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## *Theos Hypsistos* in the Papyri

In the early centuries of our era, the cult of the Highest God, *theos hypsistos*, was widespread in the eastern Mediterranean and even north of the Black Sea. Yet in Egypt after the beginning of the second century C.E. there is no evidence for this cult, and the phrase *theos hypsistos* does not appear in documentary papyri until the fourth century, when it turns up in several letters. Why?

First, some background. On their way to the council of Nicaea in 325, a group of bishops met the father of the future St. Gregory of Nazianzus in Cappadocia and converted him to Christianity. Like his more famous son, the elder Gregory became a Christian bishop; however, before his conversion, Gregory *père* had belonged to a religious sect or cult that is described by Gregory *filis* in the funeral oration for his father:

“Mixing two strongly opposed elements, Hellenic deception and legalistic mumbo jumbo, (the cult) has been composed of portions of each while avoiding parts of both. Rejecting the idols and sacrifices of the former, they worship fire and lamps; venerating the Sabbath and fastidiousness towards certain foods of the latter, they disdain circumcision. Among the humble they have the name Hypsistarians, and for them the *pantokrator* alone is worthy of awe”<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise St. Gregory of Nyssa describes this sect as those who worship a god “whom they name *hypsistos* or *pantokrator*”<sup>2</sup>. The fourth century heresiologist St. Epiphanius of Salamis also describes this sect; he says that its members are not Jews, Christians, or Samaritans, and they worship one god, called *pantokrator*. Epiphanius compares some of their places of worship with the *proseuche* (which in this instance may or may not mean synagogue) outside the walls of Philippi where St. Paul and Barnabas met the Godfearer Lydia in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 16, 10–18)<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to patristic evidence, a large and growing number of dedicatory inscriptions, many known and discussed for over a century, show that a cult of *theos hypsistos* or *Zeus hypsistos* or simply ὁ ὑψιστος was widespread. Most of the epigraphic evidence comes from Anatolia, but the large number of dedications to *theos hypsistos* at locations in southern Russia such as Tanais on the Don river led Emil Schürer to publish an article in 1897 that has remained the starting point for all subsequent discussion<sup>4</sup>. Lists of these inscriptions have appeared at various times in the last century<sup>5</sup>, and their meaning has been the subject of a continuous debate, most recently in an exceptional article by Stephen Mitchell and the recent book of Yulia Ustinova<sup>6</sup>. Mitchell appends to his article a list of almost three hundred known inscriptions to *theos hypsistos* or *Zeus hypsistos*<sup>7</sup>. Significant numbers have been found in Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Syria-

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 18. 5 (PG 35. 990) (my translation); English translations of this and other texts related to Hypsistarians are collected in *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diaspora Sourcebook*, ed. M. Williams, Baltimore 1998, 176–179.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 2 (PG 45. 482).

<sup>3</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 80. 1–2. Epiphanius calls the sect the Messalians; on their identification with Hypsistarians, see St. Mitchell, *The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, in: *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, Oxford 1999, 92–97.

<sup>4</sup> E. Schürer, *Die Juden im bosporanischen Reiche und die Genossenschaften der σεβόμενοι θεὸν ὑψιστον ebendasselbst*, Sitzungsberichte der Kgl. preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 1 (1897) 200–225.

<sup>5</sup> A. B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Cambridge 1925, II 873–890; RE IX 444–450 (s. v. Ὑψιστος); RE Suppl. XII 1477–1480 (s. v. Zeus).

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 81–148; Y. Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom: Celestial Aphrodite and the Most High God*, Leiden 1999. Both Mitchell and Ustinova give a very full bibliography: Ustinova lists over 800 items. The two come to very different conclusions about this material and it will be apparent to any who pursue this that I agree with Mitchell.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 128–147.

Palestine, as well as a few in Egypt and elsewhere. Over twenty dedications are known from Athens, most from the Pnyx, which seems to have served as a sanctuary for Hypsistarians in the second and third centuries C.E.<sup>8</sup> Evidence for the worship of *theos hypsistos* begins as early as the first century B.C.E. and continues into the fifth century of our era. Its focus on a single god, sometimes identified as Zeus *hypsistos* but more typically unnamed and called *theos hypsistos* or simply *hypsistos*, is considered characteristic of the syncretistic and henotheistic tendencies of late antique paganism<sup>9</sup>.

The term *theos hypsistos* is also frequently used in the Septuagint to translate one of the names of God and is so used as well by Philo, Josephus, and some of the authors of the New Testament. In addition, a number of inscriptions of indubitably Jewish origin refer to *theos hypsistos*. This has led to arguments as to whether particular inscriptions can be identified as either Jewish or non-Jewish, not always to good effect: almost sixty years ago, A. D. Nock, in his discussion of a papyrus containing the rules of an association of Zeus *hypsistos* in Alexandria, wrote of being “on a religious frontier” where certainty, or even strong suspicion, is often impossible<sup>10</sup>. An illustration of the porous nature of that frontier is a stele set up by worshippers of Zeus *hypsistos* at Pydna in Macedonia about 250 C.E., judged pagan but including among its officials an *archisynagogos*<sup>11</sup>.

More importantly, both the epigraphic evidence and the literary *testimonia* concerning *theos hypsistos* have contributed to discussion of both the manner and degree of religious interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish communities in the diaspora, with obvious reference to the question of the *theosebeis*, a term that could mean simply the pious but which came to be identified with the so-called “Godfearers”, those who maintained a connection with Judaism or the synagogue without undergoing full conversion or circumcision. Some have maintained that the *theosebeis* as an identifiable class or group scarcely existed, or that the terms of the New Testament and Josephus, *sebomenoi ton theon* or *phoboumenoi ton theon*, could not identify such a group if it did. Space does not allow me to argue in detail why this is wrong — there are several inscriptions for *theosebeis*, most famously at Aphrodisias<sup>12</sup> — but the *locus classicus* in the New Testament for discussion of Godfearers is Acts 16, 10–18, where Paul and Silas at Philippi encounter Lydia, a *sebomene ton theon*, at a location outside the city, a *proseuche* or synagogue, one of the spots that Epiphanius compared to the meeting places of the Hypsistarians. Shortly afterwards, at this same location, a possessed slave girl hailed Paul and Silas as δούλοι τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου, “slaves of the highest God”, and continued to do so until she was exorcised<sup>13</sup>. Stephen Mitchell has argued, I think persuasively, that the Godfearers of the Hellenistic and early Roman period were in fact “the direct ancestors of the Hypsistarians of late antiquity”<sup>14</sup>. St. Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth century attests that worshippers of *theos hypsistos* referred to themselves as *theosebeis*<sup>15</sup>.

Given the widespread evidence for the worship of *theos hypsistos* in the eastern Mediterranean, it is remarkable that there is so little evidence from Egypt, and that among papyrus letters the phrase *theos*

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 97–98.

<sup>9</sup> St. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, Oxford 1993, II 43–50.

<sup>10</sup> A. D. Nock, C. Roberts, T. C. Skeat, *The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos*, HTR 29 (1936) 65; reprinted in A. D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, Oxford 1986, I 424–425.

<sup>11</sup> Text reprinted in: *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 1 (1976) 26–27 from *Mélanges helléniques offerts à Georges Daux*, Paris 1974, 51–55.

<sup>12</sup> The literature on “Godfearers” is large; see Ustinova, *Supreme Gods* (s. n. 6), 203–216. That *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi ton theon* cannot be taken as technical terms invariably designating Jewish sympathizers does not mean that they can never do so, nor does it imply that such sympathizers did not exist in significant numbers; see L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, Princeton 1993, 73–74, 342–382. On the relation of *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi ton theon* to *theosebeis* and on the epigraphic evidence for *theosebeis*, see St. Mitchell, *Wer waren die Gottesfürchtigen?*, Chiron 28 (1998) 55–64. For a summary and defense of the traditional view, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. G. Vermes et al., Edinburgh 1973–1987, III 150–176.

<sup>13</sup> P. Trebilco, *Paul and Silas — ‘Servants of the Most High God’ (Acts 16. 16–18)*, JSNT 36 (1989) 51–73, argues that Paul exorcised the slave girl because as a Jew he objected to the pagan connotations or syncretistic possibilities of the term ὁ Θεὸς ὁ ὑψίστος. This seems to me to be a very forced reading; Paul was simply irritated by the girl and he needed no other reason for exorcizing her beyond demonic possession. Here as in his later work *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge 1991, Trebilco tries to maintain a distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish usage of *hypsistos*, the former being clear and exclusivist, the latter vague and syncretist; on this see Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 110–115.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 120.

<sup>15</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione in Spiritu et Veritate* III 92–93 (PG 68. 281).

*hypsistos* only begins to appear in the fourth century. It is worth asking why such a phenomenon is largely missing from the best documented province of the eastern empire and what the papyrological evidence might tell or suggest since, except for Nock's gild, no documentary papyrus which mentions *hypsistos* has ever been mentioned or discussed by anyone who has written substantially about this sect. Mitchell, for example, simply refers the reader to the list of papyri in Ronchi's lexicon of divine epithets in documentary papyri without comment<sup>16</sup>.

Evidence for the worship of *hypsistos* in Egypt, while not plentiful, is noteworthy. In 1936, A. D. Nock, together with Colin Roberts and T. C. Skeat, published the aforementioned papyrus containing rules for an association dedicated to Zeus *hypsistos*, dated to the first century B.C.E. Along with this, Mitchell lists five inscriptions from Egypt to *theos hypsistos*, three of them likely or certainly Jewish, but two of them not. Yet *theos hypsistos* turns up in the documentary papyri, excluding Nock's gild and one clear quotation from the Septuagint (P.Oxy. XVIII 2194, dated fifth-sixth century), at least eight times: in fact, a search in the DukeDataBank turns up no use of the word *hypsistos* at all except as part of the expression *theos hypsistos*, including seven letters from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. I think it worthwhile to consider these seven as a group, along with a few of the magical papyri, though in doing so, Nock's warning of the religious frontier is well-taken.

Among the magical papyri, *theos hypsistos* turns up at least five times. In two instances from the first century C.E. (PGM IV 1068, 5. 46), *theos hypsistos* is identified with semitic gods other than Yahweh. Another of a much later date (PGM vol. 2 p. 191) is clearly Christian. *Theos hypsistos* is, however, identified with *Iao Adonai* (PGM XII 63) in a group of spells dated ca. 100 C.E. in which Eros is called upon to carry out the command to the one who casts the spell because, the caster declares, δοῦλός εἰμι τοῦ ὑψίστου θε[ο]ῦ [τ]οῦ κατέχοντο[ς] τὸν κόσμον καὶ παντοκρ[ά]τορος, "I am a slave of *theos hypsistos* the establisher of the world and *pantokrator*" (PGM XII 71–72). The text is clearly judaizing, yet not Jewish; it combines Hellenic and Jewish elements; and it uses both of the terms associated with Hypsistarians by the patristic *testimonia*, *theos hypsistos* and *pantokrator*. It also parallels the cry of the demon-possessed girl at precisely the point in Acts where Paul has converted the proto-Hypsistarian Lydia of Philippi in an area associated with the worship of *theos hypsistos*. Do we have here an example, not of Jewish magic or Christian magic or even undifferentiated pagan magic, but Hypsistarian magic?

While those who have examined the epigraphic evidence for the cult have usually argued about whether a given inscription is pagan or Jewish, for those who have treated the documentary papyri over the decades, *theos hypsistos* has suggested Christian unless proven otherwise. Ghedini, Naldini, and Tibiletti make little more than brief references to the literature on the cult<sup>17</sup>. Yet of the seven letters of the fourth century that mention *theos hypsistos* (all dated on palaeographic grounds), two are certainly Christian, one pagan, and four make no clear religious profession. Ronchi lists these as *incerto se pagano o cristiano*. Seven letters are certainly not enough for any sort of statistical analysis, yet the fact that a majority of these are ambiguous ought to give us pause. Clear Christian use of *theos hypsistos* in inscriptions is actually quite rare, although that is no doubt because the bulk of the inscriptions are dated prior to the fourth century, when we should expect little epigraphic evidence of Christianity.

The clearly Christian letters include P.Herm. 9, a request for prayer addressed to the anchorite John, containing several formulas familiar from other such requests and concluding that after the highest god, the sender relies on John's intercessions. SB IX 6055 not only contains many of the usual formulas associated with Christian letters, but the sender prays both to the highest god and the divine providence of Jesus Christ. When we turn to the four letters containing *theos hypsistos* and listed by Ronchi as religiously uncertain, we find that none of them are concerned with matters of religion per se, so it is not surprising that the religious expressions of their authors are ambiguous; yet each uses the expression *theos hypsistos* (or in one case τῷ ἐν ὑψίστῳ θεῷ, "to God on high") in the greeting formula, and none of the original editors of these letters make any mention of the cult. These letters have been included in collections and studies such as Naldini's *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto*, and it is tempting to suspect that over the years scholars such as Ghedini, Naldini, and Tibiletti have been guilty of assuming that, absent other evidence, such letters must be Christian.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 146; see G. Ronchi, *Lexicon theonymon rerumque sacrarum et divinarum ad Aegyptum*, Milan 1974–1977, 1120–1122.

<sup>17</sup> G. Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane dai papyri greci del III e del IV secolo*, Milan 1923, 213 (note to P.Lips. I 111. 3 = Ghedini 30. 3); Mario Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto*, rev. ed. Fiesole 1998, 9; Giuseppe Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papyri greci del II e IV secolo d.C.*, Milan 1979, 111–113.

Yet I believe that Naldini was right in classifying these four as probably Christian. P.land. II 14, P.Lips. I 111, P.Lond. III 1244, and P.Select. 18 all contain so many other formulas associated with Christian letters that it is hard to avoid the suspicion, and the likelihood that they are Christian is increased by looking at my original question: why is there so little evidence for *theos hypsistos* in Egypt before the fourth century?

Arguing from dates based on palaeography is always problematic, but if we accept the dating of these letters to the fourth century then we have a puzzle: there is a large gap. Among documentary papyri, from Nock's papyrus of the guild of Zeus *hypsistos* to the fourth century, there is nothing, unless one includes the magical papyri dated to the first century C.E. Naldini claimed that *theos hypsistos* turns up in the documentary papyri in the second century C.E. and gave a reference to the SB, but this turns out to be an undated inscription<sup>18</sup>. In fact, the epigraphic evidence for *theos hypsistos* in Egypt is surprisingly thin, compared with other areas of the eastern Mediterranean, where it is thickest in the second and third centuries C.E. Cyprus, for example, has over twenty, all but one imperial, and most of second or third century. Yet of the five inscriptions from Egypt listed by Mitchell, three are from before the Common Era, one is undated — its content is pagan and magical — and only one (probably Jewish) is dated (uncertainly) to the first or second century C.E. (SEG XXXIII 1326)<sup>19</sup>.

I am, of course, in danger of making an argument from silence, but there seems a good explanation for why references to *theos hypsistos* would dry up in Egypt around 100 C.E. and re-appear two or three hundred years later, and that is the Jewish revolt of 115–117. The devastation of the Jewish community of Egypt in the aftermath of the revolt would leave little room for Godfearers, the seed-bed for Hypsistarians<sup>20</sup>. Inscriptions which mention *theosebeis*, most of which date from the second to fourth centuries and are scattered around the Mediterranean, are completely missing from Egypt<sup>21</sup>. It is telling that the observations of Cyril of Alexandria concerning *theosebeis* who worship *theos hypsistos* only concern Phoenecia and Syria: he says nothing about Egypt, whose religious coloration he certainly knew well. The re-appearance of *theos hypsistos* in the fourth century in Egypt would then be due to the rapid growth of Christianity there.

This is true even for the one fourth century papyrus in which *theos hypsistos* appears that is not Christian, Jewish, or even Hypsistarian, but emphatically pagan, and that is a letter from the so-called Theophanes archive. The archive was originally published in the Hermopolis and Rylands papyri and subsequently brought together and re-edited by Moscadi<sup>22</sup>. The letters in the archive were written by various hands in a group dedicated to Hermes Trismegistus, and so appear in the modern literature on ancient hermetism and the *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>23</sup>. Yet while the terms *pantokrator* and *theos hypsistos* never occur in the entire *Corp. Hermet.*, *pantokrator* appears in P.Herm. 5, 12–13 (Moscadi X), where it may refer to Hermes Trismegistus, and *theos hypsistos* in P.Herm. 6, 26 (Moscadi 10), where it almost certainly does not (Hermes, after all, was only a messenger)<sup>24</sup>. Despite the very self-conscious paganism of these letters, both Rees, the original editor, and Moscadi were deeply struck by the repeated similarities in terms and phraseology with contemporary Christian documents, so much so that Moscadi felt that the expression *theos hypsistos* here could only be the result of a Christian ambience<sup>25</sup>. He was right.

<sup>18</sup> Naldini, 9; SB I 1323.

<sup>19</sup> Jewish: CIJ II 1433, II B.C.E. (= Mitchell # 283); CIJ II 1443, II B.C.E. (= Mitchell # 285); SEG 33 (1983) 1326, I–II C.E.? (= Mitchell # 288). Not Jewish: CIJ II 1532, I B.C.E. (= Mitchell # 286); Cook, *Zeus*, II 889 (= Mitchell # 284). The inscriptions from Egypt in CIJ are reprinted in an appendix to CPJ III, whose editor judges CIJ II 1532 “not Jewish”.

<sup>20</sup> R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993, 275–278; J. Méléze Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt*, Philadelphia 1995, 198–225.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *Gottesfürchtigen* (s. n. 12), 57; *Theos Hypsistos* (s. n. 3), 117–119.

<sup>22</sup> A. Moscadi, *Le lettere dell'archivio di Teofane*, *Aegyptus* 50 (1970) 88–154.

<sup>23</sup> G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Cambridge 1986, 175–176, 192–193.

<sup>24</sup> In Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul are at one point identified as Zeus and Hermes respectively, since Paul did all the talking.

<sup>25</sup> Moscadi, *Archivio* (s. n. 22), 100. Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* (s. n. 23), 176 n. 94 takes issue with the idea of a Christian background for the vocabulary of some of these letters.