amount of information on this facet of Egyptian religion, but also

³⁶ Edwards, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine," 214, alluding to Plutarch, *The E at Delphi* 392A-393D.

gives instruction on how it should be interpreted. In the Platonic allegory he develops (in fact he offers quite a few), Osiris, the object of Isis' love, becomes Plutarch's monotheistic Middle-Platonic God, identified with the Good and Beautiful, and the object and destiny of Isis (treated as the human soul). Thus, the myth expresses the soul's desire for the Good and Beautiful, or in other terms, God. So Klea, to whom the essay is addressed can worship the Egyptian gods, but she is to see them as symbols and their stories as allegories. The world is created and ruled by only one God.

More compelling is the monotheistic speculation in Plutarch's *The E at Delphi*. This has strong religious overtones. Besides the setting, a famous religious site, he himself was a priest at Delphi. In the dialogue, Plutarch portrays himself as a brilliantly erratic young man, "just before he is to enter the (Platonic) Academy." His future teacher, and the leading speaker, is the Platonist Ammonios. Ammonios, in turn, seems influenced by Eudoros of Alexandria of the first century B.C.E., considered to be the founder of Middle-Platonism. In his final and by far the most majestic speech, Ammonios extols an exalted type of monotheism. This emphasizes not only the distance between God and mortals, but also that between God and any other divine being. John Whittaker many years ago demonstrated that the speech has much in common with the thought of the first century B.C.E and C.E. Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and commentator on the Bible, Philo.³⁷ As in the case of Philo, one cannot call this pure philosophical monotheism. Not only is Ammonios' speech in a religious

³⁷ John Whittaker, "Ammonios on the Delphic E," CQ 19 (1969) 185-192. See also Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, "Der eine Gott bei Philon von Alexandrien und Plutarch," in Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, ed., *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch. Götterbilder, Gottesbilder, Weltbilder. (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 54)* (Berlin 2005) 141-168.

setting but it is suggestive of a hymn in its praise of the God behind the god Apollo. According to Ammonios, God exists in instantaneous eternity, without beginning or end, in which time must always be designated as the present (“the now”). We mere mortals do not even truly exist, while God is being itself. Plutarch modifies the term that Plato used for being. Plato had employed the neuter participle of the verb to be, preceded by the article (*to on* [**to\on**]) for being or the principle of being. Ammonios, here, uses both this form and the masculine form of the participle, which would then be something like “the person existing,” or “the existing one” (*ho on* [**o\wh**]). Plato’s neuter, impersonal principle has now become a masculine divine being (393A-B). Most surprising, in the *Septuagint* version of *Exodus*, 3.14-15, when Moses asks God for His name, He replies using the same formula that Ammonios uses here, I am *ho on* (**o\wh**) (“I am the existent one.”), and in the next verse Moses is instructed to tell the Israelites that **o\wh** sent him. The Hebrew has been translated into English as “I am what I am.” (King James Version), meaning in modern English “I am that I am.” A Platonist would understand the *Septuagint* translation as “I am the one who is being itself.”, and many scholars believe that the translators deliberately wanted this echo of Plato.³⁸

In Ammonios’ speech, Apollo (in Greek Apollon) is the visible symbol of God. Apollo, is not, however, the god of myth, but Apollo, as assimilated to the sun, both as the material sun and as the Sun god. For Ammonios even the name (*Apollon* in Greek) is significant, signifying that in no way is he anything but “one.” The divine is “*a-pollon*,” signifying “not-many” (393C). The emphasis is on

³⁸ The Hebrew, *’eye(h) ’asher ’eye(h)* is equally ambiguous. See e.g. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (Anchor Bible) (New York 1998) 204-205. Aquila and Theodotion translated the phrase as “I will be who I will be.” (**ešomai of ešomai**) and this is the translation preferred by Propp.

the total simplicity or unicity of God, rather than on monotheism, but obviously, the definition excludes any other being. Ammonios does not explicitly advocate a new or direct cult of God, who is both One and Being, under the aspect of Apollo. Nonetheless, this is the implication. Presumably, on a personal level though seeming to venerate Apollo, the god of Delphi, a person should actually worship the monotheistic God whose nature was elaborated by Middle-Platonic philosophers. The mysterious letter E at the entrance to the shrine can now be deciphered. Written *ei*, as Greeks did, it means "Thou art.", that only God truly exists. Not finished yet, Ammonios adds that it would be better to say, "Thou art one." (394C).³⁹ One must imagine, then, that Kleanthes, Seneca, and Plutarch were not alone. Probably a considerable number of educated Graeco-Romans were able to do the mental gymnastics required in continuing to worship the traditional gods while really believing that their worship was directed to a supreme monotheistic god. Just as Kleanthes could write a "hymn" to the Stoic God, Plutarch used one of the most famous and traditional religious shrines in Greece as a backdrop for Ammonios' sublime speech exalting the unique God, in which there are many echoes of Philo of Alexandria.

In conclusion, I believe that Frede and many Christian writers were on the right track in seeing within Greek philosophy and to some extent religious practices inspired by later Platonic philosophy, something more than just a tendency toward monotheism. Nor can one say that it excluded worship altogether. A number of Greeks and Romans, then, practiced a form of

³⁹ See Frederick E. Brenk, "Plutarch's Middle-Platonic God: About to Enter (or Remake) the Academy," in Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, ed., *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch. Götterbilder, Gottesbilder, Weltbilder* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005) 27-50 (reprinted in Frederick E. Brenk, *With Unperfumed Voice. Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background*. (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007) 121-143.

monotheism in which one ostensibly worships traditional gods, while in fact worshipping something else. Such persons might not believe in the existence of the gods, or they might treat them as lower spiritual beings or simply as symbols, or the more visible image of a monotheistic God in a completely different class. The number of these persons may have been proportionately very small. Still this group existed. Some at least found a subtle and sophisticated way of continuing to worship the traditional gods as part of their “ancestral tradition,” while believing, on a more profound level, in a unique, transcendent God. Here, too, a debt must be acknowledged to Jewish philosophers like Aristoboulos and Philo of Alexandria who opened up to the Graeco-Roman world the possibility of a monotheism which was not only philosophical but also religious.

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⁴⁰ Since the text was considerably cut, some of the bibliographical references do not appear in the notes.

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