

CHAPTER 5

Lucian, Philo of Byblos, and Ps.-Meliton

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Classical literary texts are mainly very blinkered sources for the religions of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. They tend to notice the gods of the cities and religious centres which had long fallen within the purview of Greek culture, especially the commercial cities of the Phoenician coast. Sidon and Tyre were put on the map by Homer and Herodotus, respectively; Herodotus had visited the temple of ‘Heracles’ in the course of his chronological researches (2.44), and he also gave an interesting account of the temple complex of ‘Zeus Belos’ in Babylon (1.181–3), ‘Belos’ being an eponym and genealogical construct endlessly recycled in classical sources on Phoenicia, Arabia, and Babylonia since his first appearance in the *Catalogue of Women* (Hes. fr. 137.2 M.-W.). But problems are immediately apparent. Authors use established equations for non-classical deities which *ipso facto* import a bias; so, too, the literary genres in which the religions of the Near East find mention also tend to impose their own way of looking. Of course, an indigenous source might confirm only the extent to which classical culture had indeed penetrated a given cult or locale; nevertheless, the paucity of material from Hellenistic and Roman Syria means that alternative perspectives are in very short supply.

This chapter deals with three literary texts which seem to offer more than familiar *topoi* and routine ethnographic soundbytes. One is written in Greek; another claims to be a Greek translation of a Phoenician original; the last is in Syriac, which a Greek original may or may not underlie. None escapes classical influence, but all offer the tantalising possibility that an insider perspective might somehow be preserved alongside the intellectual structures of the Greek or Greco-Roman literary genre in question.

Lucian: *On the Syrian Goddess*

The first text is Lucian’s *On the Syrian Goddess* (*De Dea Syria*, or *DDS* from now on), and it is a hybrid in various senses. It is a short treatise which offers itself as a detailed eye-witness account of the temple of Hierapolis (modern Membij) not far from the

Euphrates in northern Syria, and its cult of the Syrian Goddess. The Syrian Goddess is Atargatis, a deity with a long and complex history whose antecedents, if we believe that diachronic surveys can shed light on a god's character in the here and now, can be found in the female consort of the north Syrian thunder-god in the second millennium BCE (Lightfoot 2003: 1-85). By the time we encounter her here, she seems to be a multi-purpose 'great goddess' figure, not, as far as we can see, as strongly linked with eroticism as her Semitic counterparts Astarte and Ishtar, but certainly of a nurturing disposition, delighting in her doves and sacred fish—but also, perhaps, with an appetite for the shedding of blood which recalls (as does her iconography) her Anatolian cousin whom the Greeks called Cybele, Rhea, and the Great Mother. *DDS* manages to be highly informative about the temple and its practices yet elusive and indirect about the goddess itself. Its opening chapters advertise the temple and offset it against various Phoenician temples, none of which match it for holiness. A couple of set-piece sequences follow, the first concerning myths of its divine founder, in which other variants are set aside in favour of the one that connects it with Dionysus; the second discusses the present temple's connections with Stratonice, wife of Seleucus I and later of his son, Antiochus. Then we learn of its topography and layout, working inwards from its position in the city to the innermost Holy of Holies with the cult statue; and the last section is a tumble of miscellanea on priests and cult personnel, festivals, rituals, and bits and pieces of devotional practice.

The text is ascribed to the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata in all the manuscripts that carry it, but the ascription has been challenged for most of the last four hundred years of the text's history. The authorship question is more than a matter of literary pigeon-holing; it is at the centre of the text's interpretation. Lucian sets up his literary *persona* as a provocateur, a foe of fraud and pretension; mythological burlesque and literary parody are two of his staples. If the text were his, it would be yet more demonstration of the versatility, verve, and wit we know were his—but would be a blow for those who wish to use the text in any sense as a historical source. Now, I believe that the text is genuinely Lucian's (Lightfoot 2003: 184-208). It is quite easy to show that it lies within the range of his literary interests, and I detect affinities with his particular way of realising the author and dialect that is being imitated here (below). The days of naïve and uncritical reading, when *DDS* (or Philo of Byblos) could be quarried without methodological *angst* as a religious-historical source, are long gone; on the other hand, it is also possible to err in the opposite direction, to be determined to

find laughter where a more subtle effect is intended. The uncertainty of exactly where *DDS* is located in between these poles is why it remains a controversial and deeply interesting text.

It is essentially a work of ethnography, and conforms to a classical scheme which goes back at least to Herodotus, in whom it is first attested. Where Herodotus tackled Egypt and Scythia in terms of history, land, and customs, he perhaps established and certainly helped perpetuate a pattern which could later be deployed in specialist monographs on particular countries (Trüdinger 1918).¹ Lucian has adapted this pattern to suit the foundation-myths (1.12-16 recall Hdt. 4.5-15 on the colonisation of Scythia), layout, and *nomoi* associated with the temple. Even the artful disarray of the final section on *nomoi* is much more planned than it appears at first sight: a well-established alternative to the ordering of such material under headings was associative listing (Trüdinger 1918: 25-6), and Lucian shows himself master of the artful *segue* (§§45-6 / 47: the lake and ritual ‘descents to the lake’; §48 ff.: other major festivals in Hierapolis’ sacred calendar; §§49-51: the Spring Festival and autocastration; §§52-3: burial customs for the galli and for Hierapolitans generally). A *penchant* for the wondrous and exotic in the selection of *nomoi* is of course thoroughly Herodotean; the notices on tattooing and hair-cutting with which the treatise ends carefully give the impression of miscellaneous after-thoughts while in fact conveying profound suggestions about national and personal identity (‘all Assyrians wear tattoos’; ‘to this day there remain in the temple my lock and my name’).

All this is combined with the narratorial voice, dialect, and mannerisms of Herodotus—the Herodotus of ethnography and travelogue, especially of the Egyptian *logos*. First of all, the text is written in Herodotus’ dialect, literary Ionic. It is one of a number of texts which revive the elderly dialect in the imperial period (Lightfoot 2003: 91-7); they do so to show off, to recapture some of the literary prestige of the authors who wrote in it. Aretaeus, for example, a medical writer, revives the dialect of the Hippocratic corpus; Arrian also revives Ionic for the purposes of a specialist ethnographic monograph on India. What these texts show is that—although the twin processes of normalisation and hypercorrection in the manuscript tradition have done their best to bewilder the scholar who would seek to determine what any given author

¹ I should therefore like to weaken my over-sharp contrast (Lightfoot 2003: 90) between the Herodotean master-text and the Hellenistic specialist commentary.

originally wrote—there were numerous ways of breathing life back into Ionic, and one argument in favour of Lucian’s authorship is that the Ionic of *DDS* is closest to the Ionic forms in other certainly Lucianic texts and to that of another text, the *Astrologia*, which is also assigned to him, though again controversially.

Another aspect of the Herodotean imitation is the assumption of his ‘historiographical’ persona, that is, of a gatherer and critic of information. The narrator travels in the interests of research (§9); elicits evidence by questioning (§11); records and evaluates variants (§§11-16; §28); prefers eye-witness (§48) and personal testimony, one aspect of which is the frequent use of the *topos* of ‘of all those whom / which I know’ (§§2, 10, 49); suggests alternative motivations (§27); and falls silent over cultic secrets (§28). Nor is the imitation of Herodotus played straight: the text seems to inhabit a territory somewhere between pastiche (being a close imitation of the Herodotean idiolect) and parody. Although it does not seem to want to mock its subject-matter, it does—though with varying degrees of intensity—guy the narrative voice, which is intrusive, fussy, and credulous. Tall stories are told in a deadpan voice (e.g. §§36–7, the oracle of Apollo which not only moves of its own volition, but which was also seen to rise spontaneously into the air; §48, the sacred cock) or supplied with naïve commentary (§29, the scorpion which keeps the *phallobates* awake—or is it the fear of falling?; §46, a floating altar, like Herodotus’ Chemmis—or is it supported by a pillar?). Her doves and sacred fish are staples of the ethnography of the Syrian Goddess and of the Holy City; only Lucian, however, represents the fish as individually named and responding to summons (§45).

That is not true of everything. What the text is describing is not arrant fantasy, and it would change and simplify the nature of the text if this were the kind of see-through spoof we encounter in Lucian’s *True History*. Coins and reliefs and sculpture in the round do substantiate what we are told about the goddess’ iconography. One impressive correspondence is the cultic standard or *semeion* (§33) (though it is the survival of plastic representations that allow us to identify what Lucian is talking about, rather than Lucian who allows us to identify surviving plastic representations). Lucian does not in the least clarify what the object *was*, though its role in a water-carrying festival, in connection with ‘Apollo’ or Nebo (§§33, 36) is confirmed by a parallel account with a totally different perspective in ps.-Meliton (below). Other details, such as the empty throne (§34) and the *piloi* of the priests (§42), are rendered at least plausible by iconographical or archaeological evidence from other cults. Or there are

intriguing literary and epigraphic parallels with other cults—the galli of Cybele and the spring festival with its ‘day of blood’ celebrated in imperial Rome—none of which, however, suffices to establish a bedrock from which we could ever hope to extract ‘solid’ data from *DDS*.

Throughout we are confronted, not only by the systematic biases and distortions that the ethnographical genre *ipso facto* brings with it, but also by the extent of Herodotean ventriloquism and imposition of Herodotean explanatory frameworks, and by the sheer fun which Lucian is having with his Herodotean imitation. Let us consider an example of each.

With all ethnography Lucian shares the practice of *interpretatio graeca*, whereby non-classical deities are equated with classical ones and given Greek names. But where Herodotus had used both Greek and indigenous names (sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes both), *DDS* only ever gives us the Greek, even where it tells us expressly that the Greek is not in local use (§§31-2 assures us that Zeus is an absolutely compelling identification—but is not what the Hierapolitans call him). The goddess is Assyrian Hera, or simply Hera, throughout, although as far as we can see a rare and exclusively literary identification (Lightfoot 2003: 81). No more than in any other work of ethnography is the principle on which it rests discussed, though it is only partly iconographical; §32 tells us that although the goddess is Hera ‘in the main’, she also has ‘something of’ a slew of other Greek goddesses (Athena, Aphrodite, Selene, Rhea, Artemis, Nemesis, the Moirae), so many that they succeed only in obfuscating rather than clarifying her appearance. When we move outside the temple (past the statues of ‘Zeus’, ‘Apollo’, ‘Atlas’, ‘Hermes’, and ‘Eileithyia’) things only get worse, since the courtyard contains a whole rogues’ gallery of sculptures identified with figures from the Trojan Cycle as well as Philomela, Procne, Tereus, and others (§40). The untheorised nature of the connections between classical and non-classical deities is always a problem, wherever we find it; in a place like Roman Syria it also seriously obscures the extent to which classical culture had penetrated the region. Where *any* of these identifications accepted locally, and if so how do we know which ones—and by whom?

As for the second category, the use of Herodotean explanatory frameworks, the aniconic thrones of the sun and moon are an excellent example (§34). From extant examples of empty thrones in Phoenician cult centres it is practically certain what these objects were. What we cannot be certain of is Lucian’s attribution of the thrones to the

sun and moon and of their aniconism to the visibility of the luminaries in the heavens. He is obviously echoing Herodotus' Persian ethnography, where the Persians are made to articulate a criticism of traditional Greek practice (also à propos of anthropomorphic deities) which in fact arose in intellectual circles among the Greeks themselves (Hdt. 1.131; Lightfoot 2003: 449-55). Much the same applies to the criticism of Greek practice in the following chapter, on the bearded statue of Apollo (§35). What is at stake here is not satire. Lucian is not having fun at anyone's expense. But he has imported a stance and mode of explanation from Ionian ethnography into an entirely different context, Roman Syria over half a millennium later, leaving us just as far as ever from what (if anything) the Hierapolitans really thought.

Where fun does enter into it, at last, is with the narrator's fixation with phalli and phallicism. The two columns in the temple propylaea are phalli, inscribed as such by Dionysus (§16); later we learn that they are 300 fathoms high, and that a man climbs up one of them every year and remains sleepless on the top for seven days for fear a scorpion will bite him (§28). Both the live human climber and a phallic bronze statue inside the temple (§16) are compared (apparently) to carved wooden marionettes mounted on a phallus pole. This is a romp through the phallicism of Herodotus' Egypt, specifically through his account of the cult of 'Dionysus' (Osiris), which also features phallic processions and jointed wooden marionettes (2.48-9). But the anchor there (Osiris ~ Dionysus) is missing here; what in Hierapolis is 'Dionysus' supposed to represent? And what in the world are we to make of the startling 1800-feet-high erections in the temple courtyard?

The complications do not end even here, because at the beginning the narrator tells us he is himself an Assyrian, and at the end that he has been, since boyhood, a devotee of the temple. The result is that we get a double perspective, of outsider looking in, and of local possessed of 'insider' knowledge. Hierapolis was not, in fact, a terribly remote or mysterious location; previously in Seleucid territory, it became part of the Roman province created by Pompey in 64 BCE; the city begins to be registered in Hellenistic texts, its goddess and religious practices begin to glimmer in the consciousness of classical writers well before that (Xanthus of Lydia, *FGrH* 765 F 17a; Ctesias, F 1b (4, 20,2); Xen. *Anab.* 1.4.9). But both the specialist monograph and, still more, the Herodotean stance, position the goddess and her cult before us as an exotic 'other', about which we are to be informed and entertained. In practice we are never really offered a perspective other than that of the wide-eyed, credulous, phallically-

fixated tourist—but briefly at the beginning, and more strongly again at the end, the reversal of perspective teases us with the possibility of more intimate insights, those of a devotee whose youthful lock of hair resides in one of the caskets of precious metal affixed to the interior of the temple.

What we have, I suggest, is a version of the very Lucianic device of metalepsis. Metalepsis is the calculated violation of the ‘sacred frontier’ between the real world and the world of a piece of fiction. (A well-known modern example is the Martin Amis character in Martin Amis’ novel *Money*.) But it was already well within the competence of antiquity’s most sophisticated satirists, who has many stand-ins for himself in his other works. Where *they* tend to replace his name with a perspicuous substitute such as ‘the Syrian’, Lycinus, or Parrhesiades (‘son of the free-speaker’), *this* work, while it teases us with the ‘Assyrian’ identity of its author, withholds his name altogether (*ounoma* hangs, without further specification, as the last word). As a guide to interpretation, the procedure is almost exactly the reverse of the *True Histories*, which opens with an express statement that everything that follows is lies. The travelogue itself goes on to use every gambit to encourage belief in its truth—which has been definitively undermined in advance. *DDS*, on the contrary, has no introductory statement, no frame, only a Herodotean ethnographic voice to which we listen with amused reservation of judgement until we get to the final sentence, with its seductions of ‘insiderhood’. But, after all that has come before, are we really seduced?

Philo of Byblos

Philo of Byblos was born in the time of Nero and lived at least until the reign of Hadrian (*Suda* f 447; Baumgarten 1981: 32-5), on whose reign he wrote a monograph. The *Suda*, which calls him a *grammatikos*, mentions also works on bibliography and on famous men and their cities, and Eusebius quotes from a monograph on the Jews. It is also Eusebius who quotes excerpts from his most important work, the *Phoenician History* (in what follows, citations are by chapter number in Eusebius).

Philo presented his work as a ‘translation’ into Greek of the ancient Phoenician writings of Sanchouniathon (1.9.20),² and it was as a translator that he was cited by Porphyry, who pressed him into service in his attack on the Christians (1.9.21, 30). We

² Philo identifies linguistically as a Greek (1.10.51). For Philo’s likely proficiency in Phoenician, see Barr 1974/5: 43-4.

hear of other Greek translations of Phoenician *arcana* (*FGrH* 784, Mochos / Laitos), but it is less reassuring to reflect on the numerous classical writers who appeal to ancient documents, especially priestly records, for self-promotional reasons (Fehling 1989: 172-3; Baumgarten 1981: 80); such writers include Leon of Pella, Hecataeus of Abdera, and Euhemerus, all of whom rationalise the gods' origin in the same way as Philo. We are also dealing with an attempt by a non-Greek people to explicate their own traditions, in Greek, to a Greek readership (compare Berosus, on whom see chapter 4, or the Egyptian priest Manetho)—save that Philo went beyond self-assertion and positively attacked the Greeks for having obfuscated the original, 'true' doctrines of the Phoenicians.³ As a native exegete of indigenous traditions in the Greek idiom to Greeks, Philo also forms a loose counterpart to the narrator of *DDS*. But whereas the one hijacks the voice of a Greek literary celebrity, the other appeals to a native source supposedly predating the Trojan War (1.9.21). Philo trades on the Phoenicians' reputation as one of the near eastern peoples whose archival records went back to remote antiquity (Joseph. *Ap.* 1.8).

Philo supports Eusebius' argument that pagan polytheism is not a natural or an original state of affairs, but a human invention, originating with Egyptians and Phoenicians, which took the place of the less pernicious, but still misguided, worship of the luminaries and elements, when only certain Hebrews were instructed in the notion of a divine artificer of the universe (1.9.1-18). That the gods of the earliest peoples were the heavenly bodies and the elements is a view that can be traced back to the sophist Prodicus, is reflected in Plato, and became the classic position of the so-called Euhemerists who distinguished the natural, celestial gods from those who originated as human beings and were subsequently deified for their good services to humanity (Henrichs 1975: 109-15; Euhemerus *Test.* 25 Winiarczyk; Diod. *Sic.* 1.11-13). But Eusebius quotes Philo from two sources, both directly and *via* Porphyry, and Porphyry's Philo seems rather different from Philo himself (Nautin 1949). Philo claimed to have translated Sanchuniathon, who had his material directly from the writings of a god, Taautos (Egyptian Thoth), which he had found hidden away apparently in a temple of Ammon (1.9.24, 26; Baumgarten 1981: 77-80). Porphyry's Sanchuniathon, on the other hand, used civic traditions and priestly writings, apparently

³ Though his work was not fixated on Phoenicia. It also looked outwards, especially to Egypt, while still giving the Phoenicians priority (1.10.32, 38).

including one dedicated to a king and verified by his advisers (1.9.22; Baumgarten 1981: 56-7). In both cases, Philo is equipped with a venerable source. But Philo's own version stresses that Sanchuniathon had uncovered ancient material free of the contaminating intellectual structures later imposed on it: Philo himself can thus overleap the intervening years of theological mystification and distortion—though the risk (for us) is that his work is untypical of mainstream Phoenician religious ideas.⁴ Porphyry's Philo, on the other hand, uses civil traditions, rather than arcane and possibly idiosyncratic ones. Of course, we might still want to ask what is meant in this context by notions like mainstream and deviant; whether there was such a thing as a standard. But we might also want to distinguish between a city's account of its religious life and the views of an individual with a particular ideological bias.

Philo's common ground with Greek literature was always clear: his connections with Hesiod's *Theogony*, his use of *interpretatio graeca* and syncretism, his Euhemerism, his appeal to ancient sources. All that changed in 1929, with the discovery of the tablets at Ras Shamra (Ugarit), dating from about 1400-1200 BCE, followed by the Hurrian-Hittite Succession myth, the so-called Kumarbi cycle, in Boghazköi in 1936. Interest was refocussed on his 'oriental' or 'Semitic' elements. Many shared theonyms in the one, and mythical motifs and patterns in the other, opened up the seductive new possibility that Philo really did have access to ancient material, and for a while his stock went up. Inevitable reaction set in, and we are now in a state of equilibrium which will presumably last until new evidence emerges to disturb the consensus. Philo is far more than an exponent of *Lügendichtung*, and there are indeed links (albeit not as direct as his early champions would like) between him and the Ugaritic and Hurrian material. But the Greek intellectual filter is impossible to argue away.

The first section of his work was a cosmogony—not an implausible genre in Phoenicia, given the precedent of Mochus. Its partly Semitic character shows through in the use of poetic parallelisms (not, however, a guarantee that the original was composed in a Semitic language: Baumgarten 1981: 129), but Greek affiliations are also evident in the demythologising, godless approach.

⁴ Despite Eusebius' claim that Sanchuniathon testified that the same gods were still worshipped in the cities and country districts (1.19.22).

This section was followed by what James Barr called a ‘technogony’, or account of the emergence of the arts of civilisation, each ascribed to a particular human innovator. Both Semitic and Greek backgrounds can be found here, too. While Mesopotamian myths of origins ascribe cultural advance to divine patrons, *Genesis* 4: 17-24—like Greek tradition—ascribes a series of developments to human *primi inventores* (Castellino 1957: 135); with his men who *become* gods, and possibly in previous tradition *were* gods (Baumgarten 1981: 140 *et al.*), Philo seems poised in between. Yet the distribution of cultural advance over a generational scheme, with family members—including several pairs of brothers—responsible for different advances, brings Philo in this respect, at least, closest to *Genesis*—hardly surprising, given the physical proximity of the Phoenician and Hebrew cultural spheres.⁵

Although there are cosmogonies where divine beings precede (or accompany) the emergence of the physical structure of the universe, and cosmogonies which culminate in the emergence of man, it is a consequence of the Euhemerism of the present treatise that humans must precede gods. The argument depends on the mortal origins of the gods, and so the technogony is followed, rather than preceded, by a theogony. Despite its placement, this section in fact has much in common with Hesiod and with other succession myths telling of the origin of the present divine order. Its very structuredness gives pause for thought. What it offers is a series of divine generations whose best parallels are not, in fact, the Ugaritic myths (which concentrate on just the two generations of El and of Baal), but the Kumarbi story and, still more, the Hesiodic version, in which the succession is from father to son, and in which female deities have a role in every generation. In fact the father-to-son succession is not easy to parallel outside Hesiod himself, so that when we find it again in Philo, we wonder how faithfully he represents Phoenician mythology, and how much he owes specifically to Hesiod—whom he mentions by name (ironically, as one of the others blamed for *travestying* the original truths of religion, 1.10.40). Philo concentrates on the three generations of Elioun-Hypsistos, Ouranos, and Cronos, after whom the scheme peters out in a succession of minor figures. Hesiod has three major figures as well, though he begins with Ouranos and ends with Zeus, who in Philo features *passim* in various local forms, but not as the culmination of the scheme. But Philo’s and Hesiod’s Ouranos are

⁵ In Diod. Sic. 3.60.4 the couplings of the seven daughters of Atlas give rise to genealogies of gods and culture heroes (but there are no pairs of siblings).

very alike (both hostile to their children, among whom Cronos leads an uprising), and so are their portraits of Cronos (dethrones his father, marries his sister Rhea, hostile to his children, castrates his father in an ambush—although in Philo it takes place in an attempted uprising by his father some time after Ouranos’ deposition).

Of course this is no mere replay of Hesiod. But the places where Philo departs from the *Theogony* are unlikely to represent alternative Ancient Near Eastern tradition. The major players, Ouranos and Cronos, are both given more wives and progeny, as if they are being used as pegs on which to hang a more comprehensive genealogy than could be supplied by Ouranos’ monogamous marriage to Gaia, or Cronos’ to Rhea. Specific correspondences with the Kumarbi myth are hard to find (Barr 1974-5: 51-2); on the contrary, there are several matches with the succession myths of Euhemerus and his follower Dionysius Scytobrachion, suggesting Philo’s *de facto* familiarity with Hellenistic Greek sources (Baumgarten 1981: 242-3, 263). In short, the succession myth—and indeed the whole treatise—looks like a medley of traditions from different times and places, assembled in an artificial literary composite. Different Phoenician cities drift in and out of focus (according with Porphyry’s presentation of Sanchuniathon’s compilatory activities); after the main structure, gods —important ones in the Hellenistic and imperial eras like Adodos / Hadad, Melcathros / Melqart, Asclepius / Eshmun—are tacked on at the end and accorded a minimalist treatment; and there are numerous pieces of reduplication, including a threefold invention of sailing. We should resist the temptation to interpret Philo’s pantheon as one specific to any time or place; and, as with Lucian, we have to ask which (if any) Phoenicians would have accepted, or even been familiar, with the ideas and structures presented here (Nautin 1949: 577).

In sum, the much-vaunted parallels with the Hurrian and Semitic material are mostly isolated items—names, mythical motifs—which are not part of the main intellectual framework of the treatise, with the exception of the presentation of cultural advance of human genealogy (above). They include the Phoenician names of *Mōt* / *Mouth*; *Chousor*; *Elioun*; and story-patterns which recall certain episodes or motifs in *Genesis* (1.10.9, the sons of god and the daughters of men ~ *Gen.* 6: 1–8; 1.10.10, fraternal hostility, if not fratricide itself ~ *Gen.* 4). There are also jumbled elements of myths familiar from Greek sources: the first god dies in an encounter with wild beasts (1.10.15), like Adonis, and Ouranos’ castration turns the rivers red (1.10.29), a

phenomenon elsewhere located at the Adonis river (*DDS* §8; Lightfoot 2003: 327-8). That should warn us of the un-canonicity of any given mythical narrative.

In principle, Philo's Euhemerism is an ineluctably Greek feature, however true it is that the Ras Shamra texts, with their anthropomorphic deities, led themselves to a euhemerising approach. Philo's introduction presents us with the standard version according to which the gods originated as mortals, subsequently deified for their services to mankind (1.9.29). What is interesting, though, is that although the technogony does indeed present us with inventors and technologists, the theogony does not; the future gods do not act in a way which is at all beneficent, euergetic, or worthy of deification. It is true that Euhemerus' succession myth (as rendered by Ennius) also involved violence, both threatened and actual, but he seems to have wanted to downplay the culpability of both Saturn and Jupiter by assigning a large role to Saturn's jealous and vindictive brother, Titan, and by attributing Jupiter's final *coup d'état* to a reaction to a plot (to which Saturn was prompted by an oracle); the narrative builds towards a Jupiter who, once established on the throne, is a worthy, not a tainted, object of future veneration (T. 62, 64A, 66-7 Winiarczyk). Philo has not designed a scheme which climaxes in a universal 'good king' whose deserts speak for themselves (might the Ugaritic Baal have provided such a model?); on the contrary, the Ouranos / Cronos conflict grinds on for thirty-two years before the castration which, in Hesiod, was the beginning and end of the matter (1.10.29; *Th.* 173-82). In this section it looks as if Euhemerism has been grafted onto a scheme with which it does not sit happily; another possible sign of tension is that the section following the consolidation of Cronos' power (1.10.31-8) often refers to its protagonists—prematurely—as gods (Baumgarten 1981: 39, 226-7).

Names are no less Janus-faced than the rest of the treatise. Some are Greek only; some Semitic only; others receive Greek glosses (Mras 1952: 180-2; Barr 1974-5: 41-4). A few have alternatives, as if Philo was striving to find and to fine-tune a Greek approximation to an underlying Semitic form (Agrou Heros or Agrotos, Epigeios or Autochthon, Titanides or Artemides, Dioscuri or Cabeiri or Corybants or Samothracians, Titanides or Artemides). On the other hand, Hermes Trismegistos (1.10.17) must equate to Taautos (Thoth), but Philo has chosen to represent him in Hellenistic Greek guise (cf. the appointment of Hermes as a counsellor by Osiris in the Euhemerist narrative *ap.* Diod. Sic. 1.16.2, 1.17.3).

In sum, Philo of Byblos is a peculiar hybrid; but if we must make comparisons, I would draw attention to the section of Diodorus Siculus' first book which is usually taken to draw extensively on Hecataeus of Abdera's *On the Egyptians* (Murray 1970).⁶ Diodorus' account begins with an account of how life first arose in Egypt, and then continues with an account of the promotion to godhead of beneficent individuals; unlike Philo, he continues into the historical period with a long account of Egypt's historical kings. He, too, repeatedly claims to be drawing on original native sources (priestly *anagraphai*); he, too, is motivated by the desire to demonstrate the primacy and superiority of Egyptian culture over Greek, claiming, like Philo, that the Greeks added a layer of mystification and travesty to the original native myths (1.23.6-7, 1.23.8, 1.24.8). That Hecataeus was Diodorus' main source has recently been challenged (Winiarczyk 2002: 69-71), and if the challenge is upheld, a new identity must be found for the voice who uses Greek methods to challenge the dominion of Greek culture. Nevertheless, it is a voice that bears reasonable comparison to Philo, and testifies to the currency in the late Hellenistic period of the broad cultural tradition to which he belongs.

Ps.-Meliton

The final item is a Syriac treatise from one of the many manuscripts procured by the British Museum from the Monastery of the Syrians in the Nitrian Desert (Wadi El Natrun) in the middle years of the nineteenth century. In the manuscript it is headed 'An Oration of Meliton the Philosopher', and it claims to have been delivered in person, *viva voce*, to 'Antoninus Caesar'. Belonging among the many apologies, some addressed specifically to emperors, in which Christian authors set out to defend their faith in the second and third centuries AD, it is, in practice, not an exposition of Christian dogma, but an attack on pagan idolatry. It is of interest to us because of a short section in which the author cites a series of examples of idolatrous cults which supposedly originated in the worship of statues. Not only is Near Eastern material, from Phoenicia, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia, remarkably prominent in this section, but it is rich, detailed — and highly idiosyncratic. So it is of some importance, as a first step, to determine the author of the treatise and his context. This, alas, is easier said than done.

⁶ Hecataeus is a possible example of Euhemerism before Euhemerus (Murray 1970: 151 and n.4), though the relative chronology of the two works is tight.

We do know of an Apology by the author to whom the treatise is inscribed, but the fragment which Eusebius cites from it does not overlap with anything in our text, which appears to be complete, and the first editor's attempts to credit Meliton with a second Apology were unpersuasive (Cureton 1855: vi-xi). The original language of composition is still undetermined, but the sheer intimacy with which the author is able to speak of the cults of Edessa and Hierapolis, in particular, might speak for a Syriac rather than a Greek original, and even for a place of composition in either of those cities. If so, then the Greek-speaking Meliton is ruled out as author straightaway; other grounds for refusing him authorship are the lack of congruence with his thought and the challenging tone, which does not suit the eirenic and accommodating Bishop of Sardis. Dating criteria are, first, the possible referent of 'Antoninus Caesar'; second, clues internal to the text, especially an apparent reference to the emperor wearing female dress, and another to plural 'sons'; and third, common ground shared with other apologists, a more slippery criterion which is harder to apply (Harnack 1897: 522-4; Vermander 1972: 33-6). The candidates for an 'Antoninus Caesar' with plural sons are Antoninus Pius (d. 161), with his adoptive sons Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, and Marcus Aurelius with his sons Commodus and Annus Verus (d. 169, which would give a *terminus ante quem* if the reference to sons is secure). Some scholars, however, have looked further forwards, to Caracalla (211-17), who put an end to the Severan persecution of the Christians, and was present in the east, in Antioch, in 215; or to Elagabalus, in view of the reference to female dress; in that case the reference to sons would have to be prospective.

Like Philo, the author is a Euhemerist, though he is—at least notionally—adapting the doctrine in the spirit of the Christian polemicists who frequently used it (whether or not they knew of Euhemerus himself) to establish the mortality of pagan gods. They appealed to the classical notion of deified kings and benefactors, and to the argument that the gods were susceptible to biological processes, to pain, wounds, and death. They sought to explain how myths arose from events explicable in a rational way, and to show up the pagan gods as human beings who behaved in reprehensible ways; and frequently they sought to explain how idolatry (not just cult, but specifically pagan statuary) derived from the images of human beings. This is ps.-Meliton's point, too; he mentions images in his stories of Heracles, Nuh of Elam, and Nebo of Mabug, but statues may be inferred from parallel versions to underlie his stories of Joseph (who became the Egyptian Serapis) and Balthi (city goddess of Byblos) as well. He proceeds

on the assumption that pagan gods were mortal men, about whom rationalised stories can be told; the mention of graves (of Tammuz) and, repeatedly, of kings (Dionysus; Zeus in Crete; Balthi in Cyprus; Cuthar in Phoenicia; the King of Elam; Hadad in Syria) echoes the apologists' repeated charge that pagans worship their defunct rulers. Several stories show us gods behaving in sordid, undignified, compromising ways (Heracles and Zuradi; Athena and Hephaestus; Zeus and Alcmene; Balthi and her lovers), a frequent Christian complaint. Yet he is far from presenting a consistently hostile picture of the cults he describes, and, apart from Joseph the provider of food in Egypt, it is conspicuously the Near Eastern cults, especially of 'Athi' (who healed the king of Syria), 'Cuthbi' (who delivered the patrician of Edessa from his enemies), and Nebo and Hadran of Hierapolis (who cleanse their city of a malevolent spirit), which receive the most positive press.

The whole sequence of *historiolae* is, in itself, remarkable, for while series of exempla of pagan cults are, in themselves, commonplace in the apologists, they never offer a combination which is as wide-ranging, non-routine, and (especially in the case of Mabug) expansive as this. The range of reference bears a certain similarity to the accumulation of case-studies in Jacob of Sarug's much later *Homily on the Fall of the Idols* (Martin 1875: 131-3), again both international and intensely local, but the eccentric Euhemerism and the narrative structures here are absent. The Mabug chapter is remarkable for another reason, for while it runs parallel to Lucian's reports on the cultic *semeion*, 'Apollo', and the water-carrying festival in Hierapolis, it presents them from an entirely different perspective, with an alternative *interpretatio graeca* for Apollo (now Orpheus, presumably on account of the statue's lyre) and an overall Zoroastrian coloration in which the gods are presented as wonder-working magi. We have yet another reminder of the multi-interpretability of Near Eastern cults — and yet another opportunity to ponder the question whether our élite, idiosyncratic, highly-interpreted literary sources represent anything that was recognisable to any constituency of the participants in the cults they describe.

Further reading

Lightfoot 2003 is the standard edition of Lucian's *De Dea Syria*; an English translation (replacing the unreadable Loeb) accompanies the Greek text, and the massive earlier bibliography on the text is accessible through the introduction and commentary. Within this bibliography, Elsner 2001 is illuminating on the literary strategies of the author,

and it should be updated with Lightfoot 2005 and Kaiser 2016. There is also a short annotated text and translation edited by Attridge and Oden 1976. Lightfoot 2007 is the most extensive treatment so far of ps.-Meliton, with a follow-up in Lightfoot 2009, though it remains an under-studied text and needs attention from a Syriac specialist. Its first editor, W. Cureton (1855), equipped it with an English translation. The major commentaries on Philo of Byblos are by Baumgarten 1981 and Kaldellis and López Ruiz 2009 (both accompanied by English translation); other important contributions are Oden 1978, Attridge and Oden 1980, and Edwards 1991. Martin's 1875 edition of Jacob of Sarug's *Homily on the Laws of the Countries* is accompanied by a French translation, and there are commentaries by Landersdorfer 1914 and by Vandenhoff 1915.

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