APPENDIX V

THE "ONE GOD" INSCRIPTIONS

There can be little doubt that the Christian use of the "One God" formula in the inscriptions of the Limestone Massif and elsewhere is to be understood as a statement of monotheistic belief vis-à-vis the villagers' abandonment of polytheism. This is emphatically the case, if only because their dated sequence in the different local contexts invariably puts them among the very earliest Christian inscriptions. It seems inevitable that scholars looking for obscure heresies will lay a different interpretation on these texts. Similarly, the theotheistic use of the formula in such phrases as "One Zeus Sarapis" is bound to raise other questions about the origin and peculiarly varied proliferation of the "One God" idea. Be this as it may, the Syrian Christian use of the formula can be explained as a conveniently brief adaptation of a significant passage from the New Testament (I Cor. 8.4–6) which contrasts Christian monotheism with the Hellenic multiplicity of gods, veneration of idols, and consumption of sacrificial meats:

So concerning the eating of meats offered to idols, we know that there is no idol in the world and that there is no God unless he is One. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in the sky or on the earth, as though there were many gods and many lords, yet for us there is One God the father from whom all things are and we are in him, and there is One Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are, and we through him.

Origen cites this passage twice in his polemic *Contra Celsum* (4.29 and 8.4) in contexts that refute polytheism. A number of texts has been cited elsewhere in this work that emphatically underscore this particular usage of the Christian "One God" formula. Among these are the statements incised on the Isis temple at Philae during its conversion to a Christian shrine after the synoikism of cults had

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1 Jacques Jarry, "Datierungsprobleme in Nordsyrien," Tyche 3 (1988), 129–134. It is worth noting here that the use of the "One God" formula by Christians precedes both the Arian and Monophysite controversies. Cf. the Christian "One God only" inscription of Aurelius Demetris which is dated to 287/8 A.D. It was found in the village of Juweikat near the great temenos of the Baal Baitochichi in Mt. Lebanon. IGLS 404.1. Cf. supra, Ch. VIII, Sect. 2.
ended there;² the exclamation of “One God” by a Christian monk upon beholding an array of idols and a bloody altar at the Isis temple of Canopus (“He cried out ‘One God’ in Coptic, as he wished to say that it was necessary to extirpate the error of polytheism.”);³ and the deliberate juxtaposition of “One God who helps” with crosses next to a pagan prayer for a cure to a triad of divinities in a temple at Deir el-Bahari in Egypt.⁴

One gets little sense of this as a primary contextual usage of the “One God” formula from Erik Peterson’s EIC ΘΕΟC: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen (Göttingen: 1926). It is a fine piece of work, but shares one weakness of the Form-critical school in its formal disregard of the pragmatic side of the question, that is, the ordinary adaptive use to which the village clergy and their congregations put the phrase under discussion here. Peterson’s work is a mine of information about the different applications of the “One God” formula, including liturgical contexts (130ff.), acclamations (141ff.), its use in amulets and other small objects (81ff.), and the problems connected with the “One Zeus Sarapis” formula (227ff.). It emerges that the Christian “One God” is quite rare in the epigraphy of Asia Minor, but is used there more often in pagan henotheistic contexts (77f.). While quite numerous in Egypt, the Christian variants are mostly undated and are therefore of little help in working out the problems of conversion there (47–77). We are thus thrown back on the dated Syrian texts, and so it is hoped that the foregoing chapter will clarify this question to some extent. Two of the more interesting examples cited by Peterson require brief notice. The first of these is a “One God who helps” text from Deir el-Bahari. It is accompanied with incised palm leaves and an Ankh cross, symbols of the old polytheism now integrated into the Christian scheme (56). Another text, from the Aegean island of Kos, refers simply to the “One God in the sky” (ἐν θεῷ ὑπάρχων) (78). It has a clear relationship to other Christian texts and inscriptions that reject a multiplicity of divinities in sky and sea and earth.⁵

There was in any case a clear distinction between Hellenic henotheism and Christian monotheism. On the former Campbell Bonner observes:⁶

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² Supra, Ch. IX, Sect. 4.
³ Supra, Ch. IX, Sect. 2.
⁴ Supra, Ch. II, Sect. 2.
⁵ Cf. supra, Ch. IV, Sect. 5.
⁶ Campbell Bonner, Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian (Ann Arbor 1950), 174f. Bonner cites several examples of this, including a miracle