PAGAN AND JEWISH MONOTHEISM ACCORDING
TO VARRO, PLUTARCH, AND ST PAUL: THE ANICONIC,
MONOTHEISTIC BEGINNINGS OF ROME'S PAGAN
CULT—ROMANS 1:19–25 IN A ROMAN CONTEXT

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In the opening to his Letter to the Romans, Paul argues that current pagan thinking in Rome and elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world is a distortion of an aniconic and monotheistic religion originally shared by all.¹ As we shall see, the notion of a monotheistic past resonates particularly with an audience in Rome. By differentiating between the golden age of Roman religion and current practice, Paul presents his own religion as a “logical, i.e. non-ritualistic form of worship” (Rom 12:1–2; cf. 9:4), which restores the ideal. In this way, by invoking the authority of a respectable pagan monotheism in the past, Paul seeks to undermine current polytheistic thinking. At the same time, his approach renders Jewish monotheism less exclusive, as it is not without pagan analogies. This seems to be Paul’s double strategy, as in his letter he aims to reduce tensions between Jews and ex-pagans within the Christian communities at Rome.

These tensions were the result of the fact that for the past five years the pagan converts to what we label “Christianity” in Rome had been without the fellowship of their Christian Jews. The latter, together with the non-Christian Jews from the synagogue, had suffered expulsion by Claudius who, according to Suetonius, had expelled the Jews from Rome because they “constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” [i.e. of “Christus,” Christ] (*Claudius* 25.4).² As this had happened in A.D. 49, over these five years the ex-pagan Christians had begun to develop a Christian identity separate from the Jewish Christians. When

¹ This paper was first presented at the Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire conference at the University of Exeter, 17–20 July 2006. I wish to thank Dr Peter Van Nuffelen (Exeter) and Prof. Gillian Clark (Bristol) for their comments and Dr Maria Sherwood-Smith (Leiden) for her correction of the English.

² Translations of classical sources are normally taken from the LCL with occasional small alterations. Translations of biblical quotations are, unless otherwise stated, taken from the REB with occasional alterations.

the former exiles (both non-Christian and Christian Jews) started to return to Rome after Claudius' death (A.D. 54)³ and Christian Jews again met their ex-pagan co-religionists, tensions arose, which Paul set out to address in his letter.

His answer to these challenges is not simply to bolster the Jewish monotheistic identity of the returning Christian Jews, but to point at the pagans' own distant monotheistic golden age. Paul tries to build common ground between the Jews and pagans, which lies not in *Jewish* monotheism, but in monotheism as such. It is not surprising then that Paul sketches the outlines of this monotheism not by reference to the Jewish scriptures but with the aid of general Greek philosophy.

1. PAUL

Although Paul broadens the scope of monotheism beyond Judaism, he is very critical of paganism insofar as it deviates from original monotheism. The conduct of pagan polytheists is clearly "indefensible" to him.

For all that can be known of God (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. Ever since the world began his invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible to the eye of reason (τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ . . . νοούμενα καθορᾶται), in the things he has made. Their conduct, therefore, is indefensible; knowing God (γνόντες τὸν θεόν), they have refused to honour him as God, or to render him thanks. Hence all their thinking has ended in futility (ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν), and their misguided minds (ἡ ἀσύνητος αὐτῶν καρδιά) are plunged into darkness. (Rom 1:19–21)

Although German protestant scholarship has been very reluctant to grant that Paul employs Greek natural theology, this is beyond question for those trained in ancient philosophy. Anglo-American biblical scholars have pointed out this prejudice among German and German-influenced continental scholars. Commenting on Rom 1:19–20, James Dunn, for instance, states unequivocally:

Also clear is the fact that some sort of natural theology is involved here. . . . we still have to speak of a "natural theology"—that is here, of

³ Cf. the fate of Aquila and Prisca/Priscilla according to Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Cor 16:19; and Rom 16:3.

a revelation of God through the cosmos, to humankind as a whole, and operative since the creation of the cosmos... Paul is trading upon... the Greek... understanding of an invisible realm of reality, invisible to sense perception, which can be known only through the rational power of the mind... it is scarcely possible that Paul did not intend his readers to think in terms of some kind of rational perception of the fuller reality in and behind the created cosmos... the extent to which Paul was prepared to build his argument on what was not a traditional Jewish world-view... reveals a breadth and a boldness in his apologetic strategy. (Dunn 1988, 56–58)⁴

Paul is not the first in Judaism to employ this Greek mode of thinking. As is generally acknowledged, the beginning of Romans much resembles the Jewish-Hellenistic work entitled the *Wisdom of Solomon*. In this first-century B.C. writing, which was included in the Septuagint, the author develops a similar line of thought:

For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists (καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὁρωμένων ἀγαθῶν οὐκ ἴσχυσαν εἰδέναι τὸν ὄντα), nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works (οὔτε τοῖς ἔργοις προσέχοντες ἐπέγνωσαν τὸν τεχνίτην); but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty (ὁ τοῦ κάλλους γενεσιάρχης) created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working (δύναμιν καὶ ἐνέργειαν ἐκπλαγύντες), let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator (ἐκ γὰρ μεγέθους καὶ καλλονῆς κτισμάτων ἀναλόγως ὁ γενεσιουργὸς αὐτῶν θεωρεῖται). (Wis 13:1–5; NRSV)

The author clearly shows himself dependent on Greek philosophy.⁵ Especially the last line, that “from the greatness and beauty of created

⁴ Cf. also Fitzmyer 1992, 274: “some commentators have subconsciously reacted by denying the capability of the human mind to attain some knowledge of God. As a result, they have taken refuge in a form of fideism. In doing so, they have been reluctant to admit what Paul himself actually says about natural theology; they deny that God makes himself known in any other manner than in Christ.” These commentators are particularly found among the adherents of Luther and Barth. See Wilckens 1978, 118–21.

⁵ On this dependence, see in detail Kepper 1999, 170–87; Larcher 1985, 748–67; Winston 1979, 247–57; Gilbert 1973, 13–35; Reese 1970, 50–62; Lange 1936, 293–302.

things their Creator can be perceived *by way of analogy* (ἀναλόγως),” shows the author’s acquaintance with Greek terminology.⁶ In a similar way, Alcinous argues in his *Handbook of Platonism*:

The second way of conceiving God is that of analogy, as follows: the sun is to vision and to visible objects (it is not itself sight, but provides vision to sight and visibility to its objects) as the primal intellect is to the power of intellection in the soul and to its objects; for it is not the power of intellection itself, but provides intellection to it and intelligibility to its objects, illuminating the truth contained in them. (10.5, 165.20–26; trans. J. Dillon)

Both Paul and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon appear to be well-versed in the Greek, mainly Platonic and Stoic discussions of “intelligent design,” in which the existence of the one God is deduced from physical reality. For the present purpose it is not necessary to follow these traditions in detail,⁷ nor to focus on the heated discussions between Platonists and Stoics on the one hand, and Atomists, Materialists, and Epicureans on the other.⁸ Paul and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon should be read in this context.⁹ In contrast with Graeco-Roman philosophers, however, the two Jews are far more critical of the practice of worshipping images. Although we shall see that Greek philosophers also criticized this popular custom, they never exhibit the same outspokenness as Paul and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon. After some initial doubts, the latter eventually draws firm conclusions about those who fail to deduce the Creator from the created things:

Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things? But miserable, with their hopes set on dead things, are those who give the name “gods” to the works of human hands, gold and silver fashioned

⁶ See further Reese 1970, 56–58; Winston 1979, 252–53; Gilbert 1973, 25–30; Larcher 1985, 763–64; Kepper 1999, 179–85.

⁷ On “intelligent design” theories in ancient philosophy, see Pease 1941 and Theiler 1965.

⁸ Excellent, detailed descriptions by Furley 1999; Mansfeld 1999; Gerson 1990; Irwin 1989 (see Index s.v. “design, cosmic”).

⁹ For parallels between Paul and Graeco-Roman philosophy, see also Strecker et al. 1996, 13–21; detailed treatment of Greek philosophical background to Rom 1:20 also in Cook 1994. See also Guerra 1995, 49–52 and the commentaries on Romans, esp. Dunn 1988, 56–59, 71 and Fitzmyer 1992, 272–74, 278–81.

with skill, and likenesses of animals, or a useless stone, the work of an ancient hand. (Wis 13:6–10; cf. 13:2 and 13:11–15:19)

Those who worship images are inexcusable. Paul reaches the same conclusions. Those who know God with the eye of reason, but have refused to honour him as God

boast of their wisdom, but they have made fools of themselves (φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν), exchanging the glory of the immortal God for an image (καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνας) shaped like mortal man, even for images like birds, beasts, and reptiles... They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie (οἵτινες μετέλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει), and have offered reverence and worship to created things instead of to the Creator (καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα). (Rom 1:22–23, 25)

Although Paul and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon venture the same Jewish criticism against images, there is nevertheless an important difference. Whereas the author of the Wisdom of Solomon simply describes the pagans as they are (and presumably always have been), Paul, in his description, stresses the fact that the pagans have fallen away from their original knowledge of the one God, have *changed* the glory of the immortal God into an image (καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνας), and have *altered* the truth of God into a lie (μετέλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει).

This clearly implies that Paul postulates an initial golden age of pure, intellectual worship of God without images. He sketches the development of pagan religion as a history of decline, drastically moving away from its original monotheistic and aniconic stance. Originally, the invisible God was visible to the eye of reason in the things he had made, but man has long since exchanged the glory of the immortal God for human and animal images. Paul acknowledges that pagan religion started off well but suffered deterioration. This historiography is remarkably similar to that of the antiquarian of Roman religion, Varro.

2. VARRO

2.1. Varro on pure Roman religious beginnings

In his book *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*, Varro expresses his view that

for more than 170 years, the Romans of old worshipped the gods without an image. If this practice had remained down to the present day..., the gods would have been worshipped with greater purity...those who first

set up images for the people both diminished reverence and increased error in their cities. (fig. 18 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.31; trans. R.W. Dyson)¹⁰

The pure, monotheistic era of 170 years mentioned by Varro represents the time-span from the foundation of Rome in 753 B.C. through the first kingship of Romulus and the following kingship of Numa up to the reign of Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth king of Rome (616–579 B.C.), who is reported to have started the building of the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline.¹¹ Varro clearly regards the initial period of Rome's religion as aniconic and, for that reason, more pure than the subsequent phase of Rome's religion when images were introduced.¹² Although Varro is able to interpret images in a positive, allegorical way (fig. 225 Cardauns),¹³ the development from an aniconic to an iconic religion is seen as a decline of Rome's religious golden age.

By speaking of the first 170 years, Varro also implies the importance of Numa, Rome's legendary second king (715–673 B.C.), who was credited with the fundamental design of Rome's public religion and instituted cults, rituals, priesthoods, and calendars (Ennius, *Annales* 113–119 Skutsch).¹⁴ As we shall see, Plutarch explicitly mentions Numa in connection with the religiously pure period of 170 years. Varro leaves Numa's importance implicit, although he does refer to him in other fragments.¹⁵ In one of them, which was part of his *Curio de cultu deorum*, Varro relates the story of the books of Numa which had been buried with him:¹⁶

¹⁰ Cf. further Augustine, *The City of God* 4.9: "why has he [i.e. the one God] been treated so insultingly at Rome, and among other peoples also, by having an image erected to him? This fact displeased Varro so much that, though he was himself in thrall to the perverse customs of so great a city, he did not in the least hesitate to say and write that those who had set up images for the people had both diminished reverence and increased error"; 7.5: "you [Varro] once soberly judged that those who first set up images for the people diminished the reverence of their citizens and added error, and that the ancient Romans honoured the gods more purely when they were without images."

¹¹ Cf. O'Daly 1999, 93 n. 34; Cardauns 1976, 2:147, with reference to Pliny, *Natural History* 35.37 for the construction of the Capitoline temple.

¹² On Varro's aniconism, see Van Nuffelen 2007; Lehmann 1997, 182–93; Cancik and Cancik-Lindemaier 2001; Ross-Taylor 1931.

¹³ On this see esp. Van Nuffelen 2007.

¹⁴ On Numa's religious reforms, see Hooker 1963; Scheid 1985.

¹⁵ Varro, *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*, frgs. 37–38 (Cardauns). Varro, *Curio de cultu deorum* (Cardauns 1976, 1:36, frgs. III–IV; 1:39–40, fig. B).

¹⁶ On Numa's books, see Peglau 2000; Willi 1998; Rosen 1985.

the plough turned up from the ground the king's books, in which were written down the reasons for the sacred institutions. He [a certain Terentius] took these to the praetor of the city. He, having perused the first part, referred so important a matter to the Senate. But when the leading senators had read some of the reasons given as to why each part of the sacred rites had been instituted, the Senate declared itself in agreement with the dead Numa, and the assembled fathers, as religious men, required the praetor to burn those same books. (Cardauns 1976, 1:36, frg. III; Augustine, *The City of God* 7.34; trans. Dyson)¹⁷

Augustine, who preserved this passage, explains the books' destruction by the fact "that the reasons for those rites...were not fit to become known" because "Numa Pompilius had attained to these secrets of the demons by an unlawful curiosity" (7.34).¹⁸ Augustine emphasizes, however, that this demonological interpretation is his own: "Let each man believe as he sees fit; indeed, let every egregious defender of such impiety say whatever mad contentiousness may suggest. For my part, it is enough to point out that" (7.34). As Cardauns has suggested, it is far more likely that Varro himself would have assumed that Numa's books were destroyed because they revealed the philosophical, aniconic foundation of Rome's original cults (1960, 27).¹⁹ It is Plutarch who stresses the philosophical nature of the contents of Numa's books (*Numa* 22), but Cardauns is probably right that Varro already held this opinion, although he does not highlight Numa's role in Rome's primeval aniconic religion.

According to Varro, the reason for the decline of Roman religion was the influence of the poets: "People are on the whole more inclined to follow the poets than the natural philosophers in their beliefs concerning the genealogies of the gods" (frg. 19 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.32).²⁰ The deterioration of Rome's religion is due to the poets. Their role is contrasted with that of the natural philosophers (*physici*). Here one catches a glimpse of the distinction Varro makes between "physical theology," "mythological theology," and "civic theology" (frgs.

¹⁷ Cf. the reports in Livy 40.29; Plutarch, *Numa* 22; and Pliny 13.13.84ff.

¹⁸ See further Cardauns 1976, 1:36, IV = Augustine, *The City of God* 7.35: "Numa himself...was compelled to practise hydromancy, and saw in the water the images of gods, or, rather, the mocking images of demons, from whom he heard what rites he should establish and observe."

¹⁹ Cf. Hagendahl 1967, 2:618–19.

²⁰ Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* 6.6, 6.1.

7–11 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 6.5–6). O'Daly briefly summarizes these three types of theology:

The “genus mythicon” is found in myth and especially in literature. It is anthropomorphic in tendency. The “genus civile” has to do with worship rites, and sacrifices: it enshrines the beliefs to which Varro does not subscribe, but whose [social] utility he commends. The “genus physicon” is philosophical, and deals with the origins, identity, and nature of the gods in a speculative and often controversial way: but it is more appropriate to a school than to the public arena (6.5). Yet Varro approves of this third kind of discourse. (1999, 103)²¹

In his regret that “people are on the whole more inclined to follow the poets than the natural philosophers,” Varro expresses his own preference for natural philosophy. For this reason, in Augustine’s words,

it is not by his own judgment that he follows the institutions established by the city of Rome. For he does not hesitate to confess that, if he were founding the city anew, he would consecrate the gods, and give them names, according to the principles of nature (*ex naturae potius formula*) rather than following what is done now. As it is, however, finding himself among a people already ancient, he says that he must adhere to the names and titles of the gods traditionally received from antiquity, and that the purpose of his writing and study is to encourage people to worship the gods rather than to despise them. (frg. 12 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.31)²²

Ideally speaking, religion should be physical, defined “according to the principles of nature.” Yet, the Roman religion no longer accords with this ideal type of theology, since it has deteriorated. The ideal, physical theology consists of a monotheistic understanding of God as the “soul of the world”: “The only men who have truly understood what God is are those who have believed Him to be the soul of the world, governing it by movement and reason” (frg. 13 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.31). This one God is Jupiter, “the king of all the gods and goddesses” (frg. 14 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.9), “the supreme God,” as Augustine interprets Varro (*The City of God* 19.22). Although identified as “Jupiter,” the name of the supreme God is unimportant

²¹ Cf. also Hagendahl 1967, 2:610–17.

²² Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* 6.4: “if he were himself founding a new city, he would have written according to the rule of nature, but since he found himself to be a member of an old one, he could do nothing but follow its custom” (trans. Dyson).

to Varro:²³ “Varro believes that he [i.e. Jupiter] is worshipped, though called by another name, even by those who worship one God only, without an image” (fig. 15 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.9). Although Persians, Scythians and others were believed to have aniconic cults,²⁴ Varro also points to the Jews as a present-day example of those who, unlike the Romans, have preserved their pure, original religion and “worship one God only, without an image.” Varro’s estimation of Jewish monotheism will be treated in detail in the next section.

2.2. *Varro on the Jews*

(a) *References to the Jews in Varro*

In the fragment in which he praises the purity of aniconic religion, from which Rome had lapsed after 170 years, Varro also refers to the Jews:

For more than 170 years, the Romans of old worshipped the gods without an image. “If this practice had remained *down to the present day*,” he [Varro] says, “the gods would have been worshipped with greater purity” (*castius dii observarentur*). In support of this opinion, he cites, among other things, the testimony of *the Jewish nation*. (fig. 18 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.31)

The Jews are referred to as a present-day example of pure, uncontaminated aniconic religion. As we shall see presently, Varro’s high estimation of the Jews was already preceded by that of philosophers before him, and others followed suit. The Jews are also mentioned in other passages in Varro. He identifies the God of the Jews as “Jupiter,”²⁵ but also gives his name as “Iao,” the Greek form of “Yahweh.”²⁶ It was

²³ On the issue of the interchangeability of the name of the supreme God according to ancient philosophers, see Celsus apud Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.41 and Van den Berg 2006.

²⁴ Cf. Cardauns 1976, 2:146: “bildloser Kult bei Persern, Skythen, Serern und anderen: Herod. 1.131 und 4.59; Strabo 15C 732; Celsus ap. Orig. 7.62 (zit. Heraklit VS 22 B5); Dino ap. Clem. Alex. Protr. 5 p. 65.1; Diog. Laertius prooem. 6 und 9; Cic. Rep. 3.14; Tac. Germ. 9. Zur Literatur vgl. fr. 18.”

²⁵ Fig. 16 Cardauns; Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.22.30, 31, 42: “Varro... thought that the God of the Jews was Jupiter...; when he observed that the Jews worshipped the supreme God, he could not think of any object under that title other than Jupiter himself... but we revere that Jupiter of whom Maro says that ‘All things are full of Jove’ [Vergil, *Eclogues* 3.5.60], that is to say, the spirit of life that vivifies all things. It is not without some reason, therefore, that Varro thought that Jove was worshipped by the Jews” (trans. S.D.F. Salmond, Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers series).

²⁶ Fig. 17 Cardauns = Lydus, *De mensibus* 4.54. Apart from Varro, in the first century B.C. Diodorus Siculus, too, gives the Jewish God’s name as “Iao” (Diodorus, *Library of*

the aniconic religion directed towards this god that Varro praised. In this he followed philosophers like Theophrastus and Hecataeus of Abdera before him.

(b) *Varro's predecessors*

Theophrastus is only in part a precursor to Varro. He characterizes the Jews as “philosophers by race” because of their behaviour during sacrifices, but says nothing of their aniconic cult: “During this whole time, being philosophers by race, they converse with each other about the deity, and at night-time they make observations of the stars, gazing at them and calling on God by prayer” (Theophrastus [372–288/7 B.C.] apud Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 2.26; Stern, No. 4). A full concurrence with Varro is exhibited by Hecataeus of Abdera (ca. 300 B.C.). Commenting on the figure of Moses, Hecataeus portrays the cult which Moses established as aniconic:

Moses, outstanding both for his wisdom and his courage...established the temple that they hold in chief veneration, instituted their forms of worship and ritual, drew up their laws and ordered their political institutions...But he had no images whatsoever of the gods made for them, being of the opinion that God is not in human form; rather the Heaven that surrounds the earth is alone divine, and rules the universe. (Hecataeus of Abdera apud Diodorus Siculus 40.3.1–4; Stern, No. 11)

This passage from Hecataeus shows that Varro was not the first to appreciate the Jews for their aniconic and monotheistic cult. In the past, scholars have also referred to Posidonius as a forerunner of Varro, but the Posidonian origins of the passages in Strabo and Tacitus adduced to this end are not conclusive. I shall therefore ascribe them to Strabo and Tacitus themselves and treat them below. Nevertheless, it is clear that Varro formed part of a tradition of authors who were favourable towards Jewish aniconic and monotheistic cult.

(c) *Varro's successors*

One of the most important representatives of the tradition after Varro is Strabo. As I have just briefly indicated, there seem to be no grounds

History 1.94.1–2; Stern, No. 58). To judge from the surviving evidence, Varro and Diodorus are the first Graeco-Roman authors to mention “Iao.” On Graeco-Roman views on the name and identity of the Jewish God, see, extensively, Van Kooten 2006.

to assume that Strabo is dependent on Posidonius. According to Strabo, again in a passage on Moses,

Moses... was accompanied by many people who worshipped the Divine Being (τὸ θεῖον). For he said, and taught, that the Egyptians were mistaken in representing the Divine Being by the images of beast and cattle...; and that the Greeks were also wrong in modelling gods in human form. For, according to him, God is this one thing alone that encompasses us all and encompasses land and sea—the thing which we call heaven, or universe, or the nature of all that exists (καὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων φύσιν). What man, then, if he has sense, could be bold enough to fabricate an image of God resembling any creature amongst us? Nay, people should leave off all image-carving and... should worship God *without an image*. (ἔδονς χερσὶς; 16.2.35; Stern, No. 115)²⁷

The passage shows that Varro's high esteem for Judaism did not remain an exception. Like Varro, Strabo compares Jewish aniconism with Graeco-Roman image-centred religion.

Another relevant passage is the one in Tacitus' *Histories* in which he not only points to the aniconic nature of Jewish religion, but also to the fact that, consequently, the Jewish God is conceived of "with the mind only":

The Jews... conceive of one god only, and that with the mind only ("Iudaei mente sola unumque numen intellegunt"): they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples. (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.4; Stern, No. 281)²⁸

This passage is particularly relevant to our discussion of the beginning of Paul's Letter to the Romans. It shows that the Jews do what, in Paul's

²⁷ Strabo 16.2.35 in the context of 16.2.35–37. Edelstein and Kidd's edition of Posidonius, frg. 279 only includes Strabo 16.2.43, but not the passage before. See Edelstein and Kidd, 1:244 = frg. 279 = Strabo 16.2.42–43; 2.2:951–53 (952): "There is nothing to link [Strabo 16.2.]35–39 with the citation of Posidonius in [Strabo 16.2.]43... There is nothing else explicitly in the Moses fragment with Posidonius"; and 3:354–55, with special attention to the disputed nature of the extent of this fragment (Norden: Strabo 16.2.34–43; Jacoby, frg. 70: 16.2.34–35; Reinhardt: 16.2.35–39; Theiler, frg. 133: 16.2.35–39). Despite the previous scholarly consensus about the Posidonian background of the passage, according to Edelstein and Kidd "Posidonius is only mentioned for a specific point in 43." For this reason I follow Edelstein and Kidd's minimalist approach and treat the passage in 16.2.35 as Strabo's own.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.4 is not included among the fragments of Posidonius in Edelstein and Kidd. *Pace* Theiler 1982, 2:283.

view, was also characteristic of pagan physical religion in the past, i.e. “conceive of one god only, and that with the mind only (*mente sola*).” As Paul puts it: “Ever since the world began, God’s invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible with the *νοῦς* in the things he has made” (Rom 1:20).

This overview may suffice to show that Varro’s high appreciation of Jewish aniconic religion was no exception among Graeco-Roman philosophers.²⁹ Among Graeco-Roman authors, however, Varro is the exception in tracing Roman religion itself back to aniconic beginnings. In this, he is followed by Plutarch, who also taught at Rome and who referred to Varro (Βάρρων) by name in various writings. Plutarch seems to be dependent on Varro in his passages about the origin of Rome’s religion.³⁰

3. PLUTARCH ON PURE ROMAN RELIGIOUS BEGINNINGS WITH NUMA

Plutarch’s remarks about Rome’s originally aniconic religion are found in his *Life of Numa*.³¹ Unlike Varro, Plutarch explicitly connects this phase with the figure of Numa. Numa Pompilius, requested to become king of Rome after Romulus’ ascension into heaven (2–6), sets out to “soften the [recently founded] city,” “as iron is softened in the fire, and to change its harsh and warlike temper into one of greater gentleness and justice. For if a city was ever in what Plato calls a ‘feverish’ state, Rome certainly was at that time” (7–8 at 8.1). Numa achieves this softening effect by means of religion. He “calls in the gods to aid and assist him” (8.2). Plutarch does not repeat Varro’s comparison between Rome’s original aniconic cult and the contemporary cult of the Jews.

²⁹ See further Livy in *Scholia in Lucanum* 2.593: “nor is any image found there, since they do not think that God partakes of any figure” (Stern, No. 133); and Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 37, 17.2: “they do not honour any of the usual gods, but show extreme reverence for one particular divinity. They never had any statue of him, even in Jerusalem itself, but believing him to be unnameable and invisible, they worship him in the most extravagant fashion on earth” (Stern, No. 406).

³⁰ On Plutarch’s dependence on Varro, cf. also Cardauns 1976, 2:147: “Bei Plutarch Numa 8 ist die Notiz aus Varro [about the time-span of 170 years of aniconic cult in Rome; frg. 18] in einen Bericht eingeschoben, der vielleicht aus Kastor v. Rhodos stammt (v. Borries 64ff).”

³¹ On Plutarch’s Numa, see Buchheit 1991 and 1993; De Blois and Bons 1992.

Rather, he points to the alleged Pythagorean background of Numa's religious institutions:

Furthermore, his [Numa's] ordinances concerning images are altogether in harmony with the doctrines of Pythagoras. For that philosopher maintained that the first principle of being was beyond sense or feeling, was invisible and uncreated, and discernible only by the mind. And in like manner Numa forbade the Romans to revere an image of God which had the form of man or beast. Nor was there among them in this earlier time any painted or graven likeness of Deity, but while for the first hundred and seventy years they were continually building temples and establishing sacred shrines, they made no statues in bodily form for them, convinced that it was impious to liken higher things to lower, and that it was impossible to apprehend Deity except by the intellect. (*Numa* 8.7–8; trans. B. Perrin)

Plutarch clearly takes over from Varro the information about the time-span of 170 years of aniconic cult, but he renders the role of Numa explicit and adds the remarks about the Pythagorean nature of Numa's philosophical convictions.³² Plutarch stresses that iconic reverence for God is inappropriate as the first principle of being is considered, by Pythagoras, as “beyond sense or feeling, invisible and uncreated, and discernible only by the mind” (οὔτε γὰρ ἐκεῖνος αἰσθητὸν ἢ παθητὸν, ἀόρατον δὲ καὶ ἄκτιστον καὶ νοητὸν ὑπελάμβανεν εἶναι τὸ πρῶτον; *Numa* 8.7). Paul's language in Rom 1 closely resembles this mode of thinking. According to Paul, too, God's invisible attributes (τὰ ἀόρατα) become visible when reflected upon by the *nous* (νοῦς): τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ . . . νοούμενα καθορᾶται (Rom 1:20).

Plutarch exceeds Varro by portraying Numa's Pythagorean background, but at the same time he de-emphasizes the subsequent degeneration when Rome's cult became iconic. Varro remarks that “if this [aniconic] practice had remained down to the present day . . ., the gods would have been worshipped with greater purity,” and that “those who first set up images for the people both diminished reverence and increased error in their cities” (frg. 18 Cardauns; Augustine, *The City of God* 4.31); Plutarch, on the other hand, does not sketch this degeneration but simply states that Numa, following Pythagoras' views on God, “forbade the Romans to revere an image of God which had the form of man or beast.” The Romans “made no statues in bodily

³² On Numa and Pythagoras, see Panitschek 1990 and Prowse 1964.

form for them, convinced that it was impious to liken higher things to lower, and that it was impossible to apprehend Deity except by the intellect" (νόησις): οὔτε ἐφάπτεσθαι θεοῦ δυνατόν ἄλλως ἢ νοήσει (Plutarch, *Numa* 8.8). Unlike Varro and several other Graeco-Roman philosophers,³³ Plutarch does not explicitly criticize the use of images and limits himself to noting the philosophical background of Numa's religious legislation.

For that reason, he probably also drops Varro's reference to the Jews' exemplary maintenance of their aniconic cult.³⁴ Moreover, such a reference to contemporary Jews was compatible with Varro's programme, but was probably out of place in Plutarch's biography of Numa, who was part of a twin biography of Lyscurgus on the Greek side, followed by Numa on the Roman side, and concluded with a comparison between the two. As such, a reference to the Jews would have been compatible with Plutarch's elaboration of the Pythagorean background of Numa's ideas, as several philosophers in Antiquity voiced the opinion that, eventually, Pythagoras himself was dependent on the Jews.³⁵ In any case, compared with Varro, Plutarch is less interested in the decline of aniconic religion after Numa.

³³ For pagan criticism of images, see also Cardauns 1976, 2:146–47: "Zum bildlosen Kult bei Barbaren und Juden vgl. fr. 15–17; die philosophische Kritik an den Götterbildern ist bekanntlich alt: Xenophanes VS 21B 15; Heraklit VS 22B 5, B 128; Antisthenes ap. Clem. Alexandr. Protr. 46c, strom. 5 p. 601A; Zeno de Rep. SVF 1.264ff.; Chrysipp SVF 2.1076; Diogenes Babylonius SVF 3.33.... Ablehnung der Götterbilder durch Varro findet sich noch fr. 22.... Dennoch hat er RD SVI eine allegorische Deutung der Bilder gegeben (fr. 225)." See also Stern 1974, 1:207.

³⁴ For Plutarch on the Jews in other writings, see Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 363D (Typhon and the Jews); *De superstitione* 169C (Jewish scruples on the Sabbath); *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* 184E–F (armistice on a Jewish festival); *Quaestiones convivales* 669C, 669E, 670D, 671C (who the god of the Jews is); *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1051E (Jewish preconceptions of the gods).

³⁵ On Pythagoras and the Jews, see Burnyeat 2006, 140–41 n. 6: "The idea that Plato's philosophy, and Pythagoras' too, derives from the Jews goes back to a commentary on the Pentateuch (standardly dated 2nd cent. BC) by the Jewish Peripatetic Aristobolus, who claims they studied the *Exodus* story and 'our' law in translation (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.6.6, followed by Numenius' λόγιον; 13.12.1). Pythagoras' borrowing of Jewish (and Thracian) ideas is already found in the third-century biography Hermippus, quoted in Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.165. Such claims are but one symptom of a widespread ancient tendency (anxiously combated in the opening chapters of Diogenes Laertius) to find foreign origins for Greek philosophy. By the early modern period some were ready to believe that Pythagoras was himself a Jew: J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge 1998, 536–40." See also Van Kooten 2006, 121–26 on Pythagoras, the descendants of Mocho and the Jews.

4. IDEAS OF DECLINE

Before returning to Paul's view on pagan aniconic religion, I shall just pause to reflect on the type of historiography that Varro invokes in his description of the fate of Rome's religion. His historiography espouses the model of a golden age and subsequent decline. In this model, after a period of over 170 years the Roman religion ceased to be aniconic and became less pure, as, under the influence of the poets, religion ceased to be organized according to the principles of nature, true reverence to the gods diminished, and error increased.³⁶

A similar historiography, positing religious decline after a golden age, is also employed by Theophrastus and Posidonius. According to Theophrastus, between the animal-like primeval era and the beginning of moral degeneration there was a rational golden age (Theophrastus, frg. 584 Fortenbaugh, 2:405ff.). Posidonius, too, expresses the belief that after a golden age of Stoic perfection, religion and morals declined (Posidonius, frg. 284; Edelstein and Kidd, 1:248–52 text; 2.2:960–71 comm.; 3:359–66 transl.).³⁷ Theophrastus and Posidonius apply their historiography to the history of mankind in general. Varro, however, makes a very specific statement about the degeneration of *Roman* religion. It is interesting to note that Strabo is equally specific about such a degeneration when he deals with the history of *Jewish* religion and sketches its development into superstition. We have already seen Strabo's great admiration for Moses and his institution of a Jewish religion in which the Divine Being is worshipped without an image as the nature of all that exists (16.2.35). However, Strabo is far from positive about Moses' successors:

His successors for some time abided by the same course, acting righteously and being truly pious toward God; but afterwards, in the first place, superstitious men were appointed to the priesthood, and then tyrannical people; and from superstition arose abstinence from flesh, from which it is their custom to abstain even today, and circumcisions...and other observances of the kind. (16.2.37)³⁸

³⁶ Cf., however, Van Nuffelen 2007, who argues that, although Varro regarded the initial phase as "purer;" at the same time he admitted the possibility of the allegorical interpretation of images and of interpreting the *theologia civilis* in line with the *theologia naturalis*.

³⁷ See also Dölle-Oelmlüller 2004.

³⁸ This similarity between Strabo and Varro causes Cardauns to assume that Posidonius is the source of Varro's views, taking it for granted that Strabo, too, is dependent

Both Strabo and Varro employ the historiography of decline. Strabo does so to account for particular Jewish customs such as abstinence from pork and the practice of circumcision, Varro to explain the introduction of iconic cult in Rome.

5. CONCLUSION

Paul makes use of a Varronian view of the development of Roman religion in his Letter to the Romans. After 170 years of pure aniconic cult, the Romans started to worship with images. As a result, the Roman religion lost something of its initial purity, because by erecting images, the people both diminished reverence and increased error in their cities (frg. 18 Cardauns).

Paul emphasizes this transition from aniconic cult to the worship of images by stating that the worshippers changed the glory of the immortal God into an image (καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνοσ; Rom 1:23). Like Varro, he stresses the error which results from this, saying that they altered the truth of God into a lie (μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει; Rom 1:25). Although Plutarch does not explicitly speak of degeneration, he implies it by stating that Numa forbade the Romans to revere images and instilled in his people the conviction “that it was impious to liken higher things to lower, and that it was impossible to apprehend Deity except by the intellect” (οὔτε ἐφάπτεσθαι θεοῦ δυνατὸν ἄλλως ἢ νοήσει; *Numa* 8.7–8).

The same view is expressed by Paul when he speaks about the *decline* of Roman religion. By inaugurating images in their cult, the Roman religion has become impious, because the Romans offer reverence and worship to created things instead of to the Creator (καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα; Rom 1:25). This type of worship diminishes the perception of the invisible God by the mind (Rom 1:20). For this reason, Paul contrasts the Romans’ pagan religion with his own, which he characterizes as a logical form of worship, a λογικὴ λατρεία, which consists in the transformation of one’s mind

on Posidonius. See Cardauns 1976, 2:146: “Für Posidonius als Quelle Varos kann sprechen, dass bei Strabo eine Entstellung der reinen Lehre des Moses angenommen wird und Varro diese Vorstellung mit der ältesten römischen Religion verbindet.” It is far from sure, however, that Strabo is dependent on Posidonius here. See above.

(*nous*): μεταμορφωσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς (Rom 12:1–2). What Paul suggests is that by accepting his Jewish-Christian monotheistic convictions, the Romans have not so much crossed the boundary into Judaism, as reverted to their own originally aniconic religion.³⁹ This seems to be his strategy to solve the tensions about identity which were marring relations between the Jews and ex-pagans within the Christian communities of Rome. In some way, he seems to put the two groups on an equal footing, by granting the pagans a glorious past of which Christianity is the restoration.

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³⁹ On other apologetic early Christian views on Roman religion, see Rüpke 2006.

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