CHAPTER 20

Introducing Foreign Deities: The Documentary Evidence

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As the Apostle Paul proclaims Jesus as crucified and risen Savior in the Athenian agora, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers involve him in a debate. Luke notes two different reactions in Acts 17:18: some comment on the unsystematic nature of his teaching about God, the world, and human beings,1 while others think that he proclaims foreign divinities (ξένα δαιμόνια), that is, deities that are not worshipped in Athens, a possibility that prompts an investigation by the Areopagus Council (Acts 17:19). While Greek and Roman cities did not stipulate which deities the population had to worship, the introduction of new deities was subject to the “official authorization of the state.”2 This can be illustrated both by literary and documentary evidence from ancient times.

1 Literary Evidence

The literary evidence for the aversion of the Athenians to the introduction of new deities and their cults into the city ranges from Isocrates and Xenophon (fifth/fourth century BCE) to Josephus and Maecenas in the first century CE.

1. Isocrates (436–338 BCE) praises the Athenians for guarding “against the elimination of any of the ancestral sacrifices and against the addition of any sacrifices outside the traditional ones (ὅπως μηδὲν μήτε τῶν πατρίων καταλύσουσιν μήτ’ έξω τῶν νομιζομένων προσβήσουσιν). For they thought that piety existed not in great expenditures, but rather in not changing any of those things that their ancestors had handed down to them (ἐν τῷ μηδὲν κινεῖν ὧν αὐτοῖς οἱ πρόγονοι παρέδοσαν)” (Areop. 30).3 This traditionalism, which rejects the novelty of non-traditional gods and cults, is seen in Greek literature right from the start: see

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2 Versnel, “Paradox,” 122.
3 The translation is from J. D. Mikalson, L.C.L.
Hesiod (“in whatever way a city sacrifices, the ancient rule is the best” [ὡς κε πόλις ἱερεῖσι, νόμος δ’ ἁρχαῖος ἄριστος]; Frag. 322); a law of Draco (sixth century BCE), which, according to Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.22, instructs the Athenians “as a group to honour the gods and local heroes in accordance with the ancestral practices and in private as best they can (θεοὺς τιμᾶν καὶ ἥρωας ἐν κοινῷ ἐπομένοις νόμοις πατρίοις, ἰδίᾳ κατὰ δύναμιν)”; the Delphic oracle’s answer to the question of how to perform the sacrifices to the ancestors (“according to the law of the city” [νόμῳ πόλεως], Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.3.1; cf. Cicero, *Leg.* 2.16.40).

2. Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BCE) describes the indictment against Socrates (399 BCE) as follows: “Socrates is guilty of rejecting the gods acknowledged by the state and of bringing in strange deities; he is also guilty of corrupting the youth (ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσφέρων: ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τούς νέους διαφθείρων) (Mem. 1.1.1; Trans. E. C. Marchant, *LCL*).5 Xenophon relates that Socrates, who defended himself against the charge that he did “not believe in the existence of the gods (in the way it is traditionally done by the *polis*)” (Plato, *Apol.* 24C; Favorinus, in Diogenes Laertius 2.40; Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.1), “to be on the safe side, was at pains to prove that nobody had ever seen him sacrificing to strange gods (καινοὶ δαίμονις—not δαιμονίοις), nor swearing by or acknowledging other gods (οὔτε ὀμνὺς οὔτε νομίζων ἄλλους θεούς)” *Apol.* 24.6

3. The Case of Phryne: In the early part of the fourth century, the *hetaira* Phryne was accused of *asebeia*, based on the fact that “she held a *komos* in the Lykeion. She introduced a new god and she organized *thiasoi* of men and women (ἀσεβείας κρινομένη ἡ Φρύνη: καὶ γὰρ ἐκώμασεν ἐν Λυκείῳ καὶ καινὸν εἰσήγαγε θεόν καὶ θιάσους ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν συνήγαγεν); the plaintiff Euthias states in what is regarded as an authentic epilogue: “So I have now proven that Phryne is impious because she has participated in a scandalous revelry, because she has introduced a new god, and because she has assembled unlawful *thiasoi* of both men and women (ἐπέδειξα τοίνυν ὑμῖν ἀσεβῆ Φρύνην, κωμάσασαν ἀναιδῶς, καινοῦ θεοῦ εἰσηγήτριαν, θιάσους ἀνδρῶν ἐκθέσμους καὶ γυναικῶν συναγαγόν)’’

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6 Versnel, “Paradox”, 127, with further reference to Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.2–4; 1.3.1; 1.3.4; *Apol.* 10–11; *Anab.* 3.1.4–8; Plato, *Apol.* 21B; 33C; *Phaed.* 60B–61B: Socrates participated in, and advocated, the traditional Athenian cults. Much later, Servius (ca. CE 400) confirms in connection with Socrates’ trial that the Athenians prohibited the introduction of new gods: “The Athenians saw to it that nobody should introduce superstitious cults (ne quis introduceret religions): on this charge Socrates was sentenced” (cited by Virgil, *Aen.* 8.187).