

Introduction

Texts, Traditions, and the Gods of the Ancient Mediterranean World

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, ca. 58–60 CE, the apostle Paul wrote what amounts to a confession of faith:

“For if there are so-called Gods, whether in Heaven or on the earth—and indeed there are many such Gods and many Lords—but to us there is one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

Thus Paul expressed what to the majority of his world’s population was essentially atheistic and intolerant.

In the latter half of the first century CE, the apostle’s insistence upon “one God” was a minority opinion; mainly he shared his attitude with his fellow Jews. When Paul traveled in the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean world had undergone centuries of significant change. Due in great part to the conquests of Alexander the Great and made even more prevalent by the rise of the Roman Empire, travel and

inter-regional commerce had increased dramatically. This brought the exchange and melding of what had previously been mainly regional concepts: language, religion, the arts, and other cultural entities. People not only exchanged goods and services; they shared ideas and concepts.

The people of the Roman Empire also shared gods. What were once regional gods were worshiped throughout the empire, and there were many of them.

Such sharing is inevitable in cultural exchange. When folks travel, they carry their internal as well as their external luggage. Isis, an Egyptian deity, became popular throughout the Empire as a goddess of healing, marriage (and things sexual), and many other attributes. She was joined by the Greek god Aphrodite in the sharing of their function as deities. There were dozens of other identifications of gods and goddesses between the two cultures. When cultures interact as they did during the period of the Greek and then Roman empires, there is virtually no aspect of these societies which do not in some way come into competition and mixing. The result is the triumph of one cultural entity over the other, or, what is a more useful metaphor, a melding of these cultural streams.

Eternals and Immortals

In the first century BCE, a Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, wrote that there were, generally speaking, two ways of perceiving Gods:

The ancients among men have given to later generations two conceptions [*ennoia*] concerning Gods. They say on the one hand that some are eternal and imperishable, such as (Gods named after) the Sun and the Moon and the other stars in heaven . . . but the others they say were earthly men [*epigeios*] who became Gods, attaining immortal honor and glory because of their benefactions [*euergesia*] toward men, such as Herakles, Dionysos, Aristaios, and others similar to them.¹

During that time, the famous Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero made the same point. He was discussing his ideal city, and he indicated that the religious institutions should have

[Citizens who] shall worship as Gods both those who have always been dwellers in Heaven, and those whose merits [*merita*] have (more recently) admitted them to Heaven: (such as) Hercules [= Herakles], Liber, Aesculapius [Asklepios], Castor, Pollux, Quirinius [= Romulus].²

It was also the case that one of the eternal Gods would make a temporary appearance, an epiphany (*epiphaneia*), on earth in human form. Usually, the God would appear incognito in a city or public place, and would perform some great deed or gather information about the people and their attitudes. This is what is, in religious studies, often called an incarnation (that is, Latin for “putting on flesh”).

An example of this incarnational act can be found in the writings of the Roman poet Virgil. After close to twenty years of civil war in Rome, Julius Caesar’s nephew

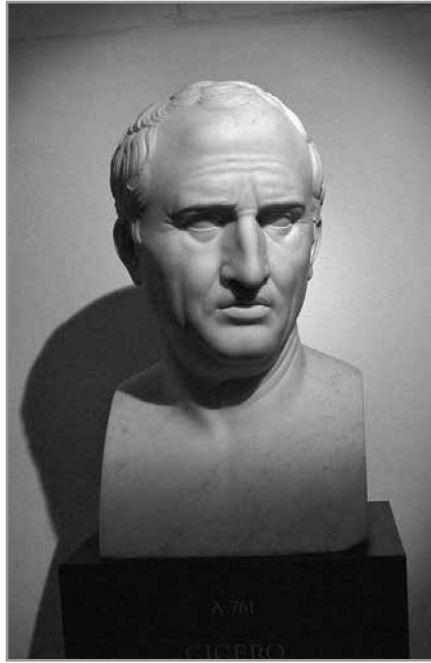


Fig. 0.2. *Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106--43 B.C.E.; copy by Bertel Thorvaldsen, ca. 1799, of a Roman bust. Commons.wikimedia.org.*

Octavian (Augustus Caesar) seized control of the government in 44 BCE. The peace, stability, and accomplishments of Octavian's leadership and his stable moral and personable style brought him high admiration throughout the Roman Empire. The court poet, Virgil, wrote a famous poem (*Eclogue IV*). The poet likened Octavian to a divine child sent from heaven.³ Another poet, Horace, composed a less well-known poem, in which he expressed the concept of Octavian as the incarnation of a Roman God:

Which of the Gods now shall the people summon
 To prop Rome's reeling sovereignty?
 What prayer shall the twelve Virgins
 Use to reach the ear of Vesta,
 Who grows each day deafer to litanies?
 Whom shall Jupiter appoint
 As instrument of our atonement?
 Come, fore-telling Apollo . . . ?
 Or thou (Venus) . . . ?
 Or, thou (Mars, great parent of our race?)
 Or, else thou, (Mercury) winged boy of gentle Maia.

Put on the mortal shape of a young Roman;
 Descend and, well-contented to be known as,
 Caesar's avenger.
 Stay gladly and long with Romulus' people.
 Delay they homeward skybound journey . . .
 Stay on earth, enjoy resplendent triumphs.
 Be Prince, be Father-titles to rejoice in!
 And let no Parthian raider ride unscathed
 While Caesar has charge of Rome!⁴

Identifying Gods in the Mediterranean World

When Christianity appeared in the ancient Mediterranean world, there were already, as Paul wrote, many Gods in the heavens and many on the earth occupying thrones, temples, shrines, and sanctuaries. Further, the vast separation that we have in our time between creator and creation, the divine and the human, was more easily bridged. However, for the purpose of an academic study, the types of gods and divinity need some exploration.

The ordinary man or woman of that time had learned to understand the time's plethora of divinities, for each one of these many divinities had some special niche in the pantheon. It was customary to group the deities according to function, giving the name of the Greek God of healing to the Egyptian deity of the same function, and so on. There were ancient deities of earth and sky and sea whom people had worshiped longer than anyone could remember, and newer, more personal gods and goddesses, who possessed the newest and most elaborate temples in the downtown areas.

In addition to these divinities, there were the great emperors, the kings and regional potentates of one kind or another, who were also paid varying degrees of homage as gods. These are among the "gods . . . on the earth" to which Paul referred. For example, the Provincial Assembly of Asia Minor passed this resolution regarding Caesar Augustus (who ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE) somewhere near the middle of his reign:

It was considered good to the Greeks in Asia, in the thinking of the High Priest Apollonios of Menophilos Azonitos: "Since Providence has put in order everything in our lives and has deep interest in our life, she has set everything in perfect order by giving us Augustus (for the great benefit of men) whom she filled with great virtue, so that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior [*sôtēr*] for us and our descendants, to end war and to put everything in the cosmos in order. He, by his appearance [*epiphania*], went beyond all our expectations and beyond all previous helpers, and not leaving to the future any hope of accomplishing more than what he has done; and since the birthday of the God Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [or "gospel," *euangelia*] for the world he established—which Asia resolved in Smyrna."⁵

This edict (often known as the Priene Inscription), enacted around 9 BCE, is noteworthy for its use of certain concepts—savior, gospel, and the era of universal

peace—which also occur prominently in early Christian writings. Further, the edict was promulgated throughout the Greek cities of Asia Minor roughly four decades prior to Paul’s beginning his missionary work there.

The following resolution concerning the Roman emperor Caligula was passed by the Ephesian City Council around the year 48 CE, a few years before Paul arrived in Ephesus:

The Council and the people (of the Ephesians and other Greek) cities which dwell in Asia and the nations (acknowledge) Gaius Julius, the son of Gaius Caesar as High Priest and Absolute Ruler . . . the God Visible who is born of (the Gods) Ares and Aphrodite, the shared savior (*sōtēr*) of human life.⁶

The custom of voting divine titles to living rulers was common in the eastern Mediterranean regions, where there were extremely ancient and powerful traditions of divine kingship, especially in Egypt. The famous Rosetta Stone, discovered near one of the mouths of the Nile in 1799, contains a lengthy announcement in flowery Egyptian style proclaiming the divinity of a Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy V Epiphanes



Fig. 1.2. Augustus (center right) is depicted as a divine being, seated among the gods in heaven, in the Gemma Augustea, onyx, first decades of the first century C.E. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Commons.wikimedia.org.

(210–180 BCE). Issued in three languages around the year 196 BCE at Alexandria, when the king was twelve years old, it says in part:

In the reign of the young king by inheritance from his father, Lord of the Diadems, great in glory, pacifier of Egypt and pious toward the Gods, superior over his adversaries, restorer of the life of man . . . king like the sun, Great King of the Upper and Lower Lands, child of the Gods through the love of the Father . . . *living image of Zeus*, Son of the Sun, Ptolemy the immortal . . . priest of (the divine) Alexander (the Great) and the Savior Gods and the Benefactor Gods and the Gods of the love of the Father, the God visible (or manifest), for whom thanks he given.⁷

Kings and emperors were not the only mortals to be paid divine honors, however. Famous philosophers were also revered in this way. For example, the Roman poet Lucretius (94–55 BCE) said this in praise of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 340–270 BCE):

Who is able with mighty mind to build a song worthy of the majesty of these discoveries?

To devise praises fit for his merits,
Who by his own intellect winning and gaining such treasures,
Has left them to us?

None will be found, I think, of the sons of mortal men.

For if we must speak as this very majesty of nature
Now known to us demands, he was a God [*deus ille fuit*],

Noble Memmius, a God he was who first discovered

That reasoned plan of life [*vitae rationem*]

Which is now called Wisdom [*sapientia*],

Who by his skill brought life out of those tempestuous billows

And that deep darkness, and settled it

In such a calm and in light so clear.

Do but compare the ancient discoveries accounted godlike,

Made by others.

For Ceres is said to have introduced corn to mortals,

Liber, the liquor of vine-borne juice.

But nevertheless life could have remained without these things,

As we are told that some nations live even now.

But good life [*bene vivere*] was impossible without a purged mind;

Which makes him seem to us with better reason a God,

From whom even now spreading abroad through great nations

Come sweet consolations of life [*dulcia solada vitae*]

To soothe our minds [*animos*].⁸

We know of a few cases where philosophers described themselves as gods. The Greek philosopher Empedocles (fl. c. 450 BCE) addressed his fellow citizens thus:

Friends that inhabit (my) city . . . All Hail!

I go about among you (as) an immortal God.

No mortal now, honored by all as is meet.
 Crowned with fillets and flowery garlands.
 Whenever I enter with these men and women in my entourage
 into flourishing towns, immediately reverence is given me.
 People follow me in countless throngs
 Asking of me what is the best way to financial success,
 Others desire revelations about the future,
 while others, who have for many a dreary day
 been pierced by the grievous pangs of all kinds of sickness,
 beg to hear from me the word of healing.⁹

Archaeologists have discovered hundreds of coins, inscriptions, epitaphs, and writings from the Hellenistic-Roman period (300 BCE–200 CE) that use the titles of “Visible God” (*theos epiphanēs*), “Savior” (*sōtēr*), and “Benefactor” (*euergetēs*). Grateful city councils, pious provincial assemblies, the priesthood in the Roman Senate, and a wide spectrum of public and private religious assemblies commonly assigned these titles to kings, generals, statesmen, philosophers, poets, and physicians, and, in some cases, even to famous athletes. They became so commonly used that they were, in some cases, little more than pious clichés.

Paul was therefore not telling the Corinthians anything they did not already know when he said, “There are many so-called gods in heaven and on the earth” (1 Cor. 8:5-6). But what was unusual was the rest of Paul’s statement: “But for us (Christians) there is one God, the Father of all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, our Savior.” Paul’s insistence, that there is only one God rather than many, reveals his Jewish heritage. The Jews had been fighting for this concept for centuries. It was not an idea that Gentile converts, long used to an attitude of tolerance toward the plethora of divinities, easily understood or accepted.

Other ideas of Paul’s were not as difficult to understand, however. When Paul wrote to the Christian community in the provincial capital of Philippi, “Our citizenship [*politeuma*] is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior [*sōtēr*], the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20, RSV), he did not use any concepts (Savior, Lord) that would have been unfamiliar. Even his claim that Christians held citizenship rights in a “heavenly city” would not have been that novel. Local citizens undoubtedly still remembered a utopian commune called “Uranopolis” (literally: “heaven-city”) that had actually been established near Philippi some two hundred years earlier by the brother of a local king.

One Christian theologian actually drew the emperor’s attention to the many similarities between Christian beliefs regarding Jesus Christ and rival religious beliefs regarding other savior gods. In an open letter to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius written around the year 150 CE, the Christian philosopher Justin Martyr complained that Christians were being unjustly persecuted “even though we say the same things [about Jesus Christ] that the Greeks (say about their gods).”¹⁰ Nor is he hesitant to give abundant evidence to support this somewhat surprising claim:

When we say that the Word [*logos*], who is the first-born of God, was born for us without sexual union . . . and that he was crucified and died and after rising again ascended into Heaven, *we introduce nothing new beyond (what you say) regarding those whom you call sons of Zeus*. When we say that Jesus was born of a virgin, you should consider this something in common with Perseus. When we say that he healed the lame, the paralyzed, and those born blind, and raised the dead, we seem to be talking about things like those said to have been done by Asklepios.¹¹

To be sure, Justin goes on to insist that these similarities in belief between pagans and Christians, as well as others he mentions later (parallels between the Christian Eucharist and the sacred meal in the cult of the Persian god Mithras) have all been caused by evil demons who were imitating the Christian rituals in order to lure unwary souls away from the one true Savior. But even so, the list of parallels Justin provides is surprisingly long.

About one hundred years later, another Christian theologian devoted considerable attention to the same subject. Origen of Caesarea (c. 185-c. 254 CE), probably the most learned theologian of his time, responded to an attack on the Christians written by an otherwise unknown Greek philosopher named Celsus (fl. c. 180 CE). Origen's point-by-point refutation makes it possible to get a good idea of the content of Celsus's arguments. One of Celsus's main complaints is the following (to paraphrase him a bit):

If you Christians believe the stories of Jesus' miracles, if you believe the story of Jesus' miraculous birth, if you believe the story that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven and so on, why do you refuse to believe precisely the same stories when they are told of the other Savior Gods: Herakles, Asklepios, the Dioscuri, Dionysos, and a dozen others I could name?¹²

What is offensive to Celsus is the habit Christians had to refer these well-known concepts to Jesus Christ alone, using them *in an exclusive sense*. He could not understand why Christians insisted on denying the applicability of these concepts to the many other divinities in the Roman Empire. Even so, it is clear that neither he nor Origen thought that these concepts as such were new and somehow unique to the Christian church. What then were some of the basic features of these shared concepts?

Gods in Mediterranean Religions

The two types of gods which inhabited the Greco-Roman world were, as stated above, the Eternals and the Immortals. The Eternals were those who were gods from before even the creation of the heavens and the earth, for example, Zeus (Jupiter) and Venus, two among the eternal pantheon of gods. The Immortals were men and women, who, because of their great deeds, were "taken up," so to speak, and who had achieved divine status as a result.

One of the most famous poems of late antiquity is a very long one—Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is employed as a sourcebook for Greek and Latin mythology to this day;



Fig. 1.3. A gold aureus, minted ca. 13-14 C.E., depicting Augustus as “son of God.” Commons. [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org).

it contains over 250 stories about the gods and their deeds. What is telling about *Metamorphoses* is that the form of Ovid’s poem is what, in biblical scholarship, we call an aretalogy. That is, it is a collection of miraculous acts and deeds that reach their climax in the divination of the person who is the collection’s main focus. Another example, according to many New Testament scholars, is Mark 4:35—6:6, which may be a portion of a collection of Jesus’ wondrous acts culminating in the miraculous feeding of the multitude. In Ovid’s case, the wonder-worker is Julius Caesar, who died just a year before Ovid’s birth. In other words, Ovid is making case in aretalogical form that the emperor has been elevated to the status of a god.

This type of theme, namely, that through the ages there were many manifestations of the divine was essentially common language through the first centuries of the church, as Christianity competed against the established pagan understanding of gods and salvation. One famous Christian, Eusebius of Caesarea, wrote a rebuttal:

Do you ask . . . what is my starting point? Listen, and I will tell you. There are bounds in Nature which embrace the beginnings, middle, and completion of the existence of all things; measures [*metron*] and laws [*thesmos*] for everything by means of which the whole mechanism and construction of the entire universe is being brought to completion. These bounds have been distributed as indestructible laws and indissoluble bonds acting as the guardians everywhere of the wholly-will of Providence,¹³ which regulates all things. Nothing may disturb nor any person alter the order of what has been once-for-all everywhere established.

Thus anyone in whom there is a longing to be overly bold and to transgress it is restrained from defying the divine law [*ho theios nomos*] by the ordinance [*themis*] of Nature. For this reason, the fish that lives in the water will not be able to transform itself and live against nature on the dry land, nor will the creature born on dry land plunge into the waters and take up living there. Nor will

anyone, by a great meteoric leap, jump up into the air, desiring to live with the eagles, although *they* can, by lowering themselves, in fact walk about on the earth.

. . . In this way then the mortal race of men, possessing soul and body, is circumscribed by supernatural bonds [*theioi horoi*]. Nor will anyone who scorns to walk the paths of the earth ever go in the body through the air without instantly paying the price of his folly, nor will he, by lifting up the soul, attain by thought to the unattainable without falling back into the sickness of melancholy. It is more prudent, therefore, to bear one's body about on the earth by means of one's feet, and to sustain one's soul by means of education and philosophy.

But one may indeed pray for some Helper [*synergos*] to come from above, to descend from the paths of Heaven and appear to one as a teacher of the salvation existing up there.¹⁴ An excellent illustration of this is the legitimate way a doctor regularly visits the sick or the way a teacher associates himself with the student who is beginning a course of study, or the way any superior condescends to come from above to those more lowly. But the opposite certainly never (happens).

Therefore a divine nature [*theia physis*], who is a benefactor [*euergetēs*] and a Savior [*sōtērā*], and who foreknows the future, will come for communion with man.¹⁵ There is no reason why this would be prevented by the bounds set by divine Providence [*theia pronoia*] either. In fact, it has allowed this, for, as Plato says, it is good and there never springs up in the Good any ill will toward anyone.

But it is hardly only for the welfare of our physical bodies that the Guide of the universe¹⁶ is concerned. Rather, since He is good, He is much more concerned for our souls, since He has graciously bestowed upon them the honor of immortality and free will. Obviously, He who is himself a benefactor [*ergetēs*] by nature, and who is lord of the entire economy (of creation), he will present gifts to our souls, since the soul can respond to them. *He will ungrudgingly give rays of the light around himself, as it were, from time to time sending one of the beings from those especially close to him, down to us here below for our salvation and assistance.*

If one of these beings were to become one with some fortunate person, whose mind had been purified and from whom the cloud of mortality had been driven away, that man would be described as truly divine [*alēthōs theios*], someone who carried the image of some great God [*meγas tis theos*] in his soul. Surely so great a person as this would affect the entire human race, shining upon the civilized world [*oikoumenēs*] more brightly than the sun. He would leave behind as the work wrought by his eternal divine nature [*aidios theotēs*] a monument to be witnessed by future generations . . . (which would) reveal the pattern of his God-indwelling nature. In this fashion then, human nature [*anthrōpeia physis*] may share in [*koinōnein*] the superhuman [*tēs par'anthrōpon*], but otherwise it is not legitimate to transgress the bounds.¹⁷

As the italicized sentences indicate, Eusebius envisaged multiple incarnations as Divine Providence sent down one Savior after another, "from time to time," as "it deemed necessary for the welfare and salvation of the civilized world [*oikoumenē*]." This statement, as we said above, is one of the clearest, most detailed explanations of the incarnation concept in all of Greek or Roman literature. It may seem ironic

to find it coming from a Christian monotheist. But this just serves to underline the point we made above: neither the Christians nor the pagans ever claimed that these concepts were new in themselves. The Christians, however, used them in an exclusive manner. And that is what happens in the rest of Eusebius's treatise. Having conceded at the outset that everyone knew that divine Providence sent divine men into the world from time to time to help things out, Eusebius goes on to argue that Apollonios of Tyana was just not one of them;¹⁸ Jesus of Nazareth and the Hebrew prophets were the only true "rays of light" to have been sent from heaven.

From the viewpoint of the vast majority of the citizens of the Empire, it was no wonder that Christians "fought the lions" in the arena and suffered other deadly persecutions. To those who lived in a world that accepted and revered many gods, the Christians were indeed atheists, and the Christian belief amounted to a rejection of the structure which made society whole and functional.

Bibliographical Prelude

If, perchance, the reader wishes to view the whole document from which we have employed a section or quotation, this may be of help.

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Greek and Latin Texts

The Loeb Classical Library: a collection of Greek and Roman Texts in many volumes. The original language is on the verso and an English translation on the recto. The collection is now going on line. See <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/collection.php?cpk=1031>

Hebrew and Aramaic Texts

Many of these texts are now online, both in the original language and in English translation, at several URLs. For example: The Internet Sacred Text Online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/apo/index.htm>



Fig. 1.0. *Christ as good shepherd; third-century fresco from the Catacomb of St. Callistus, Rome. Commons.wikimedia.org.*