A God by Any Other Name:
Polyonymy in Greco-Roman Antiquity
and Early Christianity

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The phenomenon of polyonymy—the use of multiple names, epithets, and descriptions for a deity—is defined and distinguished from closely related ideas. The Greco-Roman practice is illustrated via five deities: Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, Selene, and Isis. Related practices of the earliest Christians are explored via selected NT texts in Acts and John. Although monotheism placed some restrictions on early Christian use of polyonymy in the strict sense of proper names, a profusion of titles was readily employed to describe Jesus. This distinction corresponds roughly to the difference between contact syncretism and internal syncretism.

Key Words: Christology, divine names, divine titles, polyonymy, syncretism

“What’s in a name?” So Juliet queries as she reflects on the connection between an entity and its verbal designation (Romeo and Juliet II, ii, 1–2). Juliet concludes that the connection between a name and its corresponding reality, whether a rose or Romeo, is inconsequential, but what Juliet dismisses between devoted lovers many in antiquity would have retained vis-à-vis those objects of supreme devotion: the gods. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians generally affirmed that it does indeed matter what one calls the deity, even if this pious sense of propriety led to varied, even contradictory, practices.¹ In the earliest era, the gods were often regarded as anonymous, without names, or at least with unknown or ineffable names. Eventually, Homer gave currency to the names of the traditional Greek pantheon, and eventually, reverence for these gods and others led to a multiplicity of names, sometimes resulting in elaborate prayers, spells, and invocations.² Primitive anonymity gave way to the tendency to

employ many names for one god. This article is concerned with the latter phenomenon, polyonymy, and its use in the Greco-Roman world.  

Although the writings of the NT neither mention the phenomenon of polyonymy per se nor consciously adopt or adapt it, certain developments in Christian theology and practice may be fruitfully compared to it.  

Christology, for example, has often been analyzed at least in part by the choice of names, titles, and descriptions of Jesus. Early Christians employed a wide variety of terms, images, and metaphors for Jesus, but were there any limits on the modes of address? In addition, varied descriptions of Jesus might have been advantageous to the movement’s evangelistic efforts and geographical spread. Would early Christian preachers employ diverse names or titles as a way of appealing to Greco-Roman religious sensitivities? Finally, early Christian liturgical practices could employ a variety of forms of divine address and thereby enrich worship and aid the expression of their religious experience, but again, certain features of early Christianity, both those inherited from Judaism and those that evolved within the movement, might place limits on the names and titles by which God and Jesus could be described.

The thesis of this essay is that early Christians enjoyed a significant degree of diversity in communicating their faith publicly and practicing it liturgically, but avoided—even if unconsciously—aspects of polyonymy that they would have regarded as unacceptable religious syncretism. This qualified practice of polyonymy will be seen in large part to rest on a distinction between the particularity of proper names and the descriptive force of titles and epithets. Admittedly, there is not an absolute distinction between proper names and titles. In unusual cases names have evolved into titles (e.g., “Caesar”), and titles have effectively become names (e.g., “Christ”).  

Nevertheless, the distinction is generally useful, given that names normally communicate identity, whereas titles pertain to roles, functions, and attributes. This rough distinction is also related to two types of syncretism identified by modern scholars, as we will see in the next section.

**TECHNICAL TERMS, RELATED CONCEPTS, AND TWO IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS**

The phenomenon of using multiple names for a single deity not only had its practitioners; it had its own technical terminology. As early as the 5th

3. Charles King uses “polymorphism” to denote a similar phenomenon: “the idea that gods could have multiple identities with incompatible attributes.” To the extent that names are employed in the portrayal of those identities, polymorphism overlaps with polyonymy. See King, “The Organization of Roman Beliefs,” *Classical Antiquity* 22 (2003) 275–312, esp. pp. 292–97.

4. Later Christian writers, such as Arnobius, Minucius Felix, and Augustine, did critique the multiple identities of pagan gods. See King, “Organization,” 297.

5. *BDAG* 498, 1091.

century B.C., Greeks referred to various deities using the adjective polyonymous (πολυώνυμος). The term was used in the classical and Hellenistic eras by poets, philosophers, tragedians, comedians, and writers of epigrams and inscriptions. The noun πολυώνυμία, “multiplicity of names,” is less common; the verb πολυώνυμέω, “to have many names,” and the adverb πολυώνυμως, “with many names,” are relatively rare and are only attested in late ancient and medieval texts. If having many names was not a sufficient honor, a later coinage (at least as early as the 1st century A.D.) introduced the term μυριωνύμος, “of countless names,” or more literally, “of myriad or 10,000 names.” So Plutarch remarks that “Isis . . . by most people has been called by myriad names” (Is. Os. 372E).7 We actually know one of the persons who did so thanks to an inscription in a portico on the twin Nile islands of Philae. The inscription reads, “I, Theomnēstus, a general of Ptolemy, came to Philae and worshiped the myriad-named Isis and the gods in the Adytum.”8

Latin equivalents occurred far less frequently. Apuleius, the 2nd-century A.D. author of the Metamorphoses or the Golden Ass, refers to Isis as multinominis (“many named,” Metam. 11.22), but this appears to be the only extant use of the word.9 Quite similar is the remark by Isis that nomine multiiugo totus veneratus orbis (“by a manifold name the entire world worships [me],” Metam. 11.5), in which the combination of nomen and an adjective achieve the equivalent of a technical term.

Two closely related concepts deserve mention here. Syncretism is a favorite catchall word of scholars of antiquity, especially historians of religion. Although the word has suffered from both an imprecise definition and polemical usage, it remains useful as a way of speaking of the intermingling of divine names, attributes, functions, and accoutrements in the religious and cultural bazaar of the ancient Mediterranean world.10 Indeed, it has been argued that “the term’s real value lies in its imprecision.”11

One attempt to bring some clarity to the matter is the distinction between “internal” syncretism and “contact” syncretism. Internal syncretism “involves the transfer of powers, characteristics, and divine epithets within

7. On this text, see J. Gwynn Griffiths, Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970).
a specific religious domain.“ It happens when a particular deity’s names, forms, and functions diversify. In contrast to this, contact syncretism occurs across cultures and nations when the religion of newcomers mingles with that of indigenous populations. It is “the appropriation of one people’s gods by another or their reinterpretation in the other’s terms.” The so-called mystery cults that flourished during the Hellenistic age contributed to contact syncretism, given their eclectic nature and their eastern (at least in part) origin.

The second related phenomenon is interpretatio Romana or “Latin translation.” The phrase derives from Tacitus (Germ. 43.3) and has been defined as “the Roman habit of replacing the name of a foreign deity with that of a Roman Deity considered somehow comparable.” In fact, this strategy of religious translation was also employed by non-Romans as a way of demonstrating correspondence between their native gods and those of Rome. The text in Tacitus refers to a Germanic people, the Nahanarvali, who speak of their gods “according to the Latin translation as Castor and Pollux.” The Nahanarvali evidently regarded these Roman appellations as roughly equivalent to the indigenous names for their gods. But the best-known examples of the interpretatio Romana are the substitution of the names of Roman deities for the Greek Olympians. Thus, Zeus is associated with Jupiter, Hera with Juno, Athena with Minerva, and so on. A Hellenic counterpart, the interpretatio Graeca, was coined in the 19th century to denote the parallel phenomenon in Greek authors.

Syncretism, interpretatio Romana, and polyonymy are thus interrelated. The first of these is the broadest concept, and the last two can be understood as subdivisions of it. Polyonymy and interpretatio Romana are two means by which syncretism occurs. When devotees of non-Roman gods liken them to the Roman pantheon, they are engaging in interpretatio Romana. When the same devotees address their gods using a variety of names, epithets, and descriptions that draw on multiple religious traditions, they are employing polyonymy. In both cases, syncretism occurs. New deities

are accommodated into an existing system, combining without necessarily fusing the cults or the divine identities.\textsuperscript{17}

Two important distinctions should be noted concerning the use of polyonymy. First, as is always the case, a phenomenon may exist without technical terms being present. Hence, a deity may be lavishly invoked with multiple names, epithets, and titles, without explicit use of the technical language. Conversely, the technical language may be used apart from the actual phenomenon. One might refer to a god as polyonymous and move on without elaboration, particularly if that attribute was widely acknowledged. Naturally, the terminology and the phenomenon often coincide, such that the technical vocabulary becomes part of the very phenomenon to which it refers, that is, “many namedness” becomes one of the many names ascribed to the deity.

The second distinction has already been alluded to: the distinction between a strict polyonymy of names as over against an address to the deity that simply involves epithets and titles. Employing the first type, a worshiper might address Apollo as Phoebus, Helios, or Horus. The second type employs descriptions pertaining to characteristics and functions of the deity rather than names per se. Thus, Zeus might be called the father of gods and humans, the benefactor, the creator, etc. There will be times when the distinction between proper names and descriptive epithets becomes blurred, and there are many instances in which the two techniques are combined. This distinction between polyonymous address and what we might call polytitular address corresponds to the above distinction between internal and contact syncretism. When divine titles, epithets, and descriptions multiply and yet remain largely within one religious and cultural system, we have internal syncretism. On the other hand, as soon as a cult adopts for its deity the proper name of another religion’s deity, we have contact syncretism.

**Polyonymy in Greco-Roman Antiquity**

Polyonymy in prayers had a twofold function: (1) to provide religious assurance to the persons invoking the deity, and (2) to offer due reverence to the god being invoked. The worshipers needed assurance that the god was indeed hearing them, and this only occurred with the proper invocation. The gods must know that they are being invoked; if they are not correctly

\textsuperscript{17} The technical vocabulary was not used exclusively for deities. Philo of Alexandria refers to both Moses (\textit{Mut.} 1.125) and the sage (\textit{Ebr.} 1.92) as polyonymous. Several studies have explored the Roman practice of polyonymy vis-à-vis human beings. See Alan Cameron, “Polyonymy in the Late Roman Aristocracy: The Case of Petronius Probus,” \textit{JRS} 75 (1985) 164–82; Olli Salomies, \textit{Adoptive and Polyonymous Nomenclature in the Roman Empire} (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1992); and Benet Salway, “What’s in a Name: A Survey of Roman Onomastic Practice from c.700 B.C. to A.D. 700,” \textit{JRS} 84 (1994) 124–45. The most common use of the terminology in ancient literature, however, is in reference to Near Eastern and Mediterranean deities.
named, they may not listen.\textsuperscript{18} The profusion of names thus suggests that it was “better to do too much of a good thing than to expose oneself to the danger of overlooking the decisive word.”\textsuperscript{19} Later texts sometimes even employed a liturgical addendum such as “or by whatever other name it is fitting to address you,” so as to insure the deity’s attention.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition to assuring the worshiper, multiple epithets and titles also extolled the greatness of the deity by implying a variety of functions and benefits and the breadth or even universality of the god’s recognition. Thus, the author of the Pseudo-Aristotelian work \textit{de Mundo} explains that “God [Zeus], being one, is polyonymous, being named according to all the conditions which he himself has inaugurated.” He then proceeds to relate Zeus’s epithets to a variety of natural and social phenomena under the aegis of the god.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, when Apuleius employed many names to praise Isis, he “taught a very simple lesson: Isis was great! . . . How did he know? Clearly, because so many people said so, in one city after another all over the world. They worshiped her even under other names.”\textsuperscript{22} This universalizing tendency of polyonymy is clearly seen in the poet Theocritus when he addressed Aphrodite as πολυώνυμε καὶ πολύναε (“of many names and many shrines,” \textit{Id.} 15.109). Many names were required precisely because of the multiplicity of shrines, no doubt in diverse regions where different languages and cultures prevailed.\textsuperscript{23}

In at least one case, polyonymy was an attribute coveted by a goddess herself. In his \textit{Hymn to Artemis} (or Diana) Callimachus, the Hellenistic poet, envisions the goddess as a child sitting on the knees of Zeus and asking,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Maurus Servius, the 4th-century grammarian, noted in his commentary on \textit{Aeneid}: “Priests used to pray in this way, ‘Jupiter, Best and Greatest, or by any other name you would wish to be called.’” See G. Thilo and H. Hagen, eds., \textit{Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii Carmina Commentarii} (vol. 1; Leipzig: Teubner, 1878) 277 (commentary on \textit{Aeneid}, book 2, line 351). Cf. Apuleius, \textit{Metam.} 11.2; Macrobius, \textit{Saturnalia} 3.9, 10; and Eduard Norden, \textit{Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte Religiöser Rede} (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913) 144. For similar formulas in Plato, see the references in John Burnet, \textit{Plato’s Phaedo: Edited with Introduction and Notes} (London: Oxford University Press, 1911) 111. For Aeschylus, see E. Fraenkel, \textit{Agamemnon} (vol. 2; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950) 100. In the magical papyri, the effusion of names in an invocation increased the likelihood that the petitioner would gain power over the deity. See A. D. Nock, \textit{Essays on Religion and the Ancient World} (vol. 1; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 186–7; and Simon Pulley, “The Power of Names in Classical Greek Religion,” \textit{Classical Quarterly} n.s. 44 (1994) 17–25.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Pseudo-Aristotle, \textit{Mund.} 401a, line 11. For the Greek text, see W. L. Lorimer, \textit{Aristotelis qui fertur libellus de mundo} (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1933). For a translation, see E. S. Forster, \textit{De Mundo} (London: Oxford University Press, 1914).
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ramsay MacMullen, \textit{Paganism in the Roman Empire} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981) 90–91.
\item \textsuperscript{23} John Lydus, the 6th-century scholar and administrator, observed that “in the hymns, we find Aphrodite called by close to 300 names” (\textit{de Mensibus} 4.64:109). See R. Wuensch, \textit{Ioannis Laurentii Lydi: Liber de Mensibus} (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898) 118.
\end{itemize}
“Grant that I may guard my maidenhood forever, Father, and give me many-namedness so that Phoebus might not strive against me.” Already the precocious young deity recognizes the advantage that polyonymy bestows in the rivalry of the gods.

A rehearsal of all the uses of the technical terms and the deities associated with them would be as tedious as it is unnecessary. In what follows I will highlight five noteworthy examples of divine polyonymy and selective instances, both literary and epigraphic, of the key terms.

1. Zeus, the head of the Olympian pantheon, was associated with all manner of celestial and meteorological phenomena. His various titles reveal connections with the sky, the wind, the rain, thunder, lightning, meteorites, and in the Hellenistic age, especially the sun. A. B. Cook's multivolume work on Zeus offers an exhaustive treatment of the god's appellations and descriptions. Cook notes that Zeus's association with the sun in particular led to “his fusion with a variety of solar gods all round the eastern end of the Mediterranean—Amen-Râ at Egyptian Thebes, Sarapis at Alexandria, Ba'âl-hâmmân in north Africa, Ba'âl-štâmîn in Syria, not to mention the Mithras of Chaldean magic.” These are just a few of the appellations associated with Zeus. Some of them, such as those just mentioned, are proper names belonging to foreign gods; even more of them are descriptive epithets that, while not naming another deity, attribute some characteristic or function to Zeus. When Cleanthes opens his famous Hymn to Zeus with the words, “Most glorious of immortals, many-named (πολυώνυμε), ever all-mighty Zeus,” he may have in mind both types of designations.

The flexibility that some persons in antiquity exercised when addressing Zeus is seen clearly in the remark of the philosopher Celsus quoted by Origen: “I think, therefore, that it makes no difference whether we call Zeus the Most High, or Zen, or Adonai, or Sabaoth, or Amoun like the Egyptians, or Papaeus like the Scythians.” Origen, of course, begged to differ, but Celsus's view was undoubtedly widespread.

2. Dionysus's polyonymous nature is vividly seen in Ovid's Metamorphoses. A priest of Bacchus commands the celebration of the god's feast, and the women, young and old, commence the festivities with incense and elaborate invocations:
[They] called upon Bacchus, hailing him by different titles, as Bromius and Lyaeus, as the son of the thunderbolt, the twice-born, the only child ever to have two mothers. He was invoked as Nisaeus, as Thyonaeus of the flowing tresses, as Lenaeus, and as planter of the genial vine, as Nyctelius and father Eleleus, as Iacchus and Euhan, and by all the other names besides that Bacchus bears among the Greeks.30

Dionysus is invoked as a polyonymous god in one of the Orphic Hymns: “Come, blessed Dionysus, bull-faced god conceived in fire, Bassareus and Bacchos, many-named master of all.”31 Sophocles uses the same term in Antigone 1115. One commentator on the Antigone text notes that “Most of the greater deities are called πολυώνυμοι by the poets; but the word is peculiarly suitable to Dionysus, owing to the manner in which his cult was interwoven with other cults. . . . Upwards of sixty titles given to him can be enumerated.”32

3. Apollo is proleptically described as polyonymous in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. The goddess Leto is asked to swear an oath that Apollo will build a temple on Delos. This temple will be an oracle for the Greeks, but Apollo’s benefits will eventually be for all humankind “since in truth he will be πολυώνυμος.” (line 82) The point is that by the syncretistic accumulation of names in other nations and cultures, Apollo’s influence will become universal. This quality of Apollo has been preserved in a hymn in his honor. A Greek inscription found in Susa describes the god’s mastery over wild beasts, his beneficence to humankind, and the resultant reverence of nations and cities who will “hallow the many-named eye of heaven [that is, the sun].”33 Finally, a hymn to Apollo, preserved in the Greek Anthology, contains dozens of epithets, including titles, descriptions, and functional appellations.34

4. Selene is twice addressed as many named in an anonymous prayer from the magical papyri.35 The prayer illustrates well the phenomenon of polyphony, employing descriptions and epithets as well as proper names. Selene’s descriptive appellations include night’s ornament, bull-faced,
Eternal one, dart-shooter, and goddess of harbors. But she is also addressed with proper names: Persephone, Megaira, Allekto, Hecate, Mene, Moira, and Erinys.

Nonnus, a poet of late antiquity, wrote an epic tale called the *Dionysiaca*. A prayer therein addresses Selene and employs both the technical term and several examples of polyonymy: “O daughter of Helios, Moon of many turnings, nurse of all! O Selene, driver of the silver car! If thou art Hecate of many names, if in the night thou dost shake thy mystic torch in brandcarrying hand, come nightwanderer, nurse of puppies because the nightly sound of the hurrying dogs is thy delight with their mournful whimpering. If thou art staghunter Artemis, if on the hills thou dost eagerly hunt with fawnkilling Dionysos, be thy brother’s helper now!”

Epigraphic evidence also offers its support to the polyonymous Selene. An inscription on a small marble altar in the famous temple of Aesculapius at Epidaurus contains the words: “The priest Diogenes, to Selene the many-named One.”

5. Isis was the most polyonymous deity of all. As noted above, she attracted not only the term πολυόνυμος, but also the über-epithet μυριώνυμος. The latter was not used by Plutarch alone; it seemed to be a favorite appellation for the goddess. In the *Life of Aesop*, a priestess of Isis invokes her in behalf of the famous moralist: “Oh, crown of the whole world, Isis of myriad names, have pity on this workman, who suffers and is pious, for the piety he has shown, not to me, oh mistress, but to your appearance.” In addition, the Greek magical papyri twice address Isis as the myriad-named goddess.

Additional literary sources could be cited. Of special note is the first Hymn of Isidorus. It uses the technical term and lavishly illustrates it in an effusive ten-line tribute to the goddess known around the world as Astarte, Artemis, Nanaia, Leto, Hera, Aphrodite, Hestia, Rheia, Demeter, and Thiosus, all in addition to Isis. Likewise, an extensive 2nd-century A.D. invocation to Isis in Oxyrhynchus papyrus 1380 twice describes the goddess as πολυόνυμος and identifies her with no fewer than 18 Greco-Egyptian and foreign deities.
Inscriptional evidence adds its testimony. In addition to the Philae inscription cited above, a marble fragment from the city of Cius in Bithynia contains a portion of a hymn to Anubis in which Isis is addressed by her common epithet among other descriptions: “Blessed goddess, mother, Isis of many names.”

A second-century A.D. altar in Egypt includes a dedication to “the myriad named Isis, the greatest goddess, Tyche made new.”

Other epigraphic evidence is not lacking. As one team of archeologists laconically noted: “Dedications to Isis myrionymos are not rare.”

But all these witnesses pale next to the vision of Isis in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*. This text has rightly been called “the most famous passage in ancient literature where the principle of polyonymy is enunciated.”

In the *Metamorphoses* Lucius, the central character, is transformed into an ass and begins an arduous journey toward freedom. He only finds release from his torment, restoration of his human form, and ultimately salvation through the goddess Isis, who appears to him three times near the end of the book. In the first of these visitations, Isis rises from the sea and reveals herself through multiple descriptions and names:

Lo, I am with you, Lucius, moved by your prayers, I who am the mother of the universe, the mistress of all the elements, the first offspring of time, the highest of deities, foremost of heavenly beings, the single form that fuses all gods and goddesses; I who order by my will the starry heights of heaven, the health-giving breezes of the sea, and the awful silences of those in the underworld: my single godhead is adored by the whole world in varied forms, in differing rites and with many diverse names.

Thus, the Phrygians, earliest of races, call me Pessinuntia, Mother of the Gods; thus the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropeian Minerva; and the sea-tossed Cyprians call me Paphian Venus, the archer Cretans Diana Dictyna, and the trilingual Sicilians Ortygian Proserpine; to the Eleusinians I am Ceres, the ancient goddess, to others Juno, to others Bellona and Hecate and Rhamnusia. But the Ethiopians, who are illumined by the first rays of the sun-god as he is born every day, together with the Africans and the Egyptians who excel through having the original doctrine, honor me with my distinctive rites and give me my true name of Queen Isis.


44. *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (vol. 8; Amsterdam: Gieben, 1937) 116 no. 657.


The passage is stunning in its syncretistic portrait of Isis. The goddess not only spans cultural and geographical boundaries but she even seems to transcend gender in that she “fuses all gods and goddesses.” The language reveals a trend toward monotheism, but it preserves “a recognition of other gods subsumed in the godhead.” It is polyonymy at its zenith.

In addition to the five gods highlighted above, πολυώνυμος is applied to a variety of other deities. The Orphic Hymns attribute polyonymy to several deities, among them: Pan, Hera, Hestia, Artemis, Demeter, and Adonis. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Pluto, the god of the underworld, is twice called the many-named son of Kronos, along with other epithets such as Lord, Ruler over Many, and Receiver of All. Suffice to say, the phenomenon of polyonymy, though particularly characteristic of certain deities, was widely employed.

How Do Early Christian Practices Compare to Polyonymy?

Christianity was not born into the world fully formed like Athena springing from the forehead of Zeus. There necessarily was development in Christian thought, and one of the chief areas in which development occurred was Christology. Nevertheless, Christianity did arrive on the scene with a considerable inheritance from Judaism, and that legacy included religious convictions that placed limits on Christianity’s adoption of the beliefs and practices of its Greco-Roman neighbors. Foremost among these would be Jewish monotheism.

Some scholars have wondered about the utility of the concept of monotheism in the study of Christian origins. Indeed, Paula Fredriksen has called for the “retirement” of the idea based on its anachronistic use in scholarship. There is a salutary reminder here that henotheism or perhaps

48. Griffiths, Isis-Book, 143–44. The trend toward monotheism is encapsulated in the words of the 2nd-century A.D. philosopher, Maximus of Tyre (Oration 39.5): “All the gods share one set of customs and way of life and character, which knows no divisions and no conflict: all of them rule, all are of the same age, all are saviours, living together for all time in equal honour with equal rights of speech; though their names are many, their nature is one” (Michael B. Trapp, Maximus of Tyre, The Philosophical Orations [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997] 312–13). For the Greek text, see Michael B. Trapp, Maximus Tyrius: Dissertationes (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1994) 318.

49. Athanassakis, Orphic Hymns. For the technical term, see the following hymns/lines: 2.1; 10.13; 11.10; 16.9; 27.4; 36.1; 40.1; 41.1; 45.2; 46.2; 50.2; 52.1; 56.1; and 59.2.


monolatry is a more accurate description of the faith of ancient Israel, but others would argue for the continuing validity of “monotheism” when properly nuanced.\textsuperscript{53} I incline toward the latter group, but for the purposes of this study we may set aside the question of whether Paul and other Jews of the Second Temple period would have acknowledged the existence, in any sense, of lesser divine beings. The pertinent question for this study is whether Jews at the time of Jesus would have identified the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the gods of their neighbors, whether those belonging to the ancient Near Eastern environment (for example, Asherah, Molech, Baʿal) or to the Greco-Roman milieu (for example, Zeus, Hermes, Artemis). In particular, would they have comfortably addressed the God of Israel by the names of other deities?

The limits of this essay do not permit a detailed analysis of Second Temple Judaism vis-à-vis polyonymous practices. Moreover, my primary interest is in early Christian beliefs and practices. We may, however, briefly consider as a test case the attempt of Antiochus IV in 167 B.C. to rename the Jerusalem temple “the temple of Olympian Zeus” (2 Macc 6:1–2). Antiochus was an ardent devotee of Zeus, promoting his cult, supporting his sanctuaries, and honoring him on coinage.\textsuperscript{54} The renaming of Jerusalem’s sanctuary as the temple of the Olympian Zeus is regarded by the author of 2 Maccabees as act of cultic pollution, as is a similar change to the temple in Gerizim. The proposed change could be understood either as a polyonymous assimilation of the two cults (Zeus = YHWH) or as a substitution of Antiochus’s god for Israel’s God (Zeus instead of YHWH). Anathea Portier-Young rightly judges that neither assimilation nor substitution would have been acceptable. Even the less radical alternative of assimilation “would deny the particularity of Israel’s confession and election.” “Whether through identification, disidentification, or a subtle combination of the two, rededicating the Jerusalem temple to Zeus Olympios was thus a negation of claims for the sole divinity of Yhwh and the history of this God with this people.”\textsuperscript{55} Any Jews in Jerusalem at that time who favored a syncretistic identification of YHWH with Zeus left no trace in the literary record advocating such a view.\textsuperscript{56} Those who held to the exclusivity of the name of YHWH as over against Antiochus’s Zeus did so as both an act of religious devotion and an act of political defiance.

53. Prominent here would be the works of Larry W. Hurtado. See, for example, \textit{Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), esp. pp. 27–53; and \textit{How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. pp. 111–33.


55. Anathea Portier-Young, \textit{Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 202 and 203.

56. Although the parallel in 1 Mac 1:41–43 says that “many even from Israel gladly adopted [Antiochus’] religion,” nothing is said about the renaming of the temple, and needless to say, the author only mentions this faction in order to condemn their accommodation and liken it to that of the Gentiles.
Turning from the Jewish worship of YHWH to early Christian devotion to Jesus, we immediately find that a plethora of titles and epithets are used of Jesus in the NT.\footnote{57} By the ninth century, Ishoʿdad of Merv, the Bishop of Hadatha, wrote that “our Lord is called by fifty-two names, some of them being about His Divinity, and some of them about His Manhood; some of them are appropriate to the Person of the Unity.”\footnote{58} Apparently not to be outdone, one late 19th-century author collected no fewer than 280 appellations for Jesus.\footnote{59} This could serve as raw material for elaborate, polyonymous practices, but paradoxically, early Christians were both lavish and discriminate in their use of epithets, titles, and names for Jesus. Although examples could be drawn from almost any NT writing, for reasons of space I will limit myself to selected passages in Acts and the Gospel of John.

The “Name of Jesus” in the Acts of the Apostles

The name of Jesus quickly came to enjoy a lofty status in early Christianity. In the Acts of the Apostles, we find not just that the name of Jesus is used often, as we would expect, but the very phrase “the name of Jesus” appears frequently, thus drawing attention not just to the person but to his name and its functions in the community. In Luke’s Gospel the collocation of “name” and “Jesus” is limited to the birth narrative (1:31; 2:21), but in Acts this feature explodes to become major identifying mark of the new movement.\footnote{60} Beginning at Pentecost, Peter calls on the crowd to be baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:28; cf. 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). The content and central feature of the apostolic preaching was the name of Jesus (4:18; 5:40; 8:12; 9:27–28). The name of Jesus is invoked in the performance of healings and exorcisms (3:6, 16; 4:10, 30; 16:18).\footnote{61} The proper use of Jesus’ name is seen as so crucial to the performance of powerful deeds that when seven sons of Sceva attempt to arrogate it for themselves, the result is satirical (19:13). Predictably, the outcome of this comic episode is that “the name of Jesus was praised” (19:17). (If this story serves to condemn the wrongful use of the name of Jesus in isolation, then \textit{a fortiori} Luke would reject the combination of Jesus’ name with those of pagan deities.) Finally, Paul


\footnote{58. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. \textit{The Commentaries of Ishoʿdad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha}, vol. 1: \textit{Translation} (Horae Semiticae 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) 14.}

\footnote{59. James Large, \textit{Two Hundred and Eighty Titles and Symbols of Christ} (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1888).}

\footnote{60. For a helpful survey, see J. A. Ziesler, “The Name of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles,” \textit{JSNT} 4 (1979) 28–41.}

\footnote{61. Hence the title of the book by Graham H. Twelftree, \textit{In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).}
describes his previous life as a crusade to oppose the name of Jesus (26:9) and his new life as entailing a willingness to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:13). The apex of this theme appears in Acts 4:12: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” Given the particularity of “the name” in Acts, it is hard to imagine that Luke would have tolerated the polyonymous identification of Jesus with pagan deities. A particular episode in Acts demonstrates this.

Acts 17:16–33 is the well-known narrative of Paul’s sojourn in Athens and his speech to the Athenians. Verse 16 speaks of Paul’s deep distress at seeing that the city was “full of idols.” The apostle engaged the residents of the city in debate, both the Jews in the local synagogue and the philosophers in the agora. In the latter context, Paul’s preaching sparked the interest and perplexity of Stoics and Epicureans, who led him to the Areopagus for a more formal inquiry. In Paul’s opening words he acknowledges the religious devotion of the Athenians. The profusion of idols in the city is undeniable evidence of that, even if the Athenians’ brand of piety was offensive to the apostle.

The religiosity of Athens is amply borne out by literary testimony. As early as the 5th century B.C., Pindar describes the city as “rich and violet-crowned and famous in song, bulwark of Hellas, renowned Athens, city of gods (δαιμόνιον πτολίθρον).” It is rightly noted that “when Pindar calls Athens daimonion, he does not mean, vaguely, divine, but rather possessed and inhabited by many daimones, divine beings of various kinds; the violet crown signifies the vernal festivals of the gods.” In the same century, Sophocles has his character Oedipus employ a superlative for Athens as the city “most reverent toward the gods” (θεοσεβέστατος; Oed. col. 260). Much closer to Paul’s day, perhaps within several decades of the apostle’s visit to the city, Livy wrote that the many noteworthy sights of Athens included “statues of gods and men, distinguished by every sort of material and artistry” (45.27.11). In the same era the geographer Strabo describes several shrines and temples in Athens and quotes an earlier historian as saying that “Attica is the possession of the gods, who seized it as a sanctuary for themselves, and of the ancestral heroes.” Strabo notes that another geographer had written four books on the votive offerings on the Acropolis alone (9.1.16). Finally, Josephus regards it as common knowledge that the Athenians are “the most religious (εὐσεβέστατοι) people of the Greeks” (C. Ap. 2.12 (§130).

62. Both the nature of this forum and its precise location are debated. The gathering need not be a legal hearing; Paul is neither in custody nor in jeopardy. The Areopagus might refer to the Hill of Ares or to the council that derived its name from the place.

63. The Greek adjective δεισιδαίμων can be disparaging (“superstitious”) in some contexts, but that can scarcely be the case in the exordium of Paul’s speech, in which he must garner the goodwill of the audience.


Archaeological evidence corroborates this literary testimony. Among the most prominent structures in Athens are three temples on the Acropolis: the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, and the Temple of Athena Nike. Although the Parthenon often functioned as a treasury, it was built as a temple dedicated to Athena, the eponymous protector of the city. Adjacent to the Parthenon, the Erechtheum housed the image of Athena Polias and a variety of religious altars and shrines. The Temple of Athena Nike (“victory”) was a smaller structure in Ionian style, but it contained a statue of Athena and numerous friezes with images of the victorious goddess.

The Temple of Hephaestus, the god of technology and metalworking, occupied the northwest side of the Agora. Southeast of the Acropolis was the Temple of Olympian Zeus, one of the largest temples in Greece and still under construction when Paul visited the city. The list goes on, including the Altar of the Twelve Gods, the Temple of Apollo Patrous, and countless other shrines, statuary, and inscriptions to Aphrodite, Artemis, Asklepios, Demeter, Dionysus, Eros, Hecate, Isis, Pan, Pluto, Sarapis, and others. Across the centuries Athens had more than 30 temples and twice as many shrines. Not all of these would have been extant, in good repair, or had an active cult in Paul’s day, but the overall picture justifies Luke’s description of the city as κατείδωλος, as well as the description of a modern archaeologist as the “most pagan of Greek cities.”

Given the abundance of altars in Athens dedicated to named deities, it is significant that Paul uses a shrine to “an unknown god” as the springboard for his speech. If Luke and/or Paul had been sympathetic to the practices of syncretism and polyonymy, the apostle could have identified the God of Israel and Jesus with Zeus and Apollo or any other pair of deities whose cult and functions were loosely parallel to that of Judaism or Christianity. But rather than identifying Jesus with any named god, Paul instead chooses the altar to an unknown god and uses it as his segue to the proclamation of the gospel. Paul does not conflate divine identities; he finds an empty container and fills it with Christian content.

Polytitular Christology in the Gospel of John

To conclude from a selection of passages in Acts that early Christians had no practice remotely like Greco-Roman polyonymy would be to miss a

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prevalent feature of early Christology. As the early Christians reflected on their experience of Jesus, both his itinerant ministry of preaching and healing and the experience of the resurrection and post-Easter Lord, they grasped for language that was adequate to express his significance in the economy of Israel’s God. To do this, they appropriated the language of Judaism’s Scriptures and did so in a manner that resembles a type of polyonymy. This could be illustrated with almost any NT writing. I will use the first chapter of John as an example.

In John 1, there are seven titles for Jesus used a total of 17 times. He is the Word of God in vv. 1, 3, and 14. He is the Son of God in vv. 14, 18, 34 and 49. Lamb of God appears in vv. 29 and 36. Rabbi is used in vv. 38 and 49. Christ or Messiah appears in vv. 20, 25, and 41; King of Israel in v. 49; and Son of Man in v. 51. Within the Fourth Gospel, Word and Lamb of God are found only in chapter one; all the other titles appear elsewhere in John, some of them frequently.

John affirms the essential deity of Jesus in his opening verse. In terms of Christological development, where does one go from there? The evangelist cannot go higher, but he does go broader. He diversifies his titles for Jesus in a way that resembles internal syncretism. John famously employs “I am” sayings that are unique within the NT: “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” and so on. He does not, however, appropriate the names of pagan deities. Strictly speaking, one might say that Johannine Christology is polytitular rather than polyonymous.

This tendency toward diverse titles is generally true of early Christian writers. Certainly, all four evangelists and Paul used a variety of titles and appellations for Jesus. A high point in this trend is seen in the apocryphal work Acts of Peter. In one scene, Peter addresses a gathering of believers and offers a homily of sorts, concluding with a polyonymous tribute to Jesus that borrows especially from the Fourth Gospel:

This Jesus you have, brethren, the door, the light, the way, the bread, the water, the life, the resurrection, the refreshment, the pearl, the treasure, the seed, the abundance, the mustard-seed, the vine, the plough, the grace, the faith, the word: He is all things, and there is no other greater then he. To him be praise for ever and ever. Amen.

Here we have 18 titles leading up to the crescendo “He is all things.” Because the author of the Acts of Peter draws on multiple sources for these titles, this could be viewed as a type of internal syncretism, namely, the composition of polytitular praise from several strands of tradition, albeit strands that all belonged to monotheistic Christianity.


71. On polyonymy and polymorphy in the Acts of Peter, see Simon S. Lee, Jesus’ Transfiguration and the Believers’ Transformation: A Study of the Transfiguration and Its Development
CONCLUSION

Polyonymy was a widespread phenomenon in classical antiquity. In prayers, hymns, dedications, doxologies, and votive inscriptions, Greeks, Romans, and other ancient people extolled the attributes of deities by elaborate lists of their names, titles, descriptions, and epithets. While this sometimes entailed diversification within a particular cultural or religious system, it often crossed boundaries to include the syncretistic combination of different deities.

Early Christian practices evince both similarities and differences vis-à-vis Greco-Roman polyonymy. The Lukan Paul before the Areopagus deftly avoided polyonymy and exploited Athenian openness to unknown gods to proclaim the particular God of Israel and the one whom God raised from the dead. But in a qualified way, early Christians were amenable to polyonymous, or more precisely, polytitular, praise of God and Jesus.

On the one hand, strict polyonymy in the sense of proper names was probably not an option for early Christians. The adoption of multiple names was eschewed because Jesus was not identified with other deities. Jesus could not be subsumed under the name of a Hellenistic deity in part because he was a first-century Palestinian Jew with a discrete history and tradition, not a mythical demigod or hero with an infinitely plastic narrative. More importantly, Jewish monotheism, even if qualified as monolatry, shaped Christian beliefs from the outset and would not brook the identification of Jesus or YHWH with other gods.72

On the other hand, polytitular descriptions of Jesus, a subset of polyonymy, were demanded by the religious experience of early Christians. No single title was adequate to capture the theological significance of Jesus nor to encompass the richness of his existential meaning to Christians. So the solution was to draw on the preexisting lexical storehouse of Judaism, its titles, epithets, and attributes. The function of this early Christian titular polyonymy was to achieve what no single title could do, namely, to characterize and identify Jesus as the theological gestalt of all the titles combined.

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72 With regard to the later Christian doctrine of the trinity, King (“Organization,” 294–95) notes that, while the doctrine arguably entails a logical contradiction akin to the pagan equation of Ceres with her daughter Proserpina, Christian theology also defined and limited the doctrine so that Christians were not free to “expand the Trinity by equating Jesus with Neptune.”