“Are you god? Or, is someone else?” This is the question that a theologically curious inquisitor asked the oracle of Apollo at Claros around 200 CE. One might have expected Apollo to affirm his divinity and perhaps elaborate on the awesome power of the Olympian gods. However, the oracle delivered a rather surprising response, recorded in a Greek inscription in the ancient city of Oenoanda, in present-day Turkey. The oracle reported that the All-Seeing Aether was the true god, and that one should pray to him at dawn, facing to the east. In addition, the mouthpiece of Apollo replied that the Olympian deities were angeloi of this supreme deity. Two additional sources preserve similar versions of the oracle’s statements concerning a supreme deity and its angeloi, the so-called Theosophy of Tübingen (late-fifth century) and Lactantius’ Divine Institutes (ca. 308). Both quote part of the oracle as proof of the Hellenic anticipation of Christianity. Together, these sources reveal the character of later Roman speculation about angeloi and a supreme deity, and the manner in which early Christian authorities used such pronouncements to demonstrate the Hellenic anticipation of Christian monotheism.

The Inscription at Oenoanda

The oracular inscription at Oenoanda is carved across a bas-relief altar located on the interior of the city’s Hellenistic-era defensive walls, approximately four meters from the ground (Figure 1.1). Most scholars

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1 As, for instance, in Apollo’s statement to Diomedes at Iliad 5.476–478.
date the Oenoanda inscription to the end of the second, or the beginning of the third century CE.3

The text of the oracular inscription is as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Αὐτοφύὴς,} & \quad \text{ἀδίδακτος,} \\
\text{ἀµήτωρ,} & \quad \text{ἀστυφέλικτος,} \\
\text{ούνομι} & \quad \text{μὴ χαρόν,} \\
\text{πολυώνυμος,} & \quad \text{ἐν πυρὶ ναίων,} \\
\text{τοῦτο} & \quad \text{θεὸς· μεικρὰ δὲ} \quad \text{θεώο μερίς} \\
\text{ἀγγελοὶ} & \quad \text{ἡμεῖς.}
\end{align*}
\]

Self-generated, untaught, without-mother, un-moveable, not using a name, many-named, in-fire-dwelling, this is God. We angels [Gk: angeloi] are a small part of God.

This [reply] to those who inquired about God, who he actually is: All-Seeing Aether is God, [the oracle] said, looking to him at dawn, pray, gazing towards the east.5

Modern study of the Oenoanda oracular inscription began when the European scholar-adventurers Philippe Le Bas and William Henry Waddington catalogued the text in the late-nineteenth century while traveling through Ottoman Anatolia in search of inscriptions. Le Bas and Waddington had difficulty in transcribing the inscription because, as they stated, it was high in the city wall.6 About a century later, George Bean produced the first intelligible transcription of the text in

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3 L. Robert, “Un oracle gravé a Oinoanda,” CRAI (1971) Margherita Guarducci, “Che è Dio,” Rendiconti delle sedute dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Serie 8 Vol. 27 (1972) 346 suggests that the text is Antonine; L. Robert, “Un oracle gravé à Oinoanda,” CRAI (1971) 610, suggests a date at the end of the second, or beginning of the third century; R. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Harper Collins, 1986) 169–79 suggests around the year 200. A. S. Hall, “The Klarian Oracle at Oenoanda,” ZPE 32 (1978) 263. (1978) 265–66, is one exception; Hall argued that the inscription should be dated no earlier than the mid-third century because after this date the section of the Hellenistic-era city wall into which the inscription is carved went out of use (thus assuming that Oenoanda’s residents would not carve such and inscription into a functioning defensive edifice) and because, according to Hall, the letter-forms of the inscription date to the later-third century.

4 Text after Hall (1978) 263.

5 Translations mine, unless otherwise noted.

6 Thus, Philippe Le Bas and William Henry Waddington, Inscriptions Grecques et Latines: recueilles en Asie Mineure, vol. 1 (Meisenheim: Anton Hain, 1870; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1972), no. 1234. Le Bas and Waddington’s transcription is hardly intelligible, but was the first serious attempt to record the inscription. For earlier records of the inscription, see L. Robert, “Un oracle gravé à Oinoanda,” Comptes rendus Acad. Inscr. (1971) 597–9. However, as I found upon visiting Oenoanda in spring 2003, the inscription is high, but not so high as to be unreadable.