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Autor: Lanckau, Jörg

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HYPSISTOS: CULTURAL TRANSLATION OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM IN THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Jörg Lanckau, University of Zurich
Research Priority Program "Asia and Europe"

Abstract

The much-debated evidence of a Hellenistic "Most High" God does not reflect a turn towards a uniform "pagan monotheism". The modern terms "polytheism" and "monotheism" are not suitable for the description of the complexity of the interactions within the Hellenistic world from the 2nd century BCE until the 6th century CE. The rituals and practices of these various cults were based on the belief in a unique, transcendent god that could not be represented in human form. A "third space" opens: A new religious language is applied for traditional local cults, arising in very different situations where negotiation at the boundaries and borders of groupings and communities took place. The Jewish use of *Hypsistos* attempts to translate exclusive notions of YHWH into this environment.

Introduction

Speaking of the Diaspora implies speaking of *centre* and *periphery*. The verbal noun describes a movement away from an imagined central point. The basic verb διασπείρω, *diaspeirō*, "to disperse" comes from an agrarian context (σπείρω, *speirō*, "to sow"). The denotation is therefore ambivalent. First, it is connoted negatively: Something is scattered, and consequently it is destroyed in its concrete existence. For instance, an army is dispersed, and thus it is destroyed. On the other hand, the word *diaspora* may describe a result positively: Something is sown, spread, and lives a new life, e.g., an idea or a group spreads out. People live far from their native home for a number of different reasons and take root in new environments. The descendants of the dispersion already have a new focus of life, and they develop something like a *hybrid identity*. At any rate, there is an intensive communication at the periphery, which at the same time also functions as a cultural boundary. Whoever lives in the Diaspora always acts

as a *cultural negotiator*.[1] The cultural translation comes along with the translation of the language.

The term *cultural translation* is a metaphoric enlargement of the concept of translation.[2] This means that notions, values, patterns of thinking and behaviour, and also practices of one's cultural context are transferred to those of another, similar to expressions in languages. They thus change radically and even create a new space of their own. To understand this process we have to go back to the radical critique of the concept of translation, given by Walter Benjamin in his pioneering essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" from 1923. According to Benjamin, a translation does not reproduce an original text in another language. A translation does not communicate meanings. In fact, a translation may be compared with a tangent which touches the circle—the original—only at a single point, and goes its own way after that. Neither the language of the original nor the language of the translation has essential qualities, yet both depend on a permanent spatial and temporal change. As with the languages, so it is with cultures: no culture is an essential given. No community arises from essential cultural "identities". Instead, every community reconstructs its self-conception or self-image repeatedly. The concept of "cultural translation" is born out of this constructivist approach and in the context of recent theories about the post-colonial situation of minorities. Through the basic outline provided by Homi Bhabha, the performative nature of cultural communication is seen here.[3] Generally speaking, a cultural difference is visible at first by this performance, and can be understood again by this visibility. The original tradition is not simply transferred into a new context, but rather a wholly new matter comes into being. A third space opens, a space of iridescent hybridity, which must appear scandalous and heretical from an orthodox point of view.

In my work, I am confronted with the question of whether this post-colonial, post-modern concept is also applicable to the hermeneutics of the processes of cultural exchange in the ancient world—e.g., for the understanding of the situation of Judaism in the Hellenistic period. If so, how can it be rendered productive? I shall argue that this is possible, though only within certain limits, as an example will show. I shall also try to illustrate phenomena of hybridity,

1 See BARCLAY, 2002: 15, who coined this term.

2 WAGNER, 2008: 1.6.

3 BENJAMIN, 1923 / 1972; BHABHA, 1994: 227. See the discussion in BUDEN, 2006; WAGNER, 2008.

and that there is also a third space, not only in the theoretical and emphatic sense of Bhabha, but also in a real sense—a new visible, physical and territorial space.

My topic is the epigraphically and literarily broadly-attested Greek designation of a deity *Hypsistos*, "Most High", particularly the attributive expansion of the Greek *Theos* into *Theos Hypsistos* "Most High God" and further the substitution of a specific name of deity or of this general designation by the isolated appellative *Hypsistos*. In the last ten to twelve years, scholars of classical studies, theology and religious studies have restarted an interesting transdiciplinary debate. The research questions are the same as Emil Schürer noted in 1897:[4] Has this something to do with a pagan or Jewish designation of a deity? Can this title arise as an elementary thought, and if so, which ideas and which beliefs are its basis? Or is diffusion to be assumed, and if so, how is the influence mainly directed?[5] How far can a theocracy[6], even an unique, self-standing, syncretistic cult[7] be verified in it? Or has only a local god been given the title *Hypsistos*, and have the cults been independent and, at most, influenced point by point by Judaism?[8]

The Literary Evidence

Let us start with the literary evidence because it may be analysed more easily. *Zeus* is often called *Hypsistos* in the ancient Greek literature. Homer (ca. 8th century BCE) used the epithet *Zeus hypatos* "Zeus High" (e.g., *Iliade* 5,756); since Pindar (ca. 522–443 BCE) we find *Zeus hypsistos* "Zeus Highest".[9] In the

4 SCHÜRER, 1897; see TREBILCO, 1991: 127–144; MAREK, 2000; AMELING, 2004: 8–21.

5 For a Jewish influence vote, see SCHÜRER, 1897: 200–225; TREBILCO, 1991: 142–144.

6 *Theocracy* is not to be understood as the mystic union of one's soul with God, but rather as the mingling of previously distinct deities or divine attributes into a compound conception of God.

7 This is the position of MITCHELL, 1998; 1999; 2010.

8 For the standpoint opposite to MITCHELL, see STEIN, 2001a: 119–126; BOWERSOCK, 2002: 355–359; 361f.; WISCHMEYER, 2005: 156–168 (with additional bibliographical references 149f., fn. 1 and 2). WISCHMEYER refers to three inscriptions first published and interpreted by MAREK 2000: 129–146. USTINOVA, 1999: 203–239 argues that the worshippers of *Theos Hypsistos* in Tanais and in the Bosporanian kingdom were not linked to Judaism.

9 PINDAR: Nemean 1,60. See SCHÜRER, 1897: 209–211, 214; COLPE / LÖW, 1994: 1039f.; MITCHELL, 1999: 100–102. Further testimonies in PAUSANIAS: 2, 2, 8; 5, 15, 5; 9, 8, 5 (CRANE, 2011).

Semitic world, the *Phoenician History* of Philo of Byblos attests a god *Eliun* or *Heliun* and the translation of the respective transliteration is *Hypsistos*.[10] In the *Phoenician History* (*KAI*, vol. I:41), the western Semitic deity *ʿElyon* is mentioned.[11] Either ʿElyon was fused with the creator ʾEl, known from Ugaritic literature, or he was separated from ʾEl as his hypostasis.[12]

Nonetheless, this Ugaritic reference can be approached only partially by discussing passages on *ʿElyon*, "Most High", in the Old Testament (e.g., *Genesis* 14: 18–20).[13] In the so-called "crisis of polytheism" at the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age, a new weather god, *Baʿal Shamem*, conquered the highest position in the Canaanite-Syriac religions, joining together aspects of *ʾEl* and of *Baʿal* into a concept of *Zeus*.[14] Similarly, the pre-exilic communities of Israel and Judah had fused YHWH, god of mountain and weather, a god of their ancestors and patriarchs who had travelled with them, with the local deities (e.g., *Baʿal*, *Cheba/Asherah* and *Shamash*) to form a national god which had the same features as the other national gods of the Levant. In the so-called "theology of Zion", the local YHWH of Judah first took on universal features in his cult in Jerusalem. However, most local gods in the Levant incorporated universal features and their shrines often had an *Omphalos*, a "navel of the world", the most famous of those being at the oracle in Delphi. In exilic times, the universality of YHWH was redesigned. Thus, the simple term "monotheism" provides only minimal insight into Jewish religious life or Jewish belief. In this respect, one cannot claim more than that Judaism as a whole was distinguished from its environment by "monotheism".[15]

10 EBACH, 1979: 90–92. Ἑλιοῦν καλούμενος Ὕψιστος, Euseb, Praep.evang. 10,15 = *FGrHist* 1958, part III c: 809.

11 *ʾEl* beside *ʿElyon* is mentioned together with other deities, e.g., *Sebettu*, in an epigraphic evidence, i.e., in the Aramaic Stela from Sfīre (DONNER / RÖLLIG 1964: 222 A 11).

12 Cf. ZOBEL, 1975/1993: 134–137; 145; COLPE / LÖW, 1994: 1042.

13 Cf. the reminiscence of a pre-davidic cult of *ʿElyon* associated with Jerusalem, mentioned in *Gen* 14,18–20: "Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all." But this text is much younger then all Ugaritic evidence.

14 NIEHR, 1999: 5; 23.

15 There is a substantial discussion about monotheism, which cannot be summarized in this paper, see, e.g., ASSMANN, 2003; HURTADO, 2003; OEMING / SCHMID, 2003; WACKER, 2004; KRATZ / SPIECKERMANN, 2006; KEEL, 2007; LEMAIRE, 2007; LEUENBERGER, 2010. SCHMID, 2003: 18, e.g., distinguishes between the term "monotheism" and the religious and cultic

The Greek Bible, created in a complicated process of translation and redaction during the Jewish Diaspora in Egypt beginning in the early 3rd century BCE, represents the greatest work of translation in the Ancient World. The texts of the so-called *Septuagint* (LXX) were written for Jews who did not master Hebrew or Aramaic, perhaps also for Gentiles interested in the Jewish tradition. The *Septuagint* is the main literary source for the Jewish use of the predicative or appellative *Hypsistos*. Until recently, a quotation from the Greek Bible was seen as being enough to prove the Jewish provenance of an inscription, but this is now disputed. The *Septuagint* translates אֵל עֶלְיוֹן *'El 'Elyon*, "Most High God" of the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), as ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὕψιστος *ho theos ho hypsistos,* "the Most High God", or as θεὸς ὕψιστος *theos hypsistos,* "Most High God",[16] and עֶלְיוֹן *'Elyon*, "Most High" as ὁ ὕψιστος *ho hypsistos*, "the Most High".[17]

The latter often runs parallel to the unspoken name of God (*YHWH*), the LXX renders the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* as κύριος *kyrios,* "Lord".[18] Different

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reality in Judaism. Jews and "pagans" are not to be understood as representatives of "original cults" which tried to claim the term *Hypsistos*. Monotheism was a common phenomenon in Late Antiquity and independent from Judaism and Christianity. So it became one of the preconditions for the success of the Christian Mission, and no one can claim without hesitation that Christianity has been replaced a pagan polytheism by monotheism; see STEIN, 2001b: 1; 20. We need a stricter definition of monotheism, like the one given by HURTADO, 2003: 47, who concludes "that in Second Temple Jewish tradition there was an impressive interest in various figures pictured as God's principal agent, and that the crucial line distinguishing these figures from God was in worship. God was to be worshiped, and worship was to be withheld from any of these figures."

16 MT אֵל עֶלְיוֹן = LXX ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὕψιστος / θεὸς ὕψιστος *Genesis* 14,18.22; *1 Esdras* 6,30; 8,19.21; *Esther* 16,16 [8,12q]; *Judith* 13,18; *3 Maccabees* 7,9; *Psalms* 56,3; 77,35; *Sirach* 7,9; 24,23; 50,17; *Daniel* (*LXX+Th*) 3,93; *Dan* (*LXX*) 5, preface.
LXX ὁ ὕψιστος in parallel with ὁ θεὸς: *Psalms* 49,14; 72,11; 77,56; 81,6; 90,1; 106,11; *Micah* 6,6.
LXX ὁ θεός ἕως ὑψίστων: *Psalms* 70,19.

17 MT עֶלְיוֹן = LXX ὁ ὕψιστος *Numbers* 24,16; *Deuteronomy* 32,8 // *Odes* 2,8; *Tobit* 1,4.13; 4,11; *2 Maccabees* 3,31; *Psalms* 45,5; 76,11; 77,17; *Sirach* 4,10; 7,15; 9,15; 12,2.6; 17,26; 19,17; 23,18.23; 24,2; 28,7; 29,11; 36,15 [33,15]; 31,6 [34,6]; 31,23 [34,19]; 32,8 [35,5]; 32,12 [35,9]; 32,21 [35,18]; 37,15; 38,2; 38,34 [39,1]; 41,8 [θεὸς ὕψιστος 41,8]; 42,2.18; 43,2.12; 44,20; 46,5; 47,8; 48,5; 49,4; 50,7.14–16.21; *Isaiah* 14,14; *Lamentations* 3,35.38; *Daniel* (*LXX*) 4,11 [4,14]; 4,30 [4,34]; *Daniel* (*Th*) 4,21 [4,24]; *Daniel* (*LXX+Th*) 7,18.22.27.

18 LXX ὁ ὕψιστος in parallel with κύριος *2 Samuel* 22,14; *Psalms* 9,2f.; 17,14; 20,8; 82,19; 86,5f.; 90,9; 91,2.9; 96,9; *Odes* 9,76 // *Luke* 1,76; Odes 12,7; *Wisdom* 5,15; 6,3; *Sirach* 39,5; 41,4; 47,5; 50,19; *Daniel* (*Th*) 4,14 [4,17]; *Daniel* (*LXX*) 4,34 [4,37].

terms for God such as the Masoretic אֵל מִמַּעַל *'El Mima'al*[19] which expresses only the sitting of god enthroned in the highness, are homogenised. One may speak, above all, of *Hypsistos* in a doxological sense. Thereby the limitedness and finiteness of human life is in the focus, corresponding to the mentioning of "the Exalted" or "the Eternal".[20]

When the *Septuagint* translates Hebrew or Aramaic terms for the deity, it does so in a metaphorical sense, too, i.e. as a cultural translation into the universe of Greek language and thought. It is not simply the case that holy texts are translated word-for-word, whilst their contents are transferred from the Hebrew language into the culturally dominant Greek language. From this point of view the ideas found in the *Septuagint* are not just the original Jewish ideas. Together with this linguistic translation, cultural forms, ideas and modi of expression are transferred into another context where they find a completely new or different significance. The predicate or appellative *Hypsistos* appears quite often in Psalms and the Book of Daniel, mostly in Sirach (44 quotations).[21] The term *Hypsistos*, in the sense of "Most High", gradually took on a further connotation as a name for the Jewish God.

The Jewish Diaspora negotiated within its environment as a dependent minority. In my opinion, the universality of the Jewish statements regarding their god was meant to simplify the reception in pagan contexts. This may be shown in many cases,[22] as early as in the Hebrew Bible: *Deuteronomy* 32,8–9, a rela-

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LXX (ὁ) κύριος (ὁ) ὕψιστος *1 Esdras* 2,2; *Psalms* 7,18; 12,6; 46,3; *Daniel* (*LXX*) 2,18f. – LXX τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ ὑψίστῳ θεῷ σαβαωθ παντοκράτορι *1 Esdras* 9,46.

LXX βασιλεῦ μεγαλοκράτωρ ὕψιστε παντοκράτωρ *3 Maccabees* 6,2.

LXX αἰνεῖτε τὸν κύριον ... ἐν τοῖς ὑψίστοις, "in the heights" *Psalms* 148,1; δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ "glory to God in the heights" *Odes* 14,1 // *Luke* 2,14; ἐν ὑψίστοις *Job* 16,19; ἐν ὑψίστῳ *Job* 25,2; ἐξ ὑψίστων *Job* 31,2; τὸ ἅγιόν σου πνεῦμα ἀπὸ ὑψίστων "your holy spirit" *Wisdom* 9,17; ἐν ὑψίστοις κυρίου *Sirach* 26,16; 43,9 μέγας ἡμῶν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἔνδοξος ἐν ὑψίστοις κατοικῶν *Psalms of Solomon* 18,10.

19 *Job* 31,28 (MT אֵל מִמַּעַל); *Isaiah* 57,15.

20 E.g. Paul GERHARDS' anthem from the year 1653 "Barmherzger Vater, höchster Gott", melody by Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 103/6.

21 Cf TREBILCO, 1991: 129–131.

22 *Orac. Sib.* 2, 245f.. ἥξει καὶ Μωσῆς ὁ μέγας φίλος Ὑψίστοιο (246) σάρκας δυσάμενος· "Moses, beloved of the Most High, shall come / Clothed in the flesh." Four Codices (FRLT = Ψ consensus) have φίλος θ' = θεοῦ, see LIGHTFOOT, 2007: 299. Translation: LIGHTFOOT, 2007: 319.

tively late text of the Pentateuch showing a "polytheistic language-game"[23], which translates "monotheistic" thoughts into "polytheistic" language:

בְּהַנְחֵל עֶלְיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יַצֵּב גְּבֻלֹת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
כִּי חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ:

When *'Elyon* apportioned to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance.

LXX:[8] ὅτε διεμέριζεν ὁ ὕψιστος ἔθνη ὡς διέσπειρεν υἱοὺς Αδαμ ἔστησεν ὅρια ἐθνῶν κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων [υἱῶν θεοῦ] [9] καὶ ἐγενήθη μερὶς κυρίου λαὸς αὐτοῦ Ιακωβ σχοίνισμα κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ Ισραηλ (Deuteronomy 32,8–9).

Thus, the *Septuagint* translates לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, "to the number of the children of Israel", with κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ, "to the number of the angels of God", revealing a different template compared to that of the Masoretic text. Already in 1955 P. Winter guessed that the Hebrew "Vorlage" of the *Septuagint* presuppose the *lectio difficilior* למספר בני אלהימ "to the number of the children of God / of the Gods", e.g. Symmachus and some Latin versions (cf. the Göttingen Edition of the *LXX*).[24] The Qumran fragment *4QDeutj* (*4Q37*) reads בני אלוהים.[25] "Children of God" was first corrected into "angels of God" for theological reasons, and second into "children of Israel" to make an allusion to the 70 Jewish families in Egypt, cf. the *Targum Jonathan*.[26]

An inclusive nature of God is also found in the so-called "Priestly source" of the Pentateuch using the expression *Elohim,* "God" or "Gods" in its report on creation (*Genesis* 1), and also perhaps in the argumentation in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 1. Additionally, there is an important literary function of the use of *Hypsistos* in the *Septuagint* and other Jewish literature: the predicate or appellative may be put into the mouth both of Gentiles in reference to YHWH and for the communication of the name of God from Jews to Gentiles. In my opinion, this literary function reflects a performative practice of communication. However, on the one hand, we do not know whether pagans accepted these Jewish efforts. On the other hand, certain Jewish authors, i.e. Philo (*Leg All* III 82) explicitly and Josephus (*Ant* XVI 163) implicitly, tried to fight against a syncretistic understanding of *Hypsistos*. They reduce, explain, and clarify the use

23 Oral communication by Konrad SCHMID, Zurich.

24 WINTER, 1955: 40–48; WINTER, 1963: 218–223.

25 *DJD* XIV: 90.

26 BARTHÉLEMY, 1978: 295-304.

of those terms in their scripts.[27] By understanding this work of translation by Jewish authors metaphorically, I see a beginning of a cultural difference in the use of *Hypsistos*. To communicate the sole worship of YHWH to the outside world has been essential for the survival of the Diaspora communities.

The Epigraphic Evidence

Contrarily, the epigraphic evidence is rather complex. Almost 300 inscriptions from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea[28] are dedicated to *Hypsistos* in his different designations, out of which 180 to *Theos Hypsistos* and only 24 to *Hypsistos* alone.[29] The largest portion of these inscriptions comes from the 2nd half of the 2nd century and of the 3rd century CE. A clear archaeological context is found at four places: in Serdica (Sofia), on the Pnyx (in Athens), on the Cycladic island Delos and in Oinoanda in Minor Asia. The worshippers of this *Hypsistos* mostly belonged to the lower classes of the population. *Hypsistos* was worshipped not only in towns, but all over the country, and actually without images and without bloody offerings.[30] The terms *Theos Hypsistos* and *Hypsistos* were used in pagan as well as in Jewish contexts. Differentiating the material by its provenance[31] is therefore difficult. A pagan provenance is obvious due to the name *Zeus* in 88 inscriptions that are dedicated to *Zeus Hypsistos* and distributed over the Greek mainland, Macedonia and the most intensively hellenised regions of Minor Asia. As always, the exceptions from the rule irritate; for instance the inscription to *Zeus Hypsistos* in *Pydna* in Macedonia (nearly 250 c.e.),[32] which mentions an *archisynagogos* and seems to suggest that the cult has been performed in a synagogue. Did Jewish belief form the basis for a form of worship of *Zeus Hypsistos*? This seems impossible.

27 TREBILCO, 1991: 129–131.

28 MITCHELL, 1999: 128–148. Inscriptions are arranged according to the places of discovery, cf. the charts ibid. 82–85.

29 MITCHELL, 2010: 167.

30 FÜRST, 2005: 506.

31 MITCHELL, 1999: 100; 110–115.

32 MITCHELL, 1999: 131, no. 51.

MITCHELL guesses:

> The cult of Zeus Hypsistos in Greece and Macedonia surely developed from local roots although the import of the terminology of the synagogue suggests that it absorbed Jewish influence.[33]

The question is rather: is this also the terminology of the Jewish synagogue? However, the other possibility is that an *archisynagogos* also occurs in a pagan environment, though rarely.[34] In current research the interpretations of the basic significance of the inscriptions to *Zeus Hypsistos* differ widely.[35] The epigraphic findings may show a mutual, interchangeable and finally additive use of *Theos Hypsistos* / *Megistos* and *Zeus Hypsistos* / *Megistos* that is orientated primarily to the conventional Greek linguistic usage and to the highest God in the Olympic pantheon.

Generally speaking, the thought pattern of "influence" is a simple, mechanistic understanding of causality. There is no quasi-genetic dependence; there is no "influence" in the sense of an attraction or intention to integrate the related groups. Indeed, the intellectual developments are more complex, and their impact on different social and religious groups and especially on their forms of lingual expression are indeterminable. We have to keep in mind the "long-term developments in the history of religion and ideas and their lingual worlds and fashions, which have their own life besides the local cults and their rituals and which verbalise those in all local colour."[36] Wischmeyer's objection against the

33 MITCHELL, 1999: 126.

34 Ameling, 2004: 11.

35 Whereas WISCHMEYER, 2005: 168 finds a special affinity for the title *Hypsistos* to the god Zeus and to the epithets that are conventionally attributed to him ("eine besondere Affinität von *Hypsistos* zu Zeus und zu den ihm herkömmlicherweise gebührenden Epitheta"), AMELING, 2004: 18 sees this rather as a side issue. WISCHMEYER tries to show the increasing tendency to a "pantheonal" monotheism embedded in a local cult, whereby the local god is anonymised and hyperbolically potentialised. To this end, he cites the rather elaborative votive inscription of an altar from the Bithynian Iuliopolis.

36 WISCHMEYER, 2005: 158: "Möglicherweise liegt dieser Denkfigur vom eindimensionalen Einfluß durch soziale, geistige und religiöse Attraktion oder durch die Mimikry eines starken Adaptions- und Akkulturationswillens aber ein einfaches mechanistisches Kausalitätsdenken zugrunde, das nicht in der Lage ist, komplexere geistige Entwicklungen und ihre möglicherweise gar nicht eindeutige Einwirkung auf verschiedene soziale und religiöse Gruppen und besonders deren sprachliche Ausdrucksformen genügend differenziert zu berücksichtigen. Denn vor allem findet man bei dieser Denkfigur keinen Raum für religions- und geistesgeschichtliche Langzeitentwicklungen und ihre Sprachwelten und -moden, die

use of the term "influence" is valid, in principle, but what about the epigraphic findings which clearly refer to Jewish provenance? The following signs or features have been proposed for a valid categorization of a certain inscription as Jewish:[37] (a) a plausible connection of the contributor with a Jewish community; (b) a place of discovery not far from a synagogue; (c) a definitely Jewish symbol (Menorah, Ethrog, Lulab, or Shofar);[38] or (d) a quotation from the *Septuagint*.[39]

Indeed, there exist only a few inscriptions of documented Jewish provenance. They come from Egypt, the most complete among them being in Athribis (Benha, 2nd/1st century BCE):[40]

> ὑπὲρ βασιλέυς Πτολεμαίου | καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας, | Πτολεμαῖος Ἐπικύδου, | ὁ ἐπιστάτης τῶν φυλακιτῶν, | καὶ οἱ ἐν Ἀθρίβει Ἰουδαῖοι, || τὴν προσευχὴν | θεῷ ὑψίστῳ.
> On behalf of king Ptolemy and queen Cleopatra: Ptolemy, son of Epikides, chief of police, and the Jews in Athribis (dedicated) *proseuche* to the Most High God.

In similar texts, e.g., from Athribis, Schedia (Nashwa) or Xenephyris (Kom El-Akhdar) only the *proseuche* is mentioned.[41] Another text from Hadra (Alexandria, 2nd cent. BCE) is very fragmentary:[42]

> [– – –]|[– – θε]ῶι ὑψίστωι | [– – τ]ὸν ἱερὸν | [περίβολον καὶ] τὴν προσ|[ευχὴν καὶ τὰ συγ]κύροντα.
> [...] to the Most High God [...] the sacred precinct and the *proseuche* and its appurtenances [...]

In one example the *proseuche* clearly means a synagogue, but the building of the complete structure by one individual or family is doubtful.[43]

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neben den lokalen Kulten und ihren Ritualen ihr Eigenleben besitzen und diese bei allem Lokalkolorit verbalisieren."

37 COLPE / LÖW, 1994: 1038f.

38 See the fundamental investigation of GOODENOUGH, 1953. See also AMELING, 2004: 12.

39 Cf. SCHÜRER, 1897: 21; 216; COLPE / LÖW, 1994: 1044–1048; 1051–1054; STEIN, 2001a, fn. 16.

40 *CIJ*, vol. II, no. 1443 = *JIGRE*, no. 27. Cf. TREBILCO, 1991: 133–137, who lists "secure" Jewish evidence.

41 *CIJ*, vol. II, no. 1444 = *JIGRE*, no. 28; *CIJ*, vol. II, no. 1440 = *JIGRE*, no. 22; *CIJ*, vol. II, no. 1441 = *JIGRE*, no. 24.

42 *CIJ*, vol. II, no. 1433 = *JIGRE*, no. 9.

43 *JIGRE*, no. 126; see the commentary in AMELING, 2004: 216.

Παποῦς οἰκο | δόμηση τὴν | προσευχὴν | ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ | καὶ τῆς ‹γ›υν|αικὸς καὶ τ|ῶν τέκνων· | (ἔτους) δ΄ Φαρμοῦθι ‹ζ›
Papous built the *proseuche* on behalf of himself and his wife and children. In the 4th year, Pharmouthi 7.

However, there are examples for which this argumentation is quite circular. A good example is the small Cycladic island called Delos, known from the conjecture that the earliest discovered synagogue of the Jewish Diaspora was built there. On the neighbouring island Rheneia, funeral island for the holy Delos, two votive inscriptions have been found that are dedicated to "*Theos Hypsistos*, the Lord of the Spirits and all flesh" (τὸν Θεὸν τὸν Ὕψιστουν τὸν Κύριουν τῶν πνευμάτων καὶ πάσης σαρκὸς); the phrase quotes the *Septuagint* (*Numeri* 16: 22; 17: 16).[44] Five inscriptions exist in Delos: three of them mention a vow, e.g., the vow of Zosas:[45]

Ζωσᾶς Πάριος | Θεῷ | Ὑψίστῳ | εὐχήν.
Zosas of Paros to *Hypsistos* (made) a vow.

The inscription of *Lysimachos* mentions a thank-offering (χαριστήριον).[46] Thus, the *proseuche* in the inscription of *Agathocles* and *Lysimachos* seems to be a prayer:[47]

Ἀγαθοκλῆς | καὶ Λυσίμα|χος ἐπὶ | προσευχῇ.
Agathocles and Lysimachos, in / for *proseuche*.

The sole designation of deity does not suffice for identification. Only from the inscription itself can one deduce whether the discovered building is a synagogue or a place of prayer. As a result the categorization of the inscription is difficult to

44 Cf. two epitaphs from Rheneia insula, *IJO*, vol. I: 235–242: Epitaph of Heraclea (Ach70) and Martina (Ach71, only fragmentary). Cf. the conclusion by the editors, i.e. NOY / PANAYOTOV / BLOEDHORN: "clearly Jewish Epitaphs" (ibid. 218).

45 Vow of Zosas: CIJ, vol. I, no. 727 = IJO, vol. I: 219 Ach60 = Mitchell, 1999: 135, no.106; cf. the vow of Marcia: CIJ, vol. I, no. 730 = IJO, vol. I: 221 Ach61; and the vow of Laodice: CIJ, vol. I 728 = IJO, vol. I: 222 Ach62.

46 *CIJ*, vol. I, no 729 = *IJO*, vol. I: 223f. Ach63.

47 *CIJ*, vol. I, no. 726 = *IJO*, vol. III: 223 = MITCHELL, 1999: 135, no. 108. While this inscription was actually not found in the synagogue, but in an *insula* (apartment) some distance away, the name *Lysimachos* appears on the inscription discovered with the synagogue (*CIJ*, vol. I, no. 729 = *IJO*, vol. I: 223f. Ach63).

determine. The phrase ἐπὶ προσευχῇ without the article can be read also as "in fulfilment of a prayer", although the expression is only used in Jewish contexts.

Mitchell—whose newest anthology has just recently been published (2010)—has proposed in his recent research[48] to no longer read the epigraphic evidence as expressions of different religious convictions or beliefs, be it pagan or Jewish. He asks rather what the 197 inscriptions mentioning *Theos Hypsistos* or *Hypsistos* have in common:

> We need to find out why worshippers chose to address their god by a name that fitted both pagan and Jewish patterns of belief. Instead of assuming that the inscriptions need to be sorted into Jewish and pagan groups we should try to see if they make sense as a single body of material, treated on its own terms.[49]

Mitchell argues that these common designations of a deity mirror a separate cult of pagan-Jewish character, a cult spread, since the 2nd century BCE in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. In Greece, Macedonia, Inner Asia Minor and on the northern coast of the Black Sea it emerged from local cults that were reshaped in a Jewish manner. Mitchell's thesis has been contradicted occasionally.[50] The persuasive power of Mitchell's first thesis depends on the proof of a mixture of pagan and Jewish elements in one and the same inscription, or at least in inscriptions of one and the same sanctuary. However, clear pagan and Jewish documents occurring together may simply reflect the coexistence of Jewish and Gentile / pagan communities that gravitated, in intentional competition, to the predicative or appellative *Hypsistos*.[51] This mixture seems to be the one we find in the *Pydna inscription*, but there is no solid evidence, as we have seen. If a shrine of the *Zeus Hypsistos* was situated on Mount Cynthus on Delos while the inscriptions address a *Theos Hypsistos*, then the conclusion of the uniformity of the *Hypsistos* cult is not obvious.[52] This is an issue we cannot decide in a general way, but from case to case. In this point, Stein's criticism of Mitchell is correct.

48 The starting point of his first reflections in 1999 were the reports, in the Late Antiquity, 4th–5th c. CE, of Epiphanios of Salamis, Gregory of Nazianz, Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria on the *Hypsistarii* who observed the Sabbath and certain dietary taboos, but refused circumcision.

49 MITCHELL, 1999: 100.

50 STEIN, 2001a; SCHNABEL, 2002.

51 COLPE / LÖW, 1994: 1039; 1054f.

52 NOY, 2004: 218.

Mitchell's second thesis is more far-reaching: he claims that both the *theosebeis* ("god-fearers"), documented in epigraphy and literature, and Jews in the Diaspora should be understood as followers of this *Hypsistos* cult.[53] In the meantime (responding to critics) Mitchell has modified his original identification of the *Theosebeis* with the *Hypsistarii*: they are only "very closely related to one another."[54] But what about the worshippers of *Zeus Hypsistos*? Nobody can prove that Jews were among them.

A special and controversially discussed case is found in the epigraphic evidence of the Bosporanian kingdom that took shape in the 1st century CE.[55] Let us have a look at one example from Gorgippia (Anapa), Northern Black Sea from 41 CE:[56]

> Θεῶι Ὑψίστωι παντο̣|κράτορι εὐλογητῷ· βασιλέ|ως 〔[Μιθρ]ιδάτου〕 φιλο|ΓΕΡΜΑΚΟΥ καὶ φιλοπάτ|ριδος· ἔτους ηλτ΄ μη|νὸς Δείου· Ποθος Στ|ράβωνος ἀνέθηκεν [εν?] | τῇ προσευχῆι κατ' ἐυχὴ|ν θ[ρ]επτὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἧ ὄνο̣|μα Χρύσα, ἐφ' ᾧ ἧ ἀνέπα|φος καὶ ἀνεπηρέαστος | ἀπὸ παντὸς κληρον[όμ]|ου ὑπὸ Δία Γῆν Ἥλιο̣[ν.]
>
> To *Hypsistos*, all-powerful, blessed, in the reign of King Mithridates, friend of [...] and friend of his country. Year 338, in the month Deios. Pothos (son of) Strabo, dedicated in the p*roseuche* according to a vow his homebred slave whose name (is) Chrysa, on which she may be untouched and unviolated by every heir, under Zeus, Ge, Helios.

We find the *proseuche* again, but nothing else seems to be Jewish. Yet, the clearly pagan conclusion "under Zeus, Ge, Helios" is probably only a legal formula and not evidence of religious syncretism.

53 MITCHELL, 1998: 63.

54 MITCHELL, 2010: 196: "Here too the space / time divide argues strongly against the interpretation of either phenomenon in a purely local sense, and for the conclusion that the worshippers of *Theos Hypsistos* and the *theosebeis*, if not formally identical, were very closely related to one another."

55 TREBILCO, 1991: 139 assumes Jewish influence: "Thus, it seems that these groups were influenced by both Judaism and paganism and were on the border between the two. This is probably another instance in which pagans used the term *Theos Hypsistos* because of the Jewish influence." See SCHÜRER, 1897: 221; 225. USTINOVA, 1999: 239 negates a direct Jewish influence, because Jews lived only in the large ports, e.g., in Gorgippia, but not in Tanais. So Jews and non-Jews "worshipped distinct gods, but called them *Theos Hypsistos*."

56 *CIJ*, vol. I, no. 690 = *IJO*, vol. II: 303. See USTINOVA, 1999: 229; 371.

Conclusion

The cult of *Hypsistos* was not uniform, but rather shaped by diverse forces and marked differently from situation to situation. It did not reflect a turn towards a uniform "pagan monotheism". It is important to keep in mind that the many polyform interactions between Judaism, Christianity and pagan groupings, cults and denominations inside the Hellenistic world from the 2nd century BCE until Late Antiquity cannot be understood by using the modern opposition polytheism vs. monotheism.[57] This pair of terms is not suitable for the description of the complexity of the interactions. The *concept* of *Hypsistos* as a *reference* to a sole principle and to a sole god with multiple names is the logical consequence of a coherent imagination of the deity and grows out of it without any slippage. One might rather call these ideas "megatheistic" (as an expression of piety)[58] than "pantheonal"[59]. But such knowledge remained limited to the elite of the population, as Fürst remarks:[60]

> Wir können davon ausgehen, daß die Rede von einem einzigen Prinzip und einem einzigen Gott beziehungsweise eine synkretistische Gottesvorstellung – ein Gott unter vielen Namen – zur Allgemeinbildung der Spätantike gehörte. Gleichwohl beschränkte sich solches Wissen in der Regel doch auf die schmale Oberschicht, der das antike Luxusgut Bildung überhaupt zugänglich war.

The various cults take a further step in practice. It seems that many of the followers worshipped *Hypsistos* exclusively. The rituals and practices were based on the belief in a unique, transcendent god that could not be represented in human form.[61] It represents the point of reference of an inclusive concept of deity, beyond any exclusive thinking, but also beyond a "pantheonal" thinking, as the northern Lycian Oenoanda oracle (Ceylanköy, 3rd century CE) shows, which is formulated as a dictum of the Clarian Apollo:[62]

57 See FÜRST, 2005: 497.

58 CHANIOTIS, 2010: 113.

59 WISCHMEYER, 2005: 156; FÜRST, 2005: 507.

60 FÜRST, 2005: 505.

61 MITCHELL, 2010: 197f.

62 *SEG*, vol. XXVII, no. 933. First published BEAN, 1971: 20–22, no. 37. See ROBERT, 1971/1989: 597–619; HALL, 1978: 263–268; MERKELBACH / STAUDER, 1996: 41f., no. 27 = MERKELBACH, 1997: 202–204, no. 25; MITCHELL, 1999: 81–92, no. 233; SCHNABEL, 2002: 594.

[Α]ὐτοφυής, ἀδί | δακτος, ἀμήτωρ, | ἀστυφέλικτος, |
οὔνομα μὴ χω | ρῶν, πολυώνυμος, | ἐν πυρὶ ναίων, |
τοῦτο θεός· μεικρὰ | δὲ θεοῦ μερὶς ἄνγε||λοι ἡμεις.
τοῦτο πευ|θομένοισι θεοῦ πέ|ρι ὅστις ὑπάρχει, |
Ἀἰ[θ]έ[ρ]α πανδερκ[ῆ | θε] ὸν ἔννεπεν, εἰς | ὃν ὁρῶντας
εὔχεσθ' ἠώ|ους πρὸς ἀντολίην ἐσορῶ[ν]|τα[ς].
Born of itself, untaught, without a mother, unshakeable,
not contained in a name, known by many names, dwelling in fire,
this is god. We, his angels, are a small part of god.
To you who ask this question about god, what his essential nature is,
he has pronounced that Aether is god who sees all,
on whom you should gaze and pray at dawn, looking towards the sunrise.

The Hypsistos cult also brought local deities into a position that would not belong to them with a simple translation of their functions. A "third space" opens: the new "*koine* of religious language"[63] was applied to traditional local cults, arising in very different situations where negotiation at the boundaries and borders of groupings and communities took place. The Jewish use of *Hypsistos* attempted to translate exclusive notions of YHWH into *this* environment, respectively into this emerging new space of negotiation. Unlike clearly delimiting practices like the prohibition of intermarriage, circumcision and dietary laws, the Jewish belief in some Diaspora communities converged with a general tendency to forms of an inclusive understanding of one God. So we have to take the idea into account, that this variety of Jewish belief was no more absolutely exclusive. Thus, the traditional hierarchy of centre and periphery had been reverted: in the Hellenistic period, the Jewish Diaspora became a major place of intercultural mediation and transcultural negotiation.

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63 WISCHMEYER, 2005: 160.

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Biography

Jörg Lanckau studied Evangelical Theology at the Universities of Halle-Wittenberg, Basel and Leipzig. He did his PhD at *Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn* (2005) with a thesis on *Der Herr der Träume: Eine Studie zur Funktion des Traumes in der Josefsgeschichte der Hebräischen Bibel* (published 2006). He is a postdoc at the University Research Priority Program "Asia and Europe" of Zurich University and pastor of the Evangelical Reformed parishes of Untervaz and Haldenstein in Grisons (Switzerland).