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**Citation for published version:**

Novenson, M 2020, The universal polytheism and the case of the Jews. in MV Novenson (ed.), *Monotheism and Christology in Greco- Roman Antiquity*. Novum Testamentum, Supplements, vol. 180, Brill, pp. 32-60. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004438088\\_004](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004438088_004)

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1163/9789004438088\\_004](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004438088_004)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Monotheism and Christology in Greco- Roman Antiquity

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## The Universal Polytheism and the Case of the Jews

Matthew V. Novenson

“You shall have no other gods before me,” someone has said. But what if another god is not actually another god, but one’s own god under a different name? The implications for *sogenannte* monotheism would be significant, to say the least. The present essay takes as a point of departure the claim recently advanced by Robert Parker that there was in antiquity something that we could—or indeed should—call “the universal polytheism.” In his 2017 book *Greek Gods Abroad* (the print incarnation of his Sather Classical Lectures at Berkeley for 2013), Parker coins that phrase and explicates it as follows: “[There was] the shared assumption, grounded in *interpretatio*, that at bottom the gods you worship are also the gods I do or might worship... Perhaps it is a mistake to speak of ancient polytheisms in the plural at all. From an actor’s perspective the world was divided between different countries and tribes and political systems, but it was not divided between different gods: there was only one ancient polytheism, one set of gods ruling the entire world.”<sup>1</sup>

Parker’s claim is something more than the familiar notion, mentioned in his opening sentence cited above, that many ancients practiced *interpretatio*, that is, the identification of a foreign god with an indigenous god via a theory of multiple divine names (e.g., Zeus is Ammon, Thoth is Hermes, and so on). That *interpretatio* happened is well known and has been much discussed. Parker’s more ambitious claim is that the ubiquitous ancient practice of *interpretatio* presupposes an equally ubiquitous and quite particular cosmology, a cosmology according to which there is precisely one pantheon, “one set of gods ruling the entire world,” one universal polytheism. This is a big, bold claim. I happen to think that it is probably true, at least for a great deal of our extant evidence. But my purpose in this essay is not to re-litigate the question of its truth or falsehood; people interested in doing so can read Parker’s book.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this essay is to take Parker’s universal polytheism as a working hypothesis and to consider a case that might be taken, and certainly has often been taken, to represent a counterexample: namely, the case of ancient Jews and their god. I raise the question of the case of the Jews, first, because that is my own area of specialism and, second, because the secondary literature is rife with claims that ancient Jews stood apart from the prevailing Graeco-Roman practice of *interpretatio*. Sometimes this claim is made in sympathy with ancient Jews, as, for instance, in

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This essay benefited a great deal from critical discussion at the Edinburgh colloquium, in particular Paula Fredriksen’s prepared response and perceptive questions from Richard Bauckham and Jan Bremmer. I am liable for any remaining faults in the essay.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad: Names, Natures, and Transformations* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 76.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion, see the reviews by Frederick G. Naerebout in *BMCR* (2018) and Barbara Graziosi in *TLS* (17 April 2018).

Anathea Portier-Young's account of the Seleucids' introduction of the cult of Zeus Olympios to Jerusalem:

I argue that even the suggested identification of Yhwh and Zeus entails a negation of all that Israel's traditions claimed for the Lord... If the rededication of Yhwh's Jerusalem temple to Zeus Olympios meant identifying the Lord with Zeus, it could affirm the Lord's power only by assimilating Israel's God into the pantheon of Greek gods. While not denying the existence of Israel's God, this assimilation would deny the particularity of Israel's confession and election. Worse than meaningless, such an identification would lay claim to a tradition in order to negate it.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, fascinatingly, one finds the selfsame claim advanced from an opposite posture of hostility to the view supposedly held by ancient Jews. The standard-bearer for this perspective is Jan Assman:

The Mosaic distinction was therefore a radically new distinction which considerably changed the world in which it was drawn... We may call this new type of religion 'counter-religion' because it rejects and repudiates everything that went before and what is outside itself as 'paganism.' It no longer functioned as a means of intercultural translation; on the contrary, it functioned as a means of intercultural estrangement. Whereas polytheism, or rather 'cosmotheism,' rendered different cultures mutually transparent and compatible, the new counter-religion blocked intercultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.<sup>4</sup>

Praise them as Portier-Young does, or blame them as Assman does, but many scholars evidently agree that ancient Jews were unable or unwilling to translate their god into a foreign idiom, or foreign gods into theirs. If there was a universal polytheism, it was not altogether universal, since it did not extend as far as the Jews. So the argument goes. But is it so?

### The universal polytheism

First of all, we may briefly sketch the evidence for Parker's universal polytheism, just to get an idea of what it is that ancient Jews are said *not* to have participated in. The core idea is that, although the gods have many names among the many peoples of the inhabited world, nevertheless the pantheon is one. As Cicero has Cotta explain: "Come now, do we really think that the gods are everywhere called by the same names by which they are addressed by us? But the gods have as many names as there are languages among humans. For it is not with the gods as with you; you are Velleius wherever you go, but Vulcan is not Vulcan in Italy and in Africa and in Spain" (Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.83-84; trans. Ando).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 202.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Ando, "Interpretatio Romana," *Classical Philology* 100 (2005): 41-51.

If Cicero's Cotta is right about the one pantheon, then it should, in theory, be possible to look past the several indigenous (e.g., Italian, African, Spanish) names to the selfsame god (e.g., Vulcan) standing behind them. And in fact, ancient efforts to do just this are ubiquitous in the sources. Modern interpreters call this theological activity *interpretatio*,<sup>6</sup> borrowing a line from Tacitus's account of a certain Germanic cult: "Among the Naharvali is shown a grove, the seat of a prehistoric ritual. A priest presides in female dress, but the gods commemorated there are, according to *interpretatio Romana*, Castor and Pollux. That, at least, is the power manifested by the godhead, whose name is Alci. There are no images, no trace of any foreign superstition, but nevertheless, they worship these gods as brothers and young men" (Tacitus, *Germania* 43.4; trans. Hutton and Warmington in LCL). The Naharvali call the gods Alci, but Tacitus recognizes them as Castor and Pollux. When Tacitus does this, we call it *interpretatio Romana*, but by extension, one can imagine an *interpretatio Graeca*, an *interpretatio Persica*, and so on—even, perhaps, an *interpretatio Judaica*.

Sometimes an ancient writer performs *interpretatio* in an unreflective manner, simply plugging in familiar theonyms for gods worshiped abroad. Thus, for instance, Julius Caesar's account of the religion of the Gauls: "Among the gods they chiefly worship Mercury. There are very many images of him, they call him the inventor of all skills, they call him guide over roads and routes, they think he has the greatest power in the acquisition of wealth and in trade. After him they worship Apollo and Mars and Minerva. About them they have much the same views as other people: that Apollo drives away diseases, Minerva conveys the elements of works and crafts, Jupiter holds sway over the heavens, Mars controls battles" (Caesar, *Gallic Wars* 6.17.1-2; trans. Parker). Of course, the Gauls did not worship "Mercury," but they worshiped a god of skills, roads, and trade, whom Caesar recognizes as Mercury and names accordingly.

Other times—very often, in fact—an ancient writer is uncertain about the most accurate *interpretatio* of a foreign god. In such cases, he or she will usually report whatever options are on offer. Thus, for instance, Tacitus, who was quite certain about identifying the Germanic Alci with Castor and Pollux, is much less so about the Graeco-Egyptian Serapis: "Many identify him with the god Aesculapius because he heals the sick; some with Osiris, a very ancient divinity of those peoples; many again identify him with Jupiter for his power over all things; but most identify him with Dis Pater from the emblems that are manifest in him, or through arcane reasoning" (Tacitus, *Historiae* 4.84.5; trans. Ando). Tacitus does not doubt that *interpretatio* is possible in the case of Serapis; it is just that he does not know of precisely one right answer.

Because of the demographics of our literary sources, we most often hear talk of *interpretatio Romana* and *interpretatio Graeca*, but we do have examples from a number of provincial perspectives, as well. One of these, an *interpretatio Syriaca*, comes from the remarkable treatise *On*

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<sup>6</sup> Especially following Georg Wissowa, "Interpretatio Romana: Römische Götter im Barbarenlande," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 19 (1918): 1-49.

*the Syrian Goddess* attributed to, and probably actually written by, Lucian of Samosata.<sup>7</sup> Describing the sanctuary of the goddess Atargatis in Hierapolis, Lucian tries to explain the goddess's iconography in terms of her Greek counterparts. He writes, "In it are two images, one Hera, the other Zeus, whom they call by another name... Certainly the image of Zeus resembles Zeus in all respects—his head and cloak and throne—so that you would not willingly liken him to anyone else. But Hera will reveal to you as you look at her a form of diverse appearances. Taken all together, to be sure, she is Hera, but she also has something of Athena and Aphrodite and Selene and Rhea and Artemis and Nemesis and the Parcae" (Lucian, *Syrian Goddess* 31-32; trans. Ando). Atargatis, Lucian reckons, is essentially Hera, but there is more to it than that. The equivalency is not one to one.

Speaking of high goddesses, this idea that one and the same god might be worshiped under many names among many different peoples comes to elaborate expression in the final book 11 of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, in the account of Lucius's induction into the mysteries of Isis.<sup>8</sup> Lucius petitions the *regina caeli*, queen of heaven, trialling several Latin names to which he hopes she might answer:

O queen of heaven—whether you are bountiful Ceres, the primal mother of crops, who in joy at the recovery of your daughter took away from men their primeval animal fodder of acorns and showed them gentler nourishment, and now dwell in the land of Eleusis; or heavenly Venus, who at the first foundation of the universe united the diversity of the sexes by creating Love and propagated the human race through ever-recurring progeny, and now are worshipped in the island sanctuary of Paphos; or Phoebus' sister, who brought forth populous multitudes by relieving the delivery of offspring with your soothing remedies, and now are venerated at the illustrious shrine of Ephesus; or dreaded Proserpina of the nocturnal howls, who in triple form repress the attacks of ghosts and keep the gates to earth closed fast, roam through widely scattered groves and are propitiated by diverse rites—you who illumine every city with your womanly light, nourish the joyous seeds with your moist fires, and dispense beams of fluctuating radiance according to the convolutions of the Sun—by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever image it is meet to invoke you: defend me now in the uttermost extremes of tribulation... (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.2; trans. Hanson in LCL)

Ceres, Venus, Diana, and Proserpina. But if Lucius is expansive in his form of address, the goddess is even more so in her self-identification when she answers:

Behold, Lucius, moved by your prayers I have come, I the mother of the universe, mistress of all the elements, and first offspring of the ages; mightiest of deities, queen of the dead, and foremost of heavenly beings; my one person manifests the aspect of all gods and goddesses. With my nod I rule the starry heights of heaven, the health-giving breezes of the sea, and the plaintive silences of the underworld. My divinity is one, worshipped by all the world under different forms, with various rites, and by manifold names. In one place the Phrygians, first-born of men, call me Pessinuntine Mother of the Gods, in another the autochthonous people

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<sup>7</sup> The definitive edition is now Lucian, *On the Syrian Goddess*, ed. J. L. Lightfoot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> On the historical context, see Greg Woolf, "Isis and the Evolution of Religions," in *Power, Politics, and the Cults of Isis*, RGRW 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 62-92.

of Attica call me Cecropian Minerva, in another the sea-washed Cyprians call me Paphian Venus; to the arrow-bearing Cretans I am Dictynna Diana, to the trilingual Sicilians Ortygian Proserpina, to the ancient people of Eleusis Attic Ceres; some call me Juno, some Bellona, others Hecate, and still others Rhamnusia; the people of the two Ethiopias, who are lighted by the first rays of the Sun-God as he rises every day, and the Egyptians, who are strong in ancient lore, worship me with the rites that are truly mine and call me by my real name, which is Queen Isis. (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5; trans. Hanson)

She is called by the names Pessinuntine Magna Mater, Cecropian Minerva, Paphian Venus, Dictynna Diana, Ortygian Proserpina, Attic Ceres, Juno, Bellona, Hecate, and Rhamnusia. But she has one true and original name, known to the Ethiopians and Egyptians, namely Isis. This would seem to bear our Arthur Darby Nock's point that "In spite of *interpretatio*, foreign gods were foreign gods."<sup>9</sup>

*Interpretatio* does have its limits, most of them epistemic. As we have seen, sometimes an ancient writer is unsure precisely which of his own gods corresponds to a particular foreign god. Plutarch, for instance, reports about Sulla, "It is said, also, that to Sulla himself there appeared in his dreams a goddess whom the Romans learned to worship from the Cappadocians [i.e., Cybele, presumably], whether she is Semele or Athena or Enyo" (Plutarch, *Sulla* 9).<sup>10</sup> Plutarch is unsure which Greek goddess she is, but he knows that she is one of them. Sometimes an ancient writer pleads entire ignorance as to the identity of a foreign god. Maximus of Tyre, for instance, has *interpretationes* for the god of the Celts and the god of the Paeonians, but not the god of the Arabians. "The Celts worship Zeus, but the Celtic cult statue of Zeus is a high oak tree. The Paeonians worship Helios, but the Paeonian cult statue of Helios is a small disc on a long pole. The Arabians worship a god whom I do not know, but I have seen the cult statue; it was a square stone" (Maximus of Tyre, *Dissertations* 2.8).<sup>11</sup> There are, moreover, some gods, even very well-known ones, who do not admit of *interpretatio* anywhere in our sources. This is true quite apart from the god of the Jews. Parker highlights the case of Janus, the two-faced Roman god of gates and transitions, to whom no ancient source assigns a foreign counterpart.<sup>12</sup> Foreigners who honour Janus, therefore, honour him as *Roman* Janus. The god of the Jews, as we shall see, is much more translatable than Janus is. At any rate, as Parker notes, the universal pantheon is a metaphysical given, even if mortals may not always know which names apply to which god.

What, then, about the case of the Jews? Was their god translatable, whether by themselves or by others, into other terms? And how, if at all, did ancient Jews translate foreign gods into their own idiom? Let us consider, first, the Jewish god in *interpretatio* and, second, gentile gods in *interpretatio*.

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur Darby Nock, "Ruler-Worship and Syncretism," in idem, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 2:558.

<sup>10</sup> Greek text ed. Bernadotte Perrin in LCL.

<sup>11</sup> Greek text ed. George Leonidas Koniaris in Maximus Tyrius, *Philosophumena–Dialexeis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> See Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad*, 49, 59.

## The Jewish god in *interpretatio*

Some well-informed classical sources actually know the Jewish god by the name that he revealed to Moses (or rather, its transliteration in Greek or Roman characters), which is striking in light of the ancient Jewish taboo on pronouncing the name.<sup>13</sup> Diodorus Siculus, for instance, writes, “Among the Jews, Moyses referred his laws to the god who is invoked as Iao” (*Bib. hist.* 1.94.1-2; trans. Oldfather in LCL). This, of course, is not *interpretatio*, just naming. The theonym Iao is relatively rare in literary sources but extremely common in the Greek magical papyri.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the fourth-century emperor Julian (called the Apostate by the Christians), who aspired to reintroduce the Jewish cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 23.1.2-3), calls him by another one of his ancestral names:

I revere always the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who being themselves Chaldeans of a sacred race, skilled in theurgy, had learned the practice of circumcision while they sojourned as strangers with the Egyptians. And they revered a god who was ever gracious to me and to those who worshiped him as Abraham did, for he is a very great and powerful god, but he has nothing to do with you [Christians]. For you do not imitate Abraham by erecting altars to him or building altars of sacrifice or worshiping him as Abraham did, with sacrificial offerings. (Julian, *Against the Galileans* 354; trans. W. C. Wright in LCL)

“The god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” is gracious even to the pagan Julian, evidently because Julian offers him cult in the traditional manner (i.e., by building altars and offerings sacrifices as the patriarchs had done), which the Christians do not do. Unlike many of the *interpretationes* we shall see below, which identify the Jewish god with one or more foreign counterparts, Julian thinks of him simply as the patron god the descendants of Abraham, even if that god also welcomes offerings from pious gentiles.<sup>15</sup>

In most of our ancient sources, however, *interpretatio* is the rule, for the Jewish god as for other gods. I will not dwell on it here, but there is, first of all, no little *interpretatio* of Yahweh in relation to Bronze- and Iron-Age Canaanite deities attested in the Hebrew Bible. This has all been

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<sup>13</sup> Most of the texts discussed in this section are included in the still invaluable collection by Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974-1984).

<sup>14</sup> See Morton Smith, “The Jewish Elements in the Magical Papyri,” in idem, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, 2 vols., ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2:242-256; Hans Dieter Betz, “Jewish Magic in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Envisioning Magic*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg, SHR 75 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 45-64.

<sup>15</sup> See further Pieter W. van der Horst, “Did the Gentiles Know Who Abraham Was?” in idem, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 80-94; Ari Finkelstein, *The Specter of the Jews: Emperor Julian and the Rhetoric of Ethnicity in Syrian Antioch* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

much discussed, most recently and significantly by Mark Smith in his *God in Translation*.<sup>16</sup> Yahweh himself perhaps came from Midian originally (Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4-5; Hab 3:3), but when his cult took root in Canaan, it became a matter of urgency to sort out his relation to the established gods of that place, especially El, Elyon, Baal, and Asherah. In short, Yahweh was pretty seamlessly identified with Canaanite El via *interpretatio*, and further with Elyon, who was already identified with El in some strands of Canaanite cosmology. In relation to Baal, Yahweh was conceived mostly as a rival, as, for instance, in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel: “You call on the name of [Baal], and I shall call on the name of Yahweh, and the god who answers by fire, he is the god” (1 Kgs 18:24).<sup>17</sup> Both Baal and Yahweh are gods of the storm and of warfare, which accounts for their rivalry, but also for their occasional identification via *interpretatio* (e.g., Hos 2:16: “On that day, says Yahweh, you shall call me ‘my husband,’ and you shall no longer call me ‘my Baal’”).<sup>18</sup> Asherah, being a goddess, was not easily identified with Yahweh, but some sources do figure her as the wife or consort of Yahweh (inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud; cf. 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:6-7), the same position she occupies in relation to El in other sources (here, again, perhaps suggesting an *interpretatio* of Yahweh as El).<sup>19</sup>

If, in important strands of the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is El Elyon, Greek θεὸς ὑψίστος, the most high god, then it was all but inevitable that he would eventually be identified with Greek Zeus, who is also θεὸς ὑψίστος (as, for instance, in the temple of Zeus Hypsistos near Damascus), and likewise with Roman Jupiter Optimus Maximus. “The most high god” is, by definition, a set with only one member, even if he may have different indigenous names.<sup>20</sup> Varro, writing in Rome in the first century B.C.E., reasoned in exactly this way, according to Augustine:

Yet Varro, one of themselves—to a more learned man they cannot point—thought the god of the Jews to be the same as Jupiter [*deum Iudaeorum Iovem putavit*], thinking that it makes no difference by which name he is called, so long as the same thing is understood. I believed that he did it being terrified of his sublimity. Since the Romans habitually worship nothing superior to Jupiter, a fact attested well and openly by their Capitol, and they consider him the

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<sup>16</sup> Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Translation in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). See also the older but still valuable treatment by John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, JSOTSup 265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Translations of biblical texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> See now James S. Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh’s Appropriation of Baal*, LHBOTS 617 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> See William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> See Robbert M. van den Berg, “Does It Matter to Call God Zeus? Origen, *Contra Celsum* I 24-25 against the Greek Intellectuals on Divine Names,” in *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity*, ed. George H. van Kooten, TBN 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 169-183. On the various *theos hypsistos* cults, see Stephen Mitchell, “The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians,” in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81-148.



king of all the gods, and as he perceived that the Jews worship the highest god, he could not but identify him with Jupiter. (Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.22.30; trans. Stern)

A theological reasoning like Varro's may lie behind the curious passage in Valerius Maximus about the Jews in Rome in the second century B.C.E. who were censured for spreading the foreign cult of Jupiter Sabazius. The passage reads:

Cn. Cornelius Hispalus, praetor peregrinus in the year of the consulate of P. Popilius Laenas and L. Calpurnius, ordered the astrologers by an edict to leave Rome and Italy within ten days, since by a fallacious interpretation of the stars they perturbed fickle and silly minds, thereby making profit out of their lies. The same praetor compelled the Jews, who attempted to infect the Roman customs with the cult of Jupiter Sabazius [*Judaeos, qui Sabazi Iovis cultu Romanos inficere mores conati erant*], to return to their homes. (*Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* 1.3.3; trans. Stern)

Here there is no self-conscious *interpretatio*. Valerius evidently just thinks that the Roman Jews in those days worshiped a god called Jupiter Sabazius. Jupiter we may perhaps take, as Varro did, as an equivalency for the most high God of Jerusalem. But Sabazius looks like the Latinization of Sabazios, a patron god of Phrygia and Thrace. The most likely explanation is phonetic, that Valerius or his source has mistaken Sabaoth (as in Yahweh Sabaoth, Lord of Hosts) for Sabazios. Further evidence, in any case, for the equivalency of Yahweh with Zeus or Jupiter.<sup>21</sup>

And it is not only gentile writers who suggest this equivalency. The Hellenistic Jewish author of the *Letter of Aristeas* has his main character Aristeas explain Jewish theology to the Graeco-Egyptian king Ptolemy in this way: "The god who gave them their law is the god who maintains your kingdom. They worship the same god, the lord and creator of the universe, as all other men, as we ourselves, O king, though we call him by different names, such as Zeus or Dis. This name was very appropriately bestowed upon him by our first ancestors, in order to signify that he through whom all things are endowed with life and come into being, is necessarily the ruler and lord of the universe" (*Letter of Aristeas* 15-16; trans. R. H. Charles). According to this tidy *interpretatio*, the god who gave the law to Moses is the god whom the Greeks worship as Zeus: the ruler and lord of the universe. Moving from Ptolemaic Egypt to Flavian Rome, it is striking that, when Josephus paraphrases the *Letter of Aristeas* in part of his *Jewish Antiquities*, he reproduces this *interpretatio* essentially unchanged: "For both they [the Jews] and we worship the god who created the universe, whom we call by the appropriate term Zeus [*Zῆνα*], giving him that name from the fact that he breathes life [*ζῆν*] into all creatures" (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.22; trans. Ralph Marcus in LCL). For Josephus, as for the Jewish author of *Aristeas* before him, it was not an impiety but a piety to say that their god, the lord of the universe, was the god whom the Greeks call Zeus. This same equivalency is taken for granted by

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<sup>21</sup> On which see further Eugene N. Lane, "Sabazius and the Jews in Valerius Maximus: A Re-examination," *JRS* 69 (1979): 35-38; Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 34-65.

other Jewish writers including Aristobulus in the second century B.C.E. and Luke the Evangelist in the first or second century C.E., both of whom quote Aratus's famous verse about Zeus (τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμὲν, "for we are his offspring" [*Phaenomena* 5]) as being true and referring to the god of the Jews (Acts 17:38; Aristobulus apud Eusebius, *P.E.* 13.12). The full strophe reads: "From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring" (*Phaenomena* 5; trans. Mair and Mair in LCL). Whom Aratus calls Zeus, *Letter of Aristeeas*, Josephus, Aristobulus, and Luke call God.<sup>22</sup>

This *interpretatio*, I think, helps us to understand what is often thought to be the hardest case, the case highlighted by Assmann and Portier-Young as proof of the untranslatability of the Jewish god: the introduction of the cult of Zeus Olympios to Jerusalem in the first half of the second century B.C.E. Our most proximate source, 2 Maccabees, relates the event as follows: "Not long after this, the king [Antiochus IV Epiphanes] sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their fathers and cease to live by the laws of God, and also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and call it the temple of Zeus Olympios, and to call the one in Gerizim the temple of Zeus Xenios, as did the people who dwelt in that place" (2 Macc 6:1-2 RSV, mod.).

It is clear that the author of 2 Maccabees regards this change as a defilement and an offense against the laws of the Jews; thus far we can agree with Assmann and Portier-Young. But our author also admits that what actually happened was a change of name: Antiochus IV called the temple in Jerusalem the temple of Zeus Olympios. Now, we could understand this as the introduction of an altogether different god; so 2 Maccabees understands it, and so likewise Assmann and Portier-Young. But it is also possible (and, I think, better) to understand it as an instance of *interpretatio*.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, the god of the Jews was frequently identified with Zeus, and in the case of the Seleucid Zeus Olympios, the connection was arguably closer still. Eberhard Nestle suggested in the late nineteenth century that Daniel's "abomination of desolation," *shiqqutz shomem* (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11), was a wordplay on Baal Shamem, that is, Baal of Heaven or Lord of Heaven, the Syrian god whose *interpretatio Graeca* was Zeus Olympios, Olympian Zeus or Zeus of Heaven. Antiochus IV being a Graeco-Syrian, it is likely that the cult he introduced to Jerusalem was not the Achaean cult of Zeus but the Syrian cult of Baal Shamem, Lord of Heaven.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I have not found any other Hellenistic- or Roman-period Jewish writers who expressly make this equivalency, so the extant evidence is relatively slim. But what to make of this fact? In our conference discussion, Richard Bauckham suggested that it was a deafening silence, evidence of a prevailing ancient Jewish refusal to identify the god of the Jews with any other. Perhaps. But I suspect this may be overinterpreting an absence.

<sup>23</sup> Thus rightly Beate Ego, "The Hellenistic Crisis as Reflected by the Animal Apocalypse," in *Judaism and Crisis: Crisis as a Catalyst in Jewish Cultural History*, ed. Armin Lange et al., SIJD 9 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 75-88.

<sup>24</sup> Eberhard Nestle, "Zu Daniel," *ZAW* 4 (1884): 247-250; and see further Smith, *God in Translation*, 283-288.

By his lights, and perhaps by the lights of those Jews who supported the measure (whom 2 Maccabees, of course, counts as apostates), this was not theologically absurd, even if it was politically inflammatory. Indeed, even the stridently anti-Seleucid author of Daniel calls the Jewish god (in Aramaic) Marē Shemaya, Lord of Heaven (Dan 5:23). In fact, the preferred name for the deity in Jewish sources from the Persian and Hellenistic periods is God of Heaven, Hebrew Elohei ha-Shamayim or Aramaic Elah Shemaya (Ezra 5:11, 12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh 1:4; 2:4, 20; Psalm 136:26; Dan 2:18, 19, 37, 44).<sup>25</sup> Hence, if we set aside the problem of a change of rites (which is a big problem to set aside, but we shall come back to it), the introduction of the name Baal Shamem or Zeus Olympios to the temple in Jerusalem is not at all incredible by ancient Mediterranean standards. (I suspect that Hadrian's introduction of the cult of Jupiter Capitolinus on Mount Zion some 300 years later is yet another example of the same, but time and space prevent a full discussion.)

While, of the named Greek gods, Zeus is—understandably—the one most often identified with Yahweh, he is by no means the only one. The wine god Dionysus is another, evidently because of a homology of iconography and ritual.<sup>26</sup> Plutarch explains the Yahweh/Dionysus equivalency at some length in his *Quaestiones convivales*:

The time and character of the greatest, most sacred holiday of the Jews clearly befit Dionysus. When they celebrate their so-called Fast [i.e., Yom Kippur], at the height of the vintage, they set out tables of all sorts of fruits under tents and huts plaited for the most part of vines and ivy. They call the first of the days of the feast Tabernacles [i.e., Sukkot]. A few days later they celebrate another festival [i.e., Shemini Azeret?], this time identified with Bacchus not through obscure hints but plainly called by his name, a festival that is a sort of 'Procession of Branches' or 'Thyrsus Procession,' in which they enter the temple each carrying a thyrsus [i.e., lulav, palm branch]. What they do after entering we do not know, but it is probable that the rite is a Bacchic revelry, for in fact they use little trumpets to invoke their god as do the Argives at their Dionysia. Others of them advance playing harps; these players are called in their language Levites, either from *Lysios* (Releaser) or, better, from *Evios* (God of the Cry). I believe that even the Sabbath is not completely unrelated to Dionysus. Many even now call the Bacchants *Sabi* and utter that cry when celebrating the god. Testimony to this can be found in Demosthenes and Menander. You would not be far off track if you attributed the use of this name *Sabi* to the strange excitement (*sobesis*) that possesses the celebrants. The Jews themselves testify to a connection with Dionysus when they keep the Sabbath by inviting each other to drink and to enjoy wine; when more important business interferes with this custom, they regularly take at least a sip of neat wine. Now thus far one might call the argument only probable; but the opposition is quite demolished, in the first place by the High Priest, who leads a procession at their festival wearing a mitre and clad in a gold-embroidered fawn skin, a robe reaching to the ankles, and buskins, with many bells attached to his clothes and ringing below him as he walks. All this corresponds to our custom. In the second place, they also have noise as an element in their nocturnal festivals, and call the nurses of the god 'bronze rattlers.' The carved thyrsus in the relief on the pediment of the Temple and the drums [provide other parallels]. All this surely befits, they might say, no divinity but Dionysus. Further, the Jews use no honey in their religious services because they believe that honey spoils the wine with which it is mixed; and they used honey as a libation and in place

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<sup>25</sup> See Smith, *God in Translation*, 222-223.

<sup>26</sup> See further Morton Smith, "On the Wine God in Palestine," in idem, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, 1:227-237.

of wine before the vine was discovered. (Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 4.6; trans. Hoffleit in LCL)

The agricultural festival of Sukkot, the procession of the thyrsus or lulav, the liturgical music of the Levites, the homophony between *Sabbath* and Bacchic *Sabi*, the customary wine at the Sabbath meal, the bucolic festal garments of the high priest, and the iconography of the thyrsus or lulav in the temple. From all of these correspondences (“All this corresponds to our custom”), Plutarch infers, not unreasonably, that the god worshiped by the Jews is Dionysus. Even Josephus describes the grand facade of Herod’s temple thusly: “The gate opening into the building was, as I said, completely overlaid with gold, as was the whole wall around it. It had, moreover, above it those golden vines, from which depended grape-clusters as tall as a man” (Josephus, *War* 5.210-211; trans. Thackeray in LCL). How else could a Greek be expected to interpret this iconography?

Contemporaneously, but further west, Tacitus knows the same *interpretatio* and at least some of the reasons for it, but he decides against it on grossly chauvinistic comparative ritual grounds. He writes about the Jews, “Since their priests used to chant to the accompaniment of pipes and drums and to wear garlands of ivy, and because a golden vine was found in their temple, some have thought that they were devotees of Father Liber, the conqueror of the East, in spite of the incongruity of their customs. For Liber established festive rites of a joyous nature, while the ways of the Jews are preposterous and mean” (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5; trans. Stern). Even Tacitus concedes that the rituals and icons are very close, indeed. His reason for rejecting the *interpretatio* is as impressionistic as it is bigoted.<sup>27</sup>

A different possible connection between Yahweh and Dionysus comes from Valerius Maximus’s report (already mentioned above) about the Jews at Rome in the mid-second century B.C.E. The relevant bit of the text reads, “The same praetor [viz. Cornelius Hispalus] compelled the Jews, who attempted to infect the Roman customs with the cult of Jupiter Sabazius, to return to their homes” (Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* 1.3.3). Valerius or his source thinks that the Jews worshiped Jupiter Sabazius. Jupiter we have discussed above. Sabazius was originally an indigenous god of Phrygia and Thrace, whom the Greeks identified variously with Zeus or with Dionysus. The pairing with Jupiter here obviously suggests the former link, but if, *ex hypothesi*, Yahweh were already associated in some quarters with Dionysus, then the Sabazius association could conceivably be secondary to that. Then again, there need not have been any such intermediate step. The Sabazius association could have come about directly from a perceived identity with the Jewish theonym Sabaoth.

The same paragraph in 2 Maccabees 6 that recounts the establishment of the cult of Zeus Olympios on Mount Zion also tells of the forcible celebration of the feast of Dionysus, according to

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<sup>27</sup> On Tacitus’s contempt, see further Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 179-196.

Greek custom, in the Jewish metropolis. “On the monthly celebration of the king’s birthday, the Jews were taken, under bitter constraint, to partake of the sacrifices; and when the feast of Dionysus came, they were compelled to walk in the procession in honor of Dionysus, wearing wreaths of ivy” (2 Macc 6:7 RSV). The well attested *interpretatio* of Yahweh as Dionysus may add an extra layer to this story. Perhaps this was not a random act of forced idolatry. Perhaps, as with the cult of Zeus Olympios, it was an expression of a quite particular *interpretatio*, an introduction of Greek rites thought to be proper to the wine god of the Jerusalem temple.<sup>28</sup>

If Yahweh was sometimes thought to be Zeus, other times Dionysus, then still other times he was recognized as Helios (or Sol, or Shamash), the god of the sun.<sup>29</sup> Thus an oracle of Apollo of Clarus (in a passage to be discussed further below) can say: “In summer he is Helios, while in autumn he is the graceful Iao” (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.18.18-21). Gentiles who made this *interpretatio* came by it honestly, since there is no little testimony from the Jewish side that might suggest it. In a telling passage in *War* book 2, Josephus describes the morning prayers of the Essenes as follows: “Their piety towards the deity [τὸ θεῖον] takes a peculiar form. Before the sun [τὸν ἥλιον] is up they utter no word on mundane matters, but offer to him certain ancestral prayers [πατρίους δέ τινας εἰς αὐτὸν εὐχάς], as though entreating him to rise” (Josephus, *War* 2.128). The Essenes pray to the sun, εἰς αὐτὸν, Josephus says.<sup>30</sup> But that, some interpreters have noted, sounds worryingly heterodox. “Josephus, in our passage, expressed himself badly; his words might give the impression that the Essenes honoured the sun as a divine being.”<sup>31</sup> Might give the impression, indeed. Perhaps, though, Josephus said exactly what he meant, in which case we should conclude either that the Essenes worshiped both Yahweh and Helios or, perhaps more likely, that they worshiped Yahweh as Helios, via *interpretatio*.

There are several passages in the Hebrew Bible that already suggest that *interpretatio*. The prophet Malachi gives Shemesh or Helios as an epithet for Yahweh Sabaoth. “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness [*shemesh tzedakah*, ἥλιος δικαιοσύνης] shall rise, with healing in its wings” (Mal 3:20 [ET 4:2]). An oracle of Third Isaiah may reflect the same identification: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of Yhwh has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but Yhwh will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa

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<sup>28</sup> A similar dynamic may obtain in another story in 2 Maccabees: Nicanor’s threat to build a shrine to Dionysus on the site of the sanctuary of Yahweh. “He stretched out his right hand toward the sanctuary, and swore this oath: ‘If you do not hand Judah over to me as a prisoner, I will level this precinct of God to the ground and tear down the altar, and I will build here a splendid temple to Dionysus’” (2 Macc 14:33 RSV). The parallel in 1 Macc 7:35, however, has no mention of Dionysus.

<sup>29</sup> See Morton Smith, “Helios in Palestine,” in idem, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, 1:238-262.

<sup>30</sup> On this passage, see Steve Mason, *Judean War 2*, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary vol. 1B (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 105-106.

<sup>31</sup> Otto Michel and Otto Bauernfeind, eds., Flavius Josephus, *De bello Judaico*, 2d ed. (Munich: Kösel, 1962-1969), 432n44; trans. Morton Smith.

60:1-3). Nor is this mere poetry. There is biblical evidence, like the evidence of Josephus for the Essenes, for the ritual identification of the Jewish god with the sun. In Ezekiel's vision of the temple in Ezekiel 8, he sees the following: "And he brought me into the inner court of the house of Yhwh; and behold, at the door of the temple of Yhwh, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of Yhwh, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east [προσκυνοῦσιν τῷ ἡλίῳ]" (Ezek 8:16). The prophet regards this as an abomination, but he concedes that it happened, and happened in the Jerusalem temple. The question is whether the anonymous worshipers thought they were worshiping a different god or the same god under a different aspect or name, "sun of righteousness," perhaps.<sup>32</sup>

While, as we have seen, some sources identify Yahweh with Zeus, or Dionysus, or Helios, other sources suggest that he subsumes aspects of numerous other deities within himself.<sup>33</sup> Like the Syrian goddess Atargatis, who, Lucian says, is not only Hera but also Artemis, Aphrodite, Selene, and more, Iao, too, contains multitudes. According to Macrobius, the oracle of Apollo of Clarus was once specifically asked who Iao was, with what god he should be identified. The oracle's answer, however, was not single but multiple. The full passage reads as follows:

That Liber is the sun, Orpheus clearly proclaims in the line, *Helios that is called by the name of Dionysus*. And this verse certainly makes perfect sense, but another line by the same poet is rather more elaborate: *One Zeus, one Hades, one Helios, one Dionysus*. The authority of this last line is supported by an oracle of Apollo of Clarus, in which yet another name is attached to the sun, which is called in the same sacred verses, among other names, by the name of Iao. For when Apollo of Clarus was asked who among the gods should be identified with him that is called Iao he declared as follows: *Those who have learned the Orgia should keep them in secrecy, but if the understanding is little and the mind feeble, then ponder that Iao is the supreme god among all. In winter he is Hades, at the beginning of the spring he is Zeus, in summer he is Helios, while in autumn he is the graceful Iao*. The meaning of this oracle, and the explanation of the deity and the name by which Iao is denoted Liber pater and the sun, are expounded by Cornelius Labeo in a book entitled "On the Oracle of Apollo of Clarus." (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.18.18-21; trans. Stern)

This passage incidentally supports all three of the *interpretationes* noted above, that Iao is Zeus, or Dionysus, or Helios. But the answer of the oracle transcends all of these particular identifications. Because, it says, Iao is the supreme god over all, Hades, Zeus, Helios, and others are really just so many aspects of his divinity.

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<sup>32</sup> On the ancient Israelite evidence, see J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel*, JSOTSup 111 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 148-159.

<sup>33</sup> A theological notion sometimes called "theocracy" (e.g., by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, trans. John Bowden, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], 1:261-267).

Some Greeks, reasoning from the accurate premise that the Jews do not figure their god in human or animal form, conclude that that god is identical with the heavens or the universe itself.<sup>34</sup> Already in the fourth century B.C.E., Hecataeus of Abdera (according to Diodorus Siculus) attests this view: “[Moses] had no images whatsoever of the gods made for them [viz. the Hebrews], being of the opinion that god is not in human form; rather the heaven that surrounds the earth is alone divine, and rules the universe” (Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 40.3.4; trans. Stern). Writing at the turn of the era, the geographer Strabo gives a rather more fulsome version of this *interpretatio*: “[Moses] said and taught that the Egyptians were mistaken in representing the divine by the images of beasts and cattle, as also were the Libyans; and that the Greeks were also wrong in modelling gods in human form; for, according to him, god is the one thing alone that encompasses us all and encompasses land and sea—the thing which we call heaven [οὐρανός], or universe [κόσμος], or the nature of all that exists [φύσις τῶν ὄντων]” (Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.35; trans. Stern). Moses’s unrepresentable god is οὐρανός or κόσμος or φύσις τῶν ὄντων. Ouranos/Uranus is personified as one of the primeval deities in Greek mythology, so Strabo’s *interpretatio* is not entirely removed from the universal polytheism, but it certainly tends in a philosophical and pantheistic direction.

From the fact that the Jews do not have images of their god, one might reason, as Strabo does, that he is heaven or the cosmos. Alternatively, however, one might also reason that he is some member of the universal pantheon, but *which* member we simply do not know. (We saw Tacitus and Plutarch reason thusly in the cases of other foreign gods above.) And some of our sources do just this, calling the god of the Jews *incertus deus*, ἄδηλος θεός, or ἄγνωστος θεός, an unknown or unidentified deity.<sup>35</sup> This was Livy’s understanding of the Jewish god, according to Lucan: “Judaea given over to the worship of an unknown god [*incerti Iudaea dei*].” And again, “They do not state to which of the gods pertains the temple at Jerusalem [*Hierosolimis fanum cuius deorum sit non nominant*], nor is any image found there, since they do not think the god partakes of any figure” (Scholia on Lucan, *Pharsalia* 2.593; trans. Stern). Lucan himself reasoned similarly, according to Lydus: “In conformity with Livy, Lucan says that the temple of Jerusalem belongs to an uncertain god [ἄδηλος θεός], while Numenius says that the power of this god is not to be shared by any other, and that he is the father of all the gods, and that he deems any other god unworthy of having a share in his cult” (Lydus, *De mensibus* 4.53; trans. Stern). To call the Jewish god *incertus deus* or ἄδηλος θεός is not to deny the universal polytheism, but simply to say that one does not know where he fits in it.

The famous speech of the apostle Paul on the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17) arguably belongs here. “Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: Men of Athens, I perceive that in

<sup>34</sup> See Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 34-37.

<sup>35</sup> See Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913); Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God’ in Athens (Acts 17:23) and the Cult of ‘Unknown Gods’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *ANRW* 2.18.2 (1989), 1426-1456; Albert Henrichs, “Anonymity and Polarity: Unknown Gods and Nameless Altars at the Areopagos,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 19 (1994): 27-58.

every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: *To an unknown god* [Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ]. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23 RSV). Prima facie, at least, the apostle’s reasoning would seem to presuppose something like Parker’s theory. This ἄγνωστος θεός is a member of the universal pantheon about whom the Greeks have too little information to name him. Paul, therefore, supplies what they lack: This god is the creator of all things and the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Elias Bickerman ingeniously argued that the Athenian altar noted by Paul was not an altar to an altogether mysterious deity, but one erected specifically for offerings to the patron god of the Jews, whose name, however, was unpronounced and therefore unknown.<sup>36</sup> Bickerman perceptively points to the rabbinic instructions for gentile altars (*bamot*, high places) to the Jewish god (b. Zebah. 116b). The Torah strictly forbids Jews erecting *bamot*, of course, but it says nothing about gentiles doing so, and later halakhah took this silence as permission. Paul’s speech in Acts 17, however, seems to me to assume that the Athenians know neither the name nor anything else about the god of the Jews, in which case the altar to ἄγνωστος θεός is unlikely to be a gentile *bamah* to Yahweh. On either reading, however, Acts 17 offers yet another *interpretatio Graeca* of the Jewish god, of which, as we have seen, there were very many, indeed.<sup>37</sup>

#### Gentile gods in *interpretatio*

Thus far the Jewish god in *interpretatio*, but how did ancient Jewish thinkers translate gentile gods? Or did they do so at all? On Assmann’s Mosaic distinction, they did not, and indeed could not. “False gods cannot be translated.”<sup>38</sup> This is a nice, tidy idea, but there is a mountain of evidence against it. Our sources are littered with the efforts of ancient Jewish thinkers to render gentile gods intelligible. We have already seen some of this evidence above, in reciprocal form. As Parker notes, “*Interpretatio* is always potentially a two-way process. If a Greek identifies Mars as Ares, it becomes very natural for a Roman to identify Ares as Mars.”<sup>39</sup> An *interpretatio* of Yahweh as El is, at the same time, an *interpretatio* of El as Yahweh. Likewise for Zeus in *Letter of Aristeeas* and Josephus’s *Antiquities*, and so on.

A large part of the ancient Jewish literary effort at *interpretatio* of gentile gods is interested in them as a class rather than in particular gentile deities (although there is plenty of interest in the latter, too, on which more anon). One key development here was the joining up of the very old myth of the divine council with a theory of the gods of the nations. The divine council, the *bene elim*, “sons of the

<sup>36</sup> E. J. Bickerman, “The Altars of the Gentiles: A Note on the Jewish *Ius Sacrum*,” in idem, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, ed. Amram Tropper, 2 vols., AJEC 68 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 2:596-617.

<sup>37</sup> See further George H. van Kooten, “Moses/Musaeus/Mochos and His God Yahweh, Iao, and Sabaoth, Seen from a Graeco-Roman Perspective,” in *Revelation of the Name YHWH*, 107-138.

<sup>38</sup> Assman, *Moses the Egyptian*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad*, 40.



gods,” are the host of lower deities who attend the high god El or Elyon. “On what were the bases [of the earth] sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of the gods [*bene elohim*] shouted for joy?” (Job 38:6-7). Some biblical psalms celebrate Yahweh by vaunting him above the undifferentiated *bene elim*. “Ascribe to Yhwh, O sons of the gods [*bene elim*], ascribe to Yhwh glory and strength” (Ps 29:1). And again, “For who in the skies can be compared to Yhwh? Who among the sons of the gods [*bene elim*] is like Yhwh?” (Ps 89:7 = ET Ps 89:6). So far, so Yahwhist.<sup>40</sup>

In a fateful theological move, however, the author(s) of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 conceived of the idea that there is a *ben elim* for each particular gentile nation. The much-discussed text reads: “When Elyon gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. For Yhwh’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage” (Deut 32:8-9). As is well known, in v. 8 the MT reads “according to the number of the sons of Israel [*bene yisrael*],” but the older text attested in 4QDeut reads “according to the number of the sons of God [*bene elohim*].” The LXX, meanwhile, reads “according to the number of the angels of God [ἀγγέλων θεοῦ],” which certainly reflects a *Vorlage* like the Qumran text, not the MT. In this passage, then, Elyon, the high god, apportions the various human nations according to the number of the (lower) gods, each nation having its own patron god. Jacob/Israel, naturally, has Yahweh for its patron god.<sup>41</sup>

In a number of Hebrew Bible texts, however—including, probably, the MT form of Deuteronomy 32 itself—the Judean authors came to identify Yahweh, the patron god of Israel, with Elyon, the ancient Canaanite high god. (Voilà, c’est *interpretatio*.) But once this move is made, the symmetry of the myth is undone, since now one of the nations belongs not to its designated lower deity but to the high god himself. Perhaps for this very reason, some late biblical texts introduce a new designated lower deity for Israel, namely, the archangel Michael. In Daniel 10-12, as in Deuteronomy 32, each nation has its own god, here called a *sar*, “prince” (e.g., the prince of Persia, the prince of Greece, both in Dan 10:20), but the prince of Israel is not Yahweh but rather Michael (Dan 10:21; 12:1). Michael sharply illustrates the theological puzzle of having Yahweh be both the patron god of the Jews and the high god over all the nations.<sup>42</sup>

The myth of the angels of the nations has its roots in the earliest text of Deuteronomy 32, but by late antiquity it acquires real explanatory power, becoming a principal site for *interpretatio Judaica* (and *interpretatio Christiana*) of gentile gods. The *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, for instance, give a fully rounded account of the myth:

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<sup>40</sup> See further Ellen White, *Yahweh’s Council: Its Structure and Membership*, FAT 2.65 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> See Smith, *God in Translation*, 195-212.

<sup>42</sup> On this puzzle, see Ioan P. Culianu, “The Angels of the Nations and the Origins of Gnostic Dualism,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 78-91.

Every nation has an angel, to whom God has committed the government of that nation; and when one of these appears, although he be thought and called god by those over whom he presides, yet, being asked, he does not give such testimony to himself. For the most high God, who alone holds the power of all things, has divided all the nations of the earth into seventy-two parts, and over these he has appointed angels as princes. But to the one among the archangels who is greatest was committed the government of those who, before all others, received the worship and knowledge of the most high God. (*Ps-Clem. Recog.* 2.42; trans. Thomas Smith in *ANF*)

Each nation, Pseudo-Clement says, calls its patron angel “god,” but the angels themselves know that they are angels, not gods.

Other Jewish (and Christian) texts, however, do not share this anxiety about calling gentile gods “gods.” One famous passage in the Septuagint established precedent for many Greek-speaking Jews. The MT of Exod 22:27 reads, “You shall not revile *elohim*, nor curse a ruler of your people.” Most modern versions plausibly take the MT to mean, “You shall not revile God” (although even in Hebrew the sense could conceivably be “You shall not revile the gods,” perhaps meaning neighboring deities or divinized ancestors). In any case, the Greek translator, either neglecting or, more likely, exploiting the singular/plural ambiguity of Hebrew *elohim*, writes, “You shall not revile the gods [θεούς], nor speak evil of the rulers of your people” (LXX Exod 22:27). The result is an unambiguous scriptural exhortation for Jews to pay all due respect to gentile gods.<sup>43</sup> Philo of Alexandria, for instance, takes the lesson: “He [Moses] counsels them that they must not... deal in idle talk or revile with an unbridled tongue the gods whom others acknowledge [οὐς ἕτεροι νομίζουσι θεούς], lest they on their part be moved to utter profane words against him who truly is [τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος]” (*Special Laws* 1.53; trans. F. H. Colson in LCL). The apostle Paul is rather less diplomatic on this issue, but even he concedes, “There are so-called gods either in heaven or on earth, just as there are many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8:5).

Elsewhere, however, Paul seems to call gentile gods—or, at least, to associate gentile gods with—daemons. About the gentiles, Paul writes, “What they sacrifice, [they sacrifice] to daemons and not to God [θύουσιν δαιμονίους καὶ οὐ θεῶ]” (1 Cor 10:20). This form of words is almost certainly taken from the Greek version of the Song of Moses (LXX Deut 32:17: ἔθυσαν δαιμονίους καὶ οὐ θεῶ), where δαιμόνιον renders the rare Hebrew word *shed* (cf. Ps 106:37). If, in the Pseudo-Clementines, gentile gods are not gods but angels, here gentile gods are not gods but daemons. This identification is explicit in OG Psalm 95. The MT of Psalm 96:5 reads, “For all the gods [*elohim*] of the peoples are idols [*elilim*]; but Yhwh made the heavens.” Written thusly, the verse is a piece of idol polemic, a contrast between the manufactured cult statues of the gentiles and the aniconic cult of Yahweh the creator. The Greek translator, however, introduces a subtle but important change. OG Psalm 95:5

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<sup>43</sup> See Pieter W. van der Horst, “Thou Shalt Not Revile the Gods: The LXX Translation of Ex 22:28 (27), Its Background and Influence,” *SPhA* 5 (1993): 1-8.

reads, “For all the gods of the nations are daemons [πάντες οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν δαιμόνια], but the Lord made the heavens.” Crucially, the translator renders *elilim*, “idols,” with δαιμόνια, “daemons,” erasing the contrast between deities and statues and introducing a different contrast between one class of deities and another. In short, the Greek psalmist grants gentile gods greater ontological status than his Hebrew predecessor had done. A daemon may not be a high god, but it is quite a lot more than a statue.<sup>44</sup>

Is this an *interpretatio Judaica*? It might seem so, as if the Jewish psalmist were rendering gentile gods as daemons within his own, different cosmology. Against this view, however, is the fact that Greek-speaking gentiles themselves call the gods daemons. In a great many texts from Homer onward, δαίμων just means god, though sometimes it has the sense of “divine power” in contrast to θεός, which is the person of the god him- or herself (see LSJ, s.v. δαίμων). Even the Christian Augustine reckons that daemons and gods are more or less the same class of beings. “If the Platonists prefer to call these gods rather than daemons, and to count them among those whom Plato their master writes about as gods created by the highest god, let them say what they want... for then they say exactly what we say, whatever word they may use for them” (Augustine, *civ. Dei* 9.23; trans. Marcus Dods).<sup>45</sup>

The examples cited so far in this section show gentile gods, taken as a group, glossed via *interpretatio Judaica*. They are idols, or daemons, or angels, or indeed just gods. And it is significant, I think, that our extant Jewish texts perform *interpretatio* at this taxonomic level more than they do the *interpretatio* of particular gentile gods, that is, *interpretatio* of the familiar form: Ammon is Zeus is Jupiter, etc. But our extant Jewish texts do perform the latter kind of *interpretatio*, as well. Because there is this well attested Jewish motif of the angels of the nations, it would, of course, be fascinating if our Jewish texts singled out particular angels of particular nations for *interpretatio*. The evidence for their doing so, however, is relatively slim. Daniel 10 does name the prince of Persia (Dan 10:13, 20) and the prince of Greece (Dan 10:20), but there is no way of knowing if the Jewish author might have identified the former with, say, Ahura Mazda, or the latter with, say, Zeus, or otherwise.

There are several particular angels of the nations who acquire names in the developing tradition. The early rabbinic midrash *Genesis Rabbah* identifies the *elohim* who wrestles with Jacob in Genesis 32 as the patron angel of Edom. On the brief, puzzling Gen 32:25, *And there wrestled a man with him*, the midrash says, “R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: It was the guardian prince of Esau. To this Jacob alluded when he said to him [Esau], *To see your face is like seeing the face of elohim, with such favour you have received me* [Gen 33:10]” (Gen. Rab. 77.3).<sup>46</sup> Because the mysterious wrestler is called *elohim* (Gen 32:29, 31), and because when Jacob meets Esau soon after he says that seeing

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<sup>44</sup> See further Dale B. Martin, “When Did Angels Become Demons?” *JBL* 129 (2010): 657-677.

<sup>45</sup> See further Jan den Boeft, “Daemon(es),” *Augustinus-Lexikon*, ed. Cornelius Mayer et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1996-2002), 2:213-222.

<sup>46</sup> Trans. H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 2 (London: Soncino, 1939).

Esau is like seeing *elohim*, R. Hama b. R. Hanina concludes that the *elohim* with whom Jacob wrestled was the patron angel of Esau/Edom. The later Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis concurs, and also supplies a name for the angel of Edom: “*And there wrestled a man with him* [Gen 32:25]. It was Samael, Esau’s guardian angel, who wanted to kill him [Jacob].”<sup>47</sup> This is interesting. In late rabbinic mythology, Samael becomes the angel of death and the prince of demons,<sup>48</sup> but here he is one of the angels of the nations. One wonders if the rabbinic use of Edom as a name for Rome contributed to the diabolization of Samael. At any rate, Samael is not the indigenous name of any Edomite (or Roman) god. Wilhelm Bousset suggested that Samael is derived from the name of a Syrian god, Shamel,<sup>49</sup> but as far as I know, this theory has only Bousset’s learned speculation to commend it, and it would complicate rather than resolve the connection with Edom.

More straightforward is the case of Dobiel (or Dubiel), the name the Talmud Bavli gives to the patron angel of Persia. Bavli Yoma tells a story of the angel Gabriel being punished for failing to execute a sentence decreed by God against Israel. “R. Johanan said: In that hour Gabriel was led out behind the curtain and received forty fiery strokes, he being told, ‘If you had not executed the command at all, well, you simply would not have executed it. But since you did execute it, why did you not do as you were commanded? Furthermore, don’t you know that one brings no report about mischief?’ Thereupon Dobiel, the guardian angel of the Persians, was brought in and placed in his stead, and he officiated for twenty-one days” (b. Yoma 77a).<sup>50</sup> As in the case of Samael noted above, Dobiel is not the Persian name of any Persian god. Rather, it probably comes from the *dov*, “bear,” in the vision of Persia as an animal in Daniel 7:5: “And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear [*dov*].” But this “bear god,” Dobiel, comes from Daniel’s vision, not from any indigenous Persian myth or icon.

In the case of Egypt, the rabbis assign the angel of the nation the name of the nation itself, Hebrew Mizraim. The medieval midrash Exodus Rabbah, commenting on Exod 14:10, *And behold, Egypt was marching after them*, reads as follows:

Now, it does not say ‘were marching’ [plural] but ‘was marching’ [singular], because when Pharaoh and the Egyptians began to pursue them, they raised their eyes heavenward and saw the guardian angel of Egypt hovering in the air and they became very afraid, as it says, *And they became very afraid*. What then is the meaning of, *And behold, Egypt [Mizraim] was marching after them*? Because the name of the guardian angel is Mizraim, and God does not cast down a nation before he destroys their guardian angel first. You will find that in the case of Nebuchadnezzar also God first overthrew his guardian angel, for it says, *While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell Qol [a voice] from heaven* [Dan 9:28]. R. Joshua b. Abin

<sup>47</sup> Trans. Samuel A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1996), 213.

<sup>48</sup> See Joseph Dan, “Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist and the Origins and Dating of the Sefer Zerubbavel,” in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen, SHR 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 73-104.

<sup>49</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, 2d ed. (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1906), 291n2.

<sup>50</sup> Translations of the Babylonian Talmud follow the Soncino edition.

said: The guardian angel of Nebuchadnezzar was named Qol, and God cast him down. (Ex. Rab. 21.5)<sup>51</sup>

The name Mizraim for the angel of the nation Mizraim (Egypt) is at least reasonable, even if here it comes from a too-clever reading of a grammatical singular in Exod 14:10. We know of some nations with theophoric names (e.g., Israel and its god El) and some nations with eponymous gods or heroes (e.g., Rome and its founder Romulus). But the name Qol, “voice,” here suggested for the angel of Babylon, is really based on nothing other than an acrobatic interpretation of Dan 9:28.<sup>52</sup>

So our Jewish sources do name some of the angels of the nations, but not by identifying them with particular gentile gods; this is something less than *interpretatio*. Meanwhile, however, we do find several *interpretationes Judaicae* of particular gentile gods, but not in connection with the angels of the nations. These texts’ solution, rather, is to identify a gentile god with a Jewish ancestor or hero. As Gerard Mussies argued a generation ago, these *interpretationes Judaicae* are broadly euhemerist in outlook. That is, as per the theory attributed to the *Sacred History* of Euhemerus of Messene (fl. ca. 300 B.C.E.), they explain the gods as mythological riffs on actual great human beings (kings, benefactors, etc.) from the distant past.<sup>53</sup>

Thus Bavli Avodah Zarah, commenting on a mishnah which prohibits the use of certain vessels bearing idolatrous images, gives euhemeristic *interpretationes* of two Graeco-Egyptian gods, Isis and Serapis. The mishnah itself reads: “If one finds utensils upon which is the figure of the sun or moon or a dragon, he casts them into the Salt Sea. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says: If it is upon precious utensils they are prohibited, but if upon common utensils they are permitted” (m. Avodah Zarah 3:3). The Bavli elaborates on which images, in particular, would render a vessel unfit for Jewish use. And it is especially preoccupied with conventional icons of Isis, portrayed suckling her son Horus, and Serapis, portrayed with a *kalathos* or grain-measure atop his head.

The passage in b. Avodah Zarah reads, “For it has been taught: ‘R. Judah also includes the picture of a woman giving to suck [i.e., Isis] and Serapis.’ A woman giving to suck alludes to Eve who suckled the whole world; Serapis alludes to Joseph who became a prince [*sar*] and appeased [*hephis*] the whole world. He is holding a measure and is measuring, and she is holding a child and giving it to suck” (b. Avodah Zarah 43a). On this *interpretatio Judaica*, Egyptian Isis is in fact the biblical Eve, who gave suck to all the living, as it were (Gen 3:20). And (Graeco-) Egyptian Serapis is

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<sup>51</sup> Trans. S. M. Lehrman, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 3 (London: Soncino, 1939).

<sup>52</sup> On the midrashic names for certain angels of the nations, see further Ludwig Blau and Kaufmann Kohler, “Angelology,” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906), 1:583-597.

<sup>53</sup> See Gerard Mussies, “The Interpretatio Judaica of Thot-Hermes,” in *Studies in Egyptian Religion*, ed. M. Heerma van Voss et al., SHR 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 91: “For the remaining gods of lower status [i.e., after Yahweh/Zeus] the Jews had to resort to the method which is called after Euhemerus the Messenian. . . . Following this example the Jews sometimes identified lower pagan gods with ordinary men and women who had played a part in their own history”; also idem, “The Interpretatio Judaica of Sarapis,” in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*, ed. M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 189-214.

in fact the Hebrew patriarch Joseph, son of Jacob and governor in Egypt. For the Serapis/Joseph equivalency, the rabbis give a Hebrew etymological explanation: *sar-hephhis*, the appeasing prince. Elsewhere in late antiquity, the Christian Firmicus Maternus gives an equally implausible Greek etymology: Σάραρα παῖς, “Sarah’s [great grand-] child” (*De errore profanarum religionum* 13.2). The key thing for our purposes, however, is not the reason adduced but the *interpretatio* itself: Isis is Eve. Serapis is Joseph.<sup>54</sup>

From the amoraim we learn that Isis is Eve, mother of all the living, and Serapis Joseph the patriarch. But it is thanks to earlier, Hellenistic Jews that we know that the titan Atlas is actually Enoch, who walked with God (Gen 5:24). Eusebius cites Alexander Polyhistor, who in turn cites Eupolemus (here probably Pseudo-Eupolemus) as saying, “The Greeks say that Atlas invented astrology, and that Atlas is the same as Enoch; and that Enoch had a son Methuselah, who learned all things through angels of God, and thus we gained our knowledge” (Eusebius, *P.E.* 9.17; trans. E. H. Gifford). This *interpretatio* is premised on mythological function. Atlas and Enoch are here understood as culture heroes, the persons responsible for bringing the art of astrology to their respective peoples, and thus are identified with one another. What Atlas does for the Greeks Enoch does for the Jews; hence Atlas is Enoch.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise Hellenistic-Jewish is the more elaborate identification of the Greek god Hermes and his Egyptian counterpart Thoth with Moses.<sup>56</sup> Artapanus, the Egyptian Jewish historian who flourished at the turn of the second century B.C.E., writes about Moses as follows (according to Eusebius):

He [Moses] was called Mousaeus by the Greeks. This Mousaeus was the teacher of Orpheus. As a grown man he bestowed many useful benefits on mankind, for he invented boats and devices for stone construction and the Egyptian arms and the implements for drawing water and for warfare, and philosophy. Further, he divided the state into 36 nomes and appointed for each of the nomes the god to be worshiped, and for the priests the sacred letters, and that they [the gods of the nomes] should be cats and dogs and ibises. He also allotted a choice area to the priests. He did all these things for the sake of maintaining the monarchy firm for Chenephres, for formerly the masses were disorganized and would at one time expel kings, at others appoint them, often the same people but sometimes others. On account of these things, then, Moses was loved by the masses, and was deemed worthy of godlike honor by the priests and called Hermes, on account of the interpretation of the sacred letters. (Eusebius, *P.E.* 9.27.3-6; trans. John J. Collins in Charlesworth, *OTP* 2:898-899)

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<sup>54</sup> See further Rivka Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash*, *Studia Judaica* 52 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 215-244.

<sup>55</sup> See further Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Ancient Jewish Sciences and the Historiography of Judaism,” in *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge in Second Temple Literature*, ed. Jonathan Ben-Dov and Seth L. Sanders (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 195-254.

<sup>56</sup> See Mussies, “Interpretatio Judaica of Thot-Hermes”; David Flusser and Shua Amorai-Stark, “The Goddess Thermuthis, Moses, and Artapanus,” *JSQ* 1 (1993/1994): 217-233.

There are actually two different connections to Greek myth here. At the beginning of the passage, Artapanus identifies Moses with Musaeus the teacher of Orpheus. In Greek tradition, Musaeus is usually said to be the son or the student of Orpheus, but Artapanus reverses the relation, making him Orpheus's teacher. And at the end of the passage, the Egyptian priests bestow divine honours on Moses and recognize him as Hermes (who is Thoth, via *interpretatio Aegyptica*) for his oracular powers.

As noted above, Gerard Mussies argued that these latter *interpretationes* (Isis/Eve, Serapis/Joseph, Atlas/Enoch, Hermes/Moses) are euhemerist in their theology. And this is broadly true, inasmuch as they identify gentile gods with biblical humans. But we should qualify this. The particular biblical humans in question are exceptional even apart from these identifications with deities. Enoch and Moses, in particular, become gods even *within* Jewish tradition.<sup>57</sup> Eve is a direct creation of God, without mother or father, and arguably begins her life as an immortal. Only Joseph fits the bill of a straightforwardly euhemerist interpretation, and that probably because he occupies the role of a culture hero in Egyptian Judaism: the one who supplies food to the nation. In sum, we have a great many *interpretationes Judaicae* of gentile gods, some specific and others general, some euhemerist and others in terms of the angels of the nations, and other variations beside. Ancient Jews lived in a world teeming with gentile gods. How, we might ask, could they *not* undertake to translate them?

### Conclusions

What, then, can we conclude about the universal polytheism and the case of the Jews? First and most importantly, it seems to me, the evidence we have considered overwhelmingly suggests that the Jews and their god did not live in splendid isolation from the prevailing ancient practice of translating gods across cultures. They do not in fact constitute an exception to Robert Parker's rule. Hence any strong form of the Assmann/Portier-Young hypothesis, noted in the introduction above, is to be rejected. Gentile writers promiscuously translated the Jewish god into Greek or Roman terms, and Jewish writers sometimes did likewise. Meanwhile, Jewish writers promiscuously translated gentile gods into their own terms, rendering them as the divine council, angels, princes, demons, or human heroes from the primeval biblical past. "False gods cannot be translated," Assman has said.<sup>58</sup> Of course they can. Our sources do it all the time.

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<sup>57</sup> See Philip S. Alexander, "From Son of Adam to Second God: Transformations of the Biblical Enoch," in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, ed. Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergen (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 87-122; Wayne A. Meeks, "Moses as God and King," in *Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354-371.

<sup>58</sup> Assman, *Moses the Egyptian*, 3.

Or perhaps, we are better off abandoning altogether the notion of “false gods” with reference to biblical and ancient Jewish sources. I strongly suspect, although I cannot argue the point here, that we often mistake idol polemics in our sources for metaphysical claims.<sup>59</sup> To wit: The English phrase “false gods,” which is so central to Assmann’s Mosaic distinction, occurs just three times in the RSV of the Hebrew Bible (Ps 40:5; Jer 14:22; 18:15), and none of those contains any form of the word “god” (*el, elohim*, etc.). In Ps 40:5, the term rendered “false gods” is just *kazav*, “falsehood” (OG Ps 39:5: ματαιότητος καὶ μανίας ψευδεῖς), in Jer 14:22 *havlei ha-goyim*, “the futilities of the nations” (OG Jer 14:22: εἰδώλοις τῶν ἐθνῶν), and in Jer 18:15 *shavē*, “an empty thing” (OG Jer 18:15: κενὸν). There are, strictly speaking, no “false gods” at all in the Bible. The *idols* of the nations—that is, the cult statues themselves—are considered futile and empty by many (but not all) of our biblical and Jewish sources, but that is an expression of contempt for iconism, not a denial of the reality of gentile gods. What we meet in our Jewish sources are not false gods but gentile gods (foolishly represented by statues). And gentile gods certainly can be, and very often are, translated.

Indeed, the issue of iconography arguably goes a long way toward explaining much of the evidence discussed above. Recall Maximus of Tyre trying to give an *interpretatio* of the patron god of Arabia: “The Arabians worship a god whom I do not know, but I have seen the cult statue; it was a square stone” (*Dissertations* 2.8). Now consider the case of the patron god of Judea, who had no cult statue, but who was acclaimed as “god of heaven” and “most high god” (plausibly suggesting Zeus Olympios or Jupiter Optimus Maximus) and whose temple was adorned with golden grape vines and grape clusters (plausibly suggesting Dionysus). Even those more philosophical *interpretationes* that identify the Jewish god with Ouranos or Kosmos or Phusis do so expressly on the grounds of Moses’s principled aniconism. If the god cannot be figured as a human or an animal, then he may have to be translated in more cosmological terms, but he can still be translated. Or, as *incertus deus* (thus Lucan), the Jewish god may in fact be, say, Zeus or Helios; it is just that we lack the onomastic or iconographic information that would allow us to know. Meanwhile, several established Jewish *interpretationes* of gentile gods likewise reason from iconography. Isis is Eve because her icon portrays her as the primeval mother. Serapis is Joseph because his icon portrays him providing life-giving grain for the Egyptians. And so on.

If iconography helps to explain many of the *interpretationes* discussed above, then ritual is, I think, usually to blame when *interpretatio* goes wrong. By “goes wrong” here, I refer not to theological error (which is often in the eye of the beholder) but to social unrest and political violence. Consider the identification of Yahweh with Zeus, which Jewish writers like the *Letter of Aristeas* and Josephus can make without batting an eye. But when Antiochus IV Epiphanes makes the same identification, war breaks out. Why this difference? Because Antiochus IV did not just give an

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<sup>59</sup> On this complex of issues, see Thomas A. Judge, *Other Gods and Idols*, LHBOTS 674 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2019).



*interpretatio*; he changed the rites (2 Macc 6:1-6), which is another can of worms entirely.<sup>60</sup> Parker makes this theoretical point in a different context. He writes, “There was no reason why believing that god A was the same as god B also entailed that the rituals by which the two were honoured should be the same; ancestral tradition, doubtless pleasing to the god in question, retained its validity. Customs differ and should be respected, but metaphysical reality is the same everywhere.”<sup>61</sup> Just so. Judean ancestral custom was pleasing to the patron god of Judea. Judean customs differ from Syrian or Greek ones and should be respected. The real problem is not saying that Yahweh is Baal Shamem or Zeus Olympios; it is compelling the priests to offer the wrong sacrifices, or to offer sacrifices on the wrong days, or replacing Judean priests with Syrian ones, etc. The pantheon may be universal, but ritual rules are not. “Think global, act local.”

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<sup>60</sup> Thus rightly Robert Doran, “The Persecution of Judeans by Antiochus IV: The Significance of Ancestral Laws,” in *The Other in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, ed. Daniel C. Harlow et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 423-433. John Ma (“Re-examining Hanukkah,” *Marginalia* [July 9, 2013]) is right to insist that the Seleucid intervention in the Judean cult was an administrative matter, but wrong to deny any religious aspect to it. The administrative is religious.

<sup>61</sup> Parker, *Greek Gods Abroad*, 72.