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ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS CONTACT AND CONFLICT
IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Pieter W. van der Horst (ed.)

Table of Contents

List of abbreviations	7
P. W. van der HORST	
Introduction	11
J. den BOEFT	
Knowledge of the Gods is the Essence of Human Happiness	17
G. MUSSIES	
Some Astrological Presuppositions of Matthew 2: Oriental, Classical and Rabbinical Parallels	25
H.J. de JONGE	
Jewish Arguments Against Jesus At the End of the First Century C.E. According to the Gospel of John	45
J. van OORT	
Augustine's Criticism of Manichaeism: The Case of <i>Confessions</i> III 6,10 and its Implications	57
K.J.H. VRIEZEN	
Churches Built Over Pagan Sanctuaries: a frequent phenomenon in Byzantine Palaestina/Arabia? On churches, temples and theatres	69
P.W. van BOXEL	
Isaiah 29:13 in the New Testament and Early Rabbinic Judaism	81
H.W. HOLLANDER	
Israel and God's Eschatological Agent in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs	91
I. TROMP	
The Critique of Idolatry in the Context of Jewish Monotheism	105
P.C. BEENTJES	
Satirical Polemics Against Idols and Idolatry in the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch ch. 6)	121
A.D. HOUTMAN	
"And There Shall Cleave Nought of the Cursed Thing To Your Hand..." A Dispute Between a gentile and a Sage About the Interpretation of Deuteronomy 13:18	135
P.W. van der HORST	
Jewish Self-Definition by Way of Contrast in Oracula Sibyllina III 218-247	147

Johannes Tromp

In this paper I shall study the Jewish polemics against image-worship in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Unlike the related earlier polemics against idolatry such as in the Assyrian and Babylonian periods, these polemics stand in the context of Jewish monotheism.

I.

Before discussing the way in which Hellenistic-Jewish authors resisted the worship of idols, I must clarify my position on the question of Jewish monotheism.

When the Jews asserted their belief that there can be only one God, they could count on the approval of the Greek intellectuals¹. Also, when they described their national God as just another manifestation of the divine, no pagan philosopher would object². However, if they presented their traditional religious teachings as the most appropriate way of doing theology, surpassing even Plato's teaching both in age and wisdom, they were bound to cause alienation between themselves and the pagan audience, if, in fact, they had one³. Finally, if they claimed that there can be only one God, and that this one and only God was none other than the God of the Jews, they were sure to be confronted with fundamental incomprehension from the pagan side⁴.

All these Jewish forms of speaking about God to non-Jews occurred in the Hellenistic period. The last form has lived on in the history of religions as monotheism properly speaking⁵. This monotheism is not, in my opinion, a

¹ Xenophanes, *FVS* B 23; cf. W. Jaeger, *Theology*, pp. 42-49; MacMullen, *Paganism*, p. 89. [For bibliographical details the reader is referred to the bibliography at the end of this article.]

² *Ep. Arist.* 16; Josephus, *Ap* II 190-192; compare Hecataeus of Abdera, in Diodorus of Sicily XL 3, 4; Strabo XVI 2, 35; Julian the Apostate, *Ep. ad Theodorum* 453D-454A; MacMullen, *Paganism*, pp. 86-87.

³ Aristobulus, in Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* XIII 12, 1; Philo, *Her* 214 (older than Heraclitus); *Vit-Mos* II 12; Josephus, *Ap* II 168.

⁴ *Sibylline Oracles* III; Josephus, *Ant* VIII 335, 337, 343; X 263.

⁵ The birth of monotheism in this sense is thus the result of a confusion of unrelated conceptions: the traditional Jewish confession (our people acknowledge only one God), and the philosophical concept (on logical grounds, there can be no more than one deity or divine principle). Recent denials that the Jewish religion in the Hellenistic period was not strictly monotheistic

mere development of ancient Israelite theology (as found, for instance, in the deuterio-Isaianic prophecies), but the result of the confrontation of the traditional belief of Israel with the philosophical demands of the Hellenistic age⁶.

In the strict sense the religion of ancient Israel was not, nor had it ever been, "monotheistic". The prophetic demand that only Yahweh should be worshipped was no reflection of the conviction that there was, or could be, only one God. Instead, it was the expression of the unique bond that was constructed between Yahweh and his people. The solitude of Yahweh, therefore, was not a matter of the metaphysical nature of God, but a matter of the number of ties this particular people were allowed to maintain with the divine world⁷. The aim which the "Yahweh-Alone" movement⁸ had set for itself was to limit the number of these ties with the deities down to one⁹. If the Deuteronomistic and deuterio-Isaianic phrases were to be understood as expressing "monotheism", one would have to acknowledge that they had no followers for centuries. This would make them a unique and isolated phenomenon, which, tradition-historically speaking, is quite unlikely¹⁰. The (evidently propagandistic) oracles designated as deuterio-Isaianic, as well as the Deuteronomistic laws on worship, prescribe a religion that should be called "monolatric" at the most¹¹.

have been rebutted by L.W. Hurtado, "What Do We Mean".

⁶ I know of the following authors who have reached conclusions similar to mine: W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Jews and Judaism*, pp. 93-103 (referring to Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*); M. Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, pp. 472-484; W.C. van Unnik, *Het Godspredikaat*, pp. 35, 47-48; Y. Amir, "Die Begegnung".

⁷ Compare Y. Amir, "Die Begegnung", p. 3: "Der biblische Monotheismus geht nicht von einer Gottesidee, also einem Denken über Gott, sondern von einer Beziehung zu Gott aus."

⁸ On the history of this concept in recent scholarship, see N. Lohfink, "Zur Geschichte der Diskussion über den Monotheismus im Alten Israel", pp. 19-21, with Lohfink's criticisms on pp. 21-25. To Lohfink's exposition, add the more recent article by M. Weippert, "Synkretismus und Monotheismus".

⁹ Stolz, "Monotheismus", p. 181. An important element in the evaluation of Israel's monolatry is the fact that the addressee of Deuteronomy and Deuterio-Isaiah is always Israel, and Israel alone. B. Lang, "The Yahweh-Alone Movement", p. 45, commenting on passages in Deuteronomy and Deuterio-Isaiah, insists that "this is monotheism", but adds that "it never disregards ... the conviction that Yahweh is and will remain the god of Israel."

¹⁰ The doxological meaning of Deuterio-Isaiah's "monotheism" was stressed by P.A.H. de Boer, *Second-Isaiah's Message*, pp. 84-101. H. Wildberger, "Der Monotheismus Deuteriojesajas", pp. 516-530, partly criticised De Boer's views, but Wildberger's emphasis of the uniqueness of Deuterio-Isaiah's monotheism seems to argue against his own opinion. Lang, "The Yahweh-Alone Movement", pp. 49-50, insists on the monotheistic character of Israel's religion after the exile, but he also admits that traces of Deuterio-Isaiah's influence are scanty.

¹¹ A. Bertholet, *Wörterbuch der Religionen*, p. 369: "Monolatrie ... bedeutet, daß nur Einem Gott gedient wird, ohne daß damit die Existenz anderer Götter gezeugnet würde." M. Rose, *Die Ausschließlichkeitsanspruch*, p. 11, clarifies: monolatry is the "Verehrung nur eines Gottes durch eine Gemeinschaft, ohne daß damit andere Götter für andere Gemeinschaften gezeugnet würden" (emphasis added).

The distinction between "monotheism" and "monolatry" may seem overly subtle. Nevertheless, this and other distinctions are useful when the problem of Israel's "monotheism" and its development in the Hellenistic period is concerned.

The study of the history of the Greek, Egyptian, and even Babylonian religions has shown that believers generally tended to recognise the unity of the divine world¹². Systematically, the process of identification of gods with other gods in the same religious system was ubiquitous. In the realm of personal piety, a believer could at a particular moment address his prayer to the god most competent to answer his need as to the "Most High God", and at another moment praise another god in similar terms. Also, a believer could feel individually tied to one particular god, who was thought to be the mediator of his prayers to the pertinent departments of the divine world. Thus, the emergence of the "Yahweh Alone" movement can be explained as a development of one form of polytheism into the other; in this case, as the gradual concentration, stimulated by political and religious crises¹³, of worship of one special god¹⁴.

The emergence of monotheism in the strict sense, however, cannot be explained as the result of an internal development within polytheism. It is possible for a believer or a collective (e.g., national) belief-system with a polytheistic background to concentrate entirely on one particular god. It is another matter to deny the existence of other gods altogether. For that step to be taken, a new definition is necessary of what "god" is¹⁵. I am not convinced that this step was made in the post-exilic period¹⁶. The material for such a new definition was not available to ancient Israel's theologians¹⁷. Moreover, they did not

¹² The literature on this subject is vast. Here mention should be made of the following contributions which, in spite of the sometimes evolutionistic tendency of their interpretations, offer much useful information: in general: M. Smith, "The Common Theology"; on Greece and Hellenism: E.A.G. Peterson, *Heis Theos*; on Egypt: E. Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen*; on the ancient Near East: H. Vorländer, *Mein Gott*. Concise treatments are found in the volume edited by O. Keel, *Monotheismus im Alten Israel und seiner Umwelt*, with contributions by B. Hartmann, "Monotheismus in Mesopotamien?"; and E. Hornung, "Monotheismus im pharaonischen Ägypten".

¹³ I prefer this description of the development of Israel's religion to that of a "chain of revolutions which follow one another in rapid succession" (Keel, "Gedanken zur Beschäftigung", p. 21).

¹⁴ H. Vorländer, "Der Monotheismus Israels"; compare M. Smith, "The Common Theology", p. 140, footnote 16.

¹⁵ Stolz, "Monotheismus in Israel", pp. 150-154; cf. Hornung, "Monotheismus", p. 91.

¹⁶ Against Stolz, "Monotheismus", p. 180.

¹⁷ Often, Parsism is suggested as the source of deutero-Isaiah's "monotheism"; see, for instance, M. Smith, "II Isaiah and the Persians"; H. Vorländer, "Der Monotheismus Israels", p. 106; C. Uehlinger, in: O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Göttinnen*, p. 445. However, the origins of Parsism itself loom largely in the dark. Moreover, it is uncertain to what extent the Iranian religion

seek a new definition¹⁸, since their aim—the worship of Yahweh Alone—had largely been achieved, at least in Judah¹⁹.

It is unlikely that the monotheism of Judaism as we know it emerged before the Hellenistic period. Only in that age were the formulae concerning Yahweh's solitude ("God is One"; "there are no gods beside him") found to contain new and astonishingly deep meanings, namely, when defenders of the Jewish cult read these formulae within the context of the demands of Hellenistic rationalism.

The Hellenistic Jewish polemics against image-worship, compared to their earlier counterparts from the sixth century BCE, serve to illustrate the difference in religious orientation.

The rest of this paper will contain three elements:

1. The Hellenistic-Jewish polemics against idolatry are derived primarily from a relatively fixed set of traditional motifs developed in the Israelite literature from Hosea to the deuterio-Isaianic prophecies. It was not uncustomary for pagan authors to ridicule various aspects of image-worship as well (section II).

2. The Hellenistic-Jewish polemics against idolatry are usually defensive and try to shield the Jewish believers against attacks from outside by elevating the Jewish religion intellectually above the pagan religions. In this respect, the later polemics differ fundamentally from the earlier examples in the Old Testament, which usually are aggressively directed against the Israelite believers themselves (section III).

3. A number of summarizing conclusions complete this paper (section IV).

II.

In this section I shall list a number of motifs that commonly recur in various Jewish polemics against idolatry²⁰. The instances are taken from Jewish sour-

was monotheistic in the time of Persia's supremacy, whereas direct influence of Parsism on the Jewish religion cannot be demonstrated; see J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "The Religion of Ancient Iran".

¹⁸ On the other hand, it may be an exaggeration to state that "there never was any major theological development in Israel"; so M. Smith, "The Common Theology", p. 146.

¹⁹ Uehlinger, *Göttinnen*, pp. 450-452. The religion of the "Jewish" colony Elephantine is a relic of the ancient (Northern) Israelite cults; see K. van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu", pp. 95-98.

²⁰ Compare J. Geffcken, *Zwei griechische Apologeten*, pp. xxii-xxxi; W. Bousset and H. Gressmann, *Die Religion*, pp. 305-307.

ces from the Hellenistic period²¹.

One of the motifs which often appears in the literature of this period is the description of the material from which the idol is fashioned. Sometimes the costliness of the material (bronze, marble, ivory, silver, gold) is contrasted to the idols' worthlessness as far as divine power is concerned. On other occasions, the worthlessness of the material (ceramics, wood, stone, pewter, lead) is contrasted to the more useful things that could have been made of it (for instance, a fire or household goods). The list may be longer or shorter, but it usually contains two or more items from the materials listed above (*I Enoch* 99:7; *Jub.* 22:18; *EpJer* 3, 10, 29, 39, 50, 57, 70; *Sib. Or.* III 11-14, 57-59, 586-590; *V* 82-83; *Ep. Arist.* 135; *Wis* 13:10; 14:21; 15:9; Philo, *Decal* 66; *SpecLeg* I 21; *Virt* 219; *VitCont* 7; Josephus, *Ap* II 252; *LAB* 2:9).

The idols are made by human hands (χειροποίητος, *Jdt* 8:18; *Bel* 5Θ; *Sib. Or.* III 606, 722; *Wis* 14:8; ἔργα χειρῶν, *EpJer* 50; *Wis* 13:10; cf. *Jub.* 12:5; *Sib. Or.* III 586; *opera manuum Jub.* 20:7; cf. *LAB* 44:7; pagans preferred the word χειρόκμητος, so also Philo, *Decal* 51, 66; *SpecLeg* I 22; the contrast is the real God, "not made by hands"; see *Sib. Or.* III 13; IV 6; Brixhe-Hodot nr. 4222), by the artistry (τεχνή, *Sib. Or.* III 14) of artisans (τεχνίτης, *EpJer* 45; *Wis* 13:1; τέκτων; *EpJer* 7, 45; *Sib. Or.* V 404), and, since even the mortal maker is more powerful than what is made (*EpJer* 46; *Ep. Arist.* 136; *Wis* 15:17; *LAB* 44:7), the idols are utterly powerless; they cannot help themselves (*EpJer* 33, 49, 57; *Wis* 13:16), let alone those who pray to them (*I Enoch* 99:7; *Jub.* 12:53; *EpJer* 33-37; 3 *Macc* 4:16). Yet the images themselves often receive more honour than the makers (Philo, *Decal* 71).

In the descriptions of these idols, they are portrayed as being lifeless (ἄψυχος, *Wis* 13:17; *Sib. Or.* V 84, 356; Philo, *Decal* 7; *Virt* 219; ἄπνοον, *Wis* 15:5; οὐκ ἔστιν πνεῦμα, *Jub.* 12:3, 5; *EpJer* 23; *spiritus non erit in eis, Jub.* 20:8; *non est illis cor Jub.* 22:18), they are dead (νεκρός, *Jos. As.* 8:5; 12:5; 13:11; *Wis* 13:10, 18; 15:5, 17; *EpJer* 69). Similarly, they are viewed as being mute (κωφός *Jos. As.* 8:5; 12:5; 13:11; 3 *Macc* 4:16; *Sib. Or.* IV 9, 28; V 84; cf. *Jub.* 12:3; οὐ δύνανται λαλεῖν, *EpJer* 7; cf. 3 *Macc* 4:16; ἄλαλος *Sib. Or.* III 31; IV 7), blind (*EpJer* 18; *Wis* 15:15), and deaf (*EpJer* 40; *Wis* 15:15). In short, they have no senses (*Ep. Arist.* 135).

²¹ It could be argued that early Christian sources may be included, since the line of defence which the early Christians utilised against the pagans was, at least in this case, the same as that of the Jews. For the sake of clarity, however, Christian authors have been left out of consideration.

²² With this abbreviation, I designate the inscription of an altar, published as nr. 42 by C. Brixhe, and R. Hodot, *L'Asie Mineure*, pp. 124-126. I see no reason to assume that the altar cannot be Jewish (against P.W. van der Horst, "A New Altar of a Godfearer?").

They are locked up in dark temples (EpJer 17), lest they be stolen (EpJer 13, 17, 57; *Jos. As.* 13:11); they are fastened with pins (Wis 14:15), lest they fall over (Wis 13:16); they cannot move (EpJer 26; Wis 13:18; 15:15), but have to be carried on people's shoulders (*Jub.* 12:5; EpJer 25). They are lies (EpJer 7, 50, 58; the contrast is "true", ἀληθής, Brixhe-Hodot nr. 42).

Other motifs appear now and again in Jewish polemics, such as the "folly" of those who have been "misled" to "sacrifice" to idols. In addition, the artistry of the maker (moulding, carving, painting), as well as the several kinds of images that are made (humans, animals) may be more or less elaborately described. The catalogue above, however, may suffice to show that there was a rather fixed set of invectives, and that it was quite prolific. This set was developed in the Old Testament literature up to ca. 500 BCE, and had become a separate block of tradition. In most cases, there is no need to derive each and every instance of later Jewish polemic against idolatry directly from Old Testament passages²³.

It should also be noted that the advanced thinkers of paganism itself²⁴ did not believe, either, that the true God was an image²⁵ (Heraclitus, *FVS* B 5), made of wax, stone, silver, ivory, or gold (Varro, in: Augustine, *Civ. Dei* IV 31; Ps.-Heraclitus, *Ep.* 4; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 71; Epictetus, II 8, 13-14, 20; Juvenal,

²³ Here a short overview of the Old Testament material may be given; compare H.D. Preuß, *Verspottung*; W.M.W. Roth, "For Life, He Appeals to Death"; S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*, pp. 196-221. The motif of the artisan who makes images that are erroneously worshipped first occurs in Hos 8:6; 13:2. Also in Hosea, "the work of human hands" occurs (14:4). Gods of silver and gold, wood and stone, made by human hands are also mentioned in Isa 2:20; 31:7; 37:19; Jer 1:16; 2:27; 25:6; 44:8; Ezek 20:32; cf. Isa 2:8. In Jer 51:17-18, the fact that there is no spirit in the images is added; so also Hab 2:18-19. These motifs are thematically treated in Jer 10:1-16 (the authenticity of this passage is often doubted; also by Preuß, *Verspottung*, p. 66, and Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*, pp. 196-197). It is clearly the inspirational source of the Epistle of Jeremiah. The most famous satires against idols and their makers are found in the deuterio-Isaianic prophecies: esp. Isa 44:9-20 and 46:1-2, 5-7; compare Isa 40:19-20; 41:7, 29; 42:17; 45:20; 48:5. A number of motifs, concerning the material from which the "abominations" are made, and their powerlessness, are then also used in Deuteronomy; see Deut 4:28; cf. 27:15; 29:17-18. In the Deuteronomistic history, see 2 Kgs 19:18; cf. 2 Kgs 22:17. As a stopgap epitheton, the gods of the gentiles are called "works of human hands" in 2 Chr 32:19; 34:25. The dumbness of the images is elaborated in Ps 115:4-7. It is clear that the critique of image-worship in the Old Testament culminates in the time of the impending victory of the "Yahweh Alone" movement. After the satires in the additions to Isaiah, the mocking of idolatry becomes a rather standard motif.

²⁴ For the next paragraphs, see also C. Clerc, *Les théories relatives au culte des images*, pp. 90-123: "Histoire de la polémique. Ses principaux thèmes". Clerc often acknowledges his indebtedness to P. Decharme, *La critique des traditions religieuses chez les Grecs*. See also H.W. Attridge, *First-Century Cynicism*, pp. 13-23.

²⁵ This is true also for the defenders of images; cf. I. Lévy, "Statues divines et animaux sacrés dans l'apologétique gréco-égyptienne"; compare C. Clerc, "Plutarque et le culte des images".

Sat. XIII 114; Lucian, *Philops.* 20; *JConf.* 8, *JTr.* 7; *Sacr.* 11; *Pro im.* 23; Ps.-Sophocles, in: Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V.113, 2; Oenomaus, in: Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* V 36, 1-2)²⁶. The deuterio-Isaianic satire speaking of the artisan who roasted his meat on the same wood that he used to make an idol (cf. *Wis* 13:11-13, and compare also Philo, *VitCont* 7), has a parallel in Horace's *Sat.* I 8, 1-3. There, a useless piece of wood relates how an artisan was uncertain what to make, a stool or a Priapus, and eventually decided on the god (cf. *Priapea* X 4-5). Legend has it that Diagoras of Melos went a little step further, and cooked his bran on a fire made of a wooden statue of Hercules²⁷.

The pagans were no less aware of the human origin of idols than the Jews, and they, too, pointed to this fact to mock their worship. As far as the artisans are concerned, their names (Phidias, Alcamenos and others) are often mentioned; alternatively, the limits of their art are stressed; see Heraclitus, *FVS* B 5; (Ps.-?)Heraclitus *FVS* B 128; Horace, *Sat.* I.8, 2-3; *Priapea* X 4; Ps.-Heraclitus, *Ep.* 4 (here the word χειρόκμητος is used); Plutarch, *Tranq. an.* 20 (on Diogenes; Plutarch uses the word χειρόκμητος); *Sup.* 6; Epictetus II 8, 20; Lucian, *Philops.* 20 (ἀνθρώποποιός); *JTr.* 7; *Sacr.* 11; *Pro im.* 23; Diogenes Laertius II 116 (on Stilpo the Megarian and Theodorus the Atheist)²⁸.

Seneca, in Lactantius, *Inst.* II 2, 14, was angered at those who go through great trouble to worship images of the gods, whereas they despise the craftsmen who made them. According to Plutarch, *Num.* 8, 12-14, Numa followed the lead of Pythagoras when he prohibited the erection of statues representing the gods in human or animal form, because one should not compare perfect beings to mean beings²⁹.

Heraclitus, *FVS* B 5, compared praying to statues with babbling at walls. Diogenes of Babylon, *SVF* III 33, called anthropomorphic images childish³⁰ and powerless (ἀδύνατος). Heraclitus, *FVS* B 128 (the authenticity of the passage is doubtful), mocked at praying to images that cannot hear, and that, even if they could, would not be able to give what was asked for. Juvenal, *Sat.*

²⁶ Compare Seneca, in: Augustine, *Civ. Dei* VI 10: *sacros inmortales, inviolabiles in materia villissima atque immobili dedicant.*

²⁷ Decharme, *La critique des traditions religieuses*, p. 133. According to Athenagoras and John Tzetzes, the perpetrator of this impiety was Diagoras. For the scholion, see D. Holwerda, *Jo. Tzetzae Commentarii in Aristophanem* II, nr. 829a, pp. 570-571. On the attribution of the story to Diogenes the Cynic, see Decharme.

²⁸ Here, one may also compare Zeno, *SVF* I 264-265, who called a temple οἰκοδόμων ἔργον καὶ βαναύσων.

²⁹ Without reference to images, the thought was already expressed by Xenophanes, *FVS* B 23.

³⁰ Compare Lucilius, XV 19, who remarks that little children hold fictitious dreams to be real, in the same way that they believe that bronze images are alive and are men, and that the bronze has a heart.

XIII 113-119, asks why we should bring offerings to Jove, if he hears us, but does not move his marble or bronze lips. Even Plato, *Leg.* XI 11, who readily acknowledged the usefulness of statues, was well aware that we revere the images representing the living gods *καίπερ ἀψύχοι ὄντες*.

Ps.-Heraclitus, *Ep.* 4, scorned those who think that god is locked up in dark temples. Lucian, *JConf.* 8, has one god expressing his sympathy to the other that has been stolen, as many others that were made of gold or silver before him. According to Hierocles, the Pythagoreans regarded the statues as nothing but a prey for thieves³¹.

The observation that images cannot move themselves was also made by Seneca (in Augustine, *Civ. Dei* VI 10: *immobilis*), and by Diogenes, according to Plutarch (*Tranq. an.* 20: ἀκίνητος).

It appears that verbal agreement between the Jewish and non-Jewish polemics against idolatry occurs only in the case of listing the materials out of which idols can be made. But it also appears that the favorite motifs which the Jewish authors employed have their counterparts in pagan literature. Although the pagan polemicists, unlike the Jews, did not have a fixed set of standard gibes, the main objections to idolatry (the worship of lifeless images, made by human hands out of imperfect material) were certainly known.

Clearly, the mockery of statues is almost as old as the earliest Greek philosophy (Xenophanes and Heraclitus). However, pagan critique of idolatry culminates in the works of lesser philosophers, and comedians of the first two centuries BCE and CE (Varro, Horace, Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus, and Lucianus). It seems no coincidence that Jewish polemics reached new heights in the same period.

III.

In order to understand the purpose for which the Jewish polemicists revived their traditional material, we may classify the sources according to the context in which the polemic occurs.

Two writings, *Bel and the Dragon*³², and the *Epistle of Jeremiah*³³, are solely

³¹ Quoted by Clerc, *Les théories*, p. 93.

³² Dating to the second century BCE; see Schürer, *History* III, p. 725, note 344.

³³ According to W. Naumann, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 31-44, the Greek of this writing is to be dated to the second century BCE. I am not at all convinced that *Ep. Jer* was originally written

concerned with the folly of idolatry. The former is a combination of two short, rather folkloric stories. In these stories, the wise young man Daniel out-smarts the priests of Babylon, first, by exposing the priests' fraud (it is the priests themselves who steal by night the sacrifices the idols are supposed to eat), and then by killing the dragon people thought to be divine. The Epistle of Jeremiah purports to be a letter written by the prophet to the exiles in Babylon, warning them not to be afraid of the idols that fill the city. Both books are primarily aimed at ridiculing the Babylonian religion, and, in this rather negative way, contrasting it to the excellence of the Jewish religion³⁴.

On the other hand, there are instances in which image-worship is rejected only in passing. Aseneth, the proselyte heroine of the Egyptian romance Joseph and Aseneth³⁵, describes the ridiculous attributes of the idols she has just rejected: "Behold then all the gods that I, ignorant woman, used to worship. Now I acknowledge that they are blind and dead idols; and I have made them to be trampled underfoot by men, and thieves have stolen them, because they were only silver and gold" (*Jos. As.* 13:11; contrast 3 Macc 4:16).

In other writings, critique of idolatry occurs in more or less elaborated passages within a larger polemical or apologetic context. In the third book of the Sibylline Oracles³⁶, curses against all kinds of peoples are pronounced, and these peoples' religions are adduced as the ground for their future destruction³⁷. The contrast to their horrible practices is the proper understanding of God as propounded by the Judaic religion³⁸. From *Sib. Or.* III, I quote lines 11-14: "There is one who is God, sole ruler, ineffable, who inhabits the heavens (αἰθήρ), self-begotten, who, being invisible, sees everything. And no sculptor's hand formed him, and human art does not represent him in gold or ivory."

This is one of the rare instances in which Jewish polemics against idolatry are connected with the unity of God (in marked contrast to the ancient Israe-

in another language than Greek (*ibid.*, pp. 44-47).

³⁴ On the rationalistic tendencies (in contradistinction to the Old Testament polemics) of Bel and the Dragon and the Epistle of Jeremiah, see Preuß, *Verspottung*, pp. 261-264. Cf. the comments by Gilbert, *La critique des dieux*, pp. 266-267: "Bel et le Dragon ... montre comment l'Ancien Testament applique au paganisme ambiant un schème de pensée qu'il utilisait jusqu'alors pour se situer ou se juger lui-même."

³⁵ Dating to the first centuries BCE and CE; see Schürer, *History* III, p. 549.

³⁶ Scholars usually do not date the Third Sibyl (or its oldest parts) before the second century BCE; see Schürer, *History* III, pp. 632-633, 635-638. Vss. 1-45 (or 1-96) are to be dated considerably later; see J.J. Collins, "Sibylline Oracles", p. 360.

³⁷ *Sib. Or.* III 8-45, 51-62, 601-618; cf. IV 4-22; V 77-85, 351-356; *I Enoch* 99:6-10.

³⁸ The contrast is made explicit in *Sib. Or.* III 573-600; V 403-407.

lite usage)³⁹. Naturally, the confession of God's unity is not absent in Jewish writings⁴⁰, but when it stands in a context of critique of other religions, Jewish polemicists preferred to adopt the common Hellenistic critique of the Homeric divine world—the unity of God was “proved” by pointing, for instance, at the preposterously large number of the Olympians, and the immoral behaviour attributed to them by the poets⁴¹. In Jewish writings, the critique of idolatry is usually reserved for distinguishing Judaism from the retarded religions of other peoples. Illustrative in this respect is the book of Jubilees⁴², which describes the invention of idolatry by Ur, inspired by Mastema (*Jub.* 11:4), and Abraham's discovery of their uselessness (*Jub.* 12; cf. 21:3) and his warning against them, addressed to his sons and grandsons (*Jub.* 20:7-8; 22:16-19).

Related to this use of the traditional rejection of image-worship, but markedly different in tone, is the one found in the explicitly apologetic works of Philo and Josephus⁴³. In these books the authors claim to be open to a dialogue with their pagan audience.

In their writings the contrast to idolatry is still the proper understanding of God, but now the proper understanding is that which the Jewish devotion has in common with the more advanced thinkers among the non-Jews⁴⁴. Greek intellectuals also acknowledged the folly of image-worship. Philo and Josephus used this fact to show that the Jewish religion should be strictly distinguished from the barbarian religions, including the vulgar beliefs of the illiterate Greeks. Instead, Judaism should be ranked among the finest Greek philosophical systems.

³⁹ Another instance is *Ep. Arist.* 134-136. However, *Ep. Arist.* 137 also links polytheism to the folly of the mythographers (see below).

⁴⁰ Cf., however, J. Bonsirven, *Le judaïsme palestinien*, I, p. 150: “Nous sommes étonnés de ne pas entendre souvent parler du Dieu unique. C'est presque uniquement dans les milieux hellénistes qu'on sentira le besoin d'inculquer cette vérité.”

⁴¹ E.g., Josephus, *Ap.* 240-254; *Sib. Or. fragm.* 3:1-2, 23-24; so already Xenophanes, *FVS* B11-12, and many other after him (see Jaeger, *Theology*, p. 50). This motif is very popular with Lucian and the Christian polemicists; see M. Caster, *Lucien et la pensée religieuse de son temps*, pp. 186-191.

⁴² Dating to the first half of the second century BCE; see Schürer, *History* III, pp. 311-313.

⁴³ Philo of Alexandria was active in the first half of the first century CE. Flavius Josephus lived from ca. 37 to ca. 100 CE.

⁴⁴ Compare W.C. van Unnik, *Het Godsprekingsboek*, p. 35: “Volgens de overtuiging van Josephus was het mogelijk om dat wat de grootste Griekse filosofen over *To Theion* gezegd hadden ook, ja juist te zeggen van de God van Abraham, Izaak en Jacob. Wat Plato c.s. enigszins verdoezelend gezegd hebben om de grote massa niet in hun waan te schokken, dat heeft immers Mozes vrijuit verkondigd”; Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, p. 484: “Wie für Aristobul und Ps Aristaeas ist auch für Josephus der Gott der Philosophen im Grunde auch der Gott Israels.”

The same aim is most obvious in the Epistle of Pseudo-Aristeas⁴⁵. In this writing a Greek official is said to remark that there is no significant difference between the High God of the Greeks (Zeus) and the God of the Jews (*Ep. Arist.* 16). Thus, the essential agreement between Judaism and Greek theology is attributed to a high-ranking Greek⁴⁶. The high priest Eleazar, on the other hand, is said to explain to the Egyptian king that the Jews have never worshipped statues, and that they have always rejected the folly even of the Greek mythographers (*Ep. Arist.* 134-138). Thus, the author places his readers' religion on the same level as that of the sophisticated Greeks, and far above the religions of others, including the Greek mythology.

The author of the Wisdom of Solomon⁴⁷ strongly rejects image worship (in terms directly borrowed, it seems, from especially Deutero-Isaiah⁴⁸), as well as numerous others kinds of superstitious belief⁴⁹ (Wis 13-15). Not content with his rejection of idolatry and zoolatry, the author even reprimands the worship of the elements and heavenly bodies, which enjoyed a certain respectability among, for instance, the Stoic philosophers⁵⁰. The author expresses his bewilderment at the philosophers' failure to develop a proper understanding of God, when they have come so close to discovering the true theology (Wis 13:1-9)⁵¹. Here, then, the Jewish religion is presented as ranking even above much of Greek philosophy.

It should be stressed that it is most unlikely that the writings mentioned here ever reached beyond the limits of Jewish circles of readers. Whoever the alleged addressees of, for instance, the Sibylline Oracles may have been, it was probably only the Jews who were acquainted with the contents of these writings. As in the time of the great prophets, oracles against the nations were not heard by the objects of God's ire. Only the beneficiaries of the divine actions were given the opportunity in advance to glee at their opponents' downfall. It is hard to establish whether authors such as Philo and Josephus expected their works to be received by a pagan audience of any numerical substance⁵². It

⁴⁵ To be dated to the second century BCE; see Schürer, *History* III, pp. 683-684.

⁴⁶ Compare Schlatter's remarks on Aristobulus, *Geschichte Israels*, p. 84.

⁴⁷ To be dated to the first centuries BCE and CE; see Schürer, *History* III, pp. 572-573.

⁴⁸ Cf. Gilbert, *La critique des dieux*, p. 267: "une reprise de la tradition biblique en fonction du contexte nouveau auquel l'auteur est confronté."

⁴⁹ Gilbert, *La critique des dieux*, pp. 255-256.

⁵⁰ See also Philo, *VitCont* 5; *Decal* 52-58; Carneades in Cicero's *Nat. deorum* III 40; and Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* IX 39 (rejecting Prodicus' views reported in IX 18, 52).

⁵¹ Gilbert, *La critique des dieux*, pp. 43-44.

⁵² V.A. Tcherikover, "Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered"; Schürer, *History* III, p. 609.