

MONOTHEISTIC FORMULAE OF BELIEF IN GREEK LETTERS ON
PAPYRUS FROM THE SECOND TO THE FOURTH CENTURY¹

Malcolm Choat and Alanna Nobbs

Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia

The phenomenon of monotheism as it existed outside the Judeo-Christian tradition in Late Antiquity² has recently received renewed attention.³ New approaches to the phenomenon of monotheism in late antiquity allow us to move beyond the unhelpful ‘pagan’ = polytheistic vs. Christian = monotheistic framework. In this article we trace the spread of monotheistic sentiments in letters on papyrus, found in Egypt but written in Greek, primarily in the period leading up to Late Antiquity, the second and third centuries AD.

By ‘formulae of belief’ we mean here to refer to those prayers for health which occur most regularly in the opening and closing lines of a

1. We have derived the data on which our hypotheses are based primarily from word-searches on the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri; see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Texts/papyri.html>; cf. <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/DDBDP.html>. Papyrological publications are abbreviated as in J.F. Oates *et al.* (eds.), *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* (BASP Suppl., 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 5th edn, 2001); latest version at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>. In an earlier form, this project benefited from the participation of Dr Rosalie Cook, whose contribution we should like to acknowledge.

2. Definitions vary, particularly with regard to the chronological terminus, but the period is traditionally held to begin with the accession of Diocletian in 284. In what follows, all dates are AD unless otherwise specified.

3. See in particular the proceedings of a symposium held at Oxford in 1996, published as P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

letter.⁴ While there are many variations,⁵ the basic pattern of the opening prayer is:

πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαι τοῖς θεοῖς / τῷ θεῷ σε ὑγιαίνειν *vel sim.*

‘Before all else I pray to the gods / to God that you are well’.

Prayers (again with variations in form) also customarily close a letter:

ἐρρωσθαί σε εὐχομαι τοῖς θεοῖς / τῷ θεῷ *vel sim.*

‘I pray for your health to the gods / to God’.

Variation in word order, verbal forms, and purpose of prayers (health, safety, long life, etc.) is common, and significant in its own right. Here, however, we concentrate on the target of the prayers themselves: to or before whom prayers are made, and how this is expressed. Such formulae have been the focus of prolonged attention by papyrologists and historians of religion; yet the focus has largely been on identifying ‘Christian’ formulae, as a means by which to trace the spread of the new religion through Roman Egypt.⁶ Such studies (especially the collections

4. More isolated references to divinity, some of which are discussed in the course of this article, also occur in the body of letters.

5. F.X. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1923), provides a wide-ranging if (somewhat outdated) survey.

6. G. Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane dai papiri greci del III e del IV secolo* (Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1923); *idem*, ‘Paganesimo e cristianesimo nelle lettere papiracee greche dei primi secoli d. Cr.’, in *Atti del IV Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1936), pp. 333-50; M.T. Cavassini, ‘Lettere cristiane nei papiri greci d’Egitto’, *Aeg.* 34 (1954), pp. 266-82; M. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli ii-iv* (Florence: Nardini, 2nd edn, 1998); *idem*, ‘In margine alle «lettere cristiane» nei papiri’, *Civiltà classica e cristiana* 2 (1981), pp. 167-176; H. Koskeniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1956); G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (North Ryde: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1987), IV, pp. 57-63; S.R. Llewelyn (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (North Ryde, Australia: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1992), VI, pp. 169-77; E. Wipszycka, ‘Remarques sur les lettres privées chrétiennes des II^e-IV^e siècles (a propos d’un livre de M. Naldini)’, *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 18 (1974), pp. 203-22; A.M. Nobbs, ‘Formulas of Belief in Greek Papyrus Letters of the Third and Fourth Centuries’, in T. Hillard *et al.* (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), II, pp. 233-37.

of Ghedini and Naldini) have often perpetuated the dichotomies which *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* attempts to dismantle:⁷ here we seek to move beyond them.

We accept at the outset that epistolary usage cuts across cultural and social boundaries; that there is little profit in attempting to isolate exclusively ‘Christian’ or ‘pagan’ (however the latter term might be used) phraseology. There can be no sense in which Christians wrote letters to or received them only from other Christians, and so too with other religious groups. Many educated Christians were not unfamiliar with classical knowledge and traditions; and not a few non-Christians had read Christian Scripture, even if only to attack it.⁸ Thus, there is no reason why one should attempt to segregate epistolary traditions and study them in isolation from one another (even if such a task were possible). The scene might be set with the papyrus ‘Archive of Theophanes’ from the early fourth century.⁹ Theophanes, an educated ‘upper-class’ resident of Hermopolis Magna in the early fourth century, acts as letter-carrier for a prophet of the cult of Hermes Trismegistus but (on our interpretation) receives letters from Christians.

In comparing papyrus letters from the fourth century AD with those from the two previous centuries, a pronounced shift in ‘formulae of belief’ is noticeable. Predominantly polytheistic or ‘pagan’ formulae (prayers to, or mention of, ‘the gods’ or a Graeco-Roman / Egyptian divinity) are common in second century (and, of course, earlier) letters. In the fourth century monotheistic formulae are far more frequent. The move to a more widespread usage of monotheistic formulae must be sought in the second and particularly third centuries. This article seeks to chart this change, asking how the monotheistic modes of referring to the divine evolved: are the monotheistic formulae which appear with

7. The work of G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1979), should be noted as an exception.

8. On better-known individuals, see J.G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); full details in G. Rinaldi, *Biblia gentium: primo contributo per un indice delle citazioni, dei riferimenti e delle allusioni alla bibbia negli autori pagani, greci e latini, di età imperiale* (Rome: Libreria Sacre Scritture, 1989).

9. P.Ryl. IV 616-51; P.Herm. 2-6; SB XII 10803; for an overview see H. Cadell, ‘Les archives de Théophanès d’Hermoupolis: Documents pour l’histoire’, in L. Criscuolo and G. Geraci (eds.), *Egitto e storia antica dall’ellenismo all’età araba* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1989), pp. 315-23.

increasing frequency simply refinements of polytheistic formulae? Are there any new formulae which appear in this period? To what extent can the change be attributed to the influence of New Testament (and in particular Pauline) epistolographic tropes? The underlying causes of the transformation remain difficult to assess. This article should be seen as a ‘sounding’, an approach on trial. We present the data here in the hope of assisting further elucidation of the situation.

The spread of Christianity has always provided an (apparently) obvious explanation for the spread of monotheistic sentiments. At least one ‘formula of belief’, unattested, at least as far as palaeographical dating will allow, in Egypt before the third century can be attributed to Christianity: the ‘in the Lord / God’ formula: ἐν θεῷ / κυρίῳ / κυρίῳ θεῷ. Although the phrase itself is found in the Septuagint, in the New Testament it is imbued with a distinctively Christian sense through the conceptualization of a people ‘in Christ’ (ἐν Χριστῷ). In documentary papyri, the phrase is found first in P.Bas. I 16 (3rd century init.) and in the succeeding centuries is used with increasing frequency as the number of Christians (or perhaps the number of Christians prepared to put their name to such a distinctive formula?)¹⁰ increases. Such an obviously Christian formula is not at issue here.¹¹ Rather, we are concerned with the more ambiguous prayers ‘to’ and ‘before’ God’ (τῷ / παρὰ τῷ θεῷ). Of particular interest is prayer to or before ‘the Lord God’ (κύριος θεός).

10. Opinions on whether Christians consciously avoided inserting ‘Christian’ elements into their letters for fear of persecution vary: contrast R. Rémondon, ‘L’Égypte et la suprême résistance au christianisme (V^e-VII^e siècles)’, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 51 (1952), pp. 63-78 and Nobbs, ‘Formulas of Belief’, p. 234 with the caution of H.I. Bell, ‘Evidences of Christianity in Egypt During the Roman Period’, *HTR* 37 (1944), pp. 185-208, at p. 198 and the outright scepticism of E. Wipszycka, ‘La christianisation de l’Égypte aux iv^e-vi^e siècles. Aspects sociaux et ethniques’, in *idem, Études sur le christianisme dans l’Égypte de l’antiquité tardive* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1996), pp. 63-105 (65).

11. Nor fourth century Manichaean usage evident in papyri from Ismant el-Kharab (Roman Kellis), see P.Kell. I Gr. 63 and a number of Coptic letters in P.Kell. V; see the discussion, P.Kell. V, Intro., pp. 72-73.

The Move to Monotheism

Prayers ‘to / before the gods’ , (παρὰ) τοῖς θεοῖς¹² are numerous in third century papyrus letters, as in previous centuries; we count sixteen such polytheistic prayers in the third century,¹³ as against nine in the second,¹⁴ with two dated 2nd/3rd century.¹⁵ Working with such small numbers, we do not attach any particular significance to the apparent *increase* in the use of polytheistic formulae.¹⁶ Prayers to named gods, such as Sarapis, Hermes, or Isis, decrease in frequency. What is remarkable is the sharp increase in the use of monotheistic prayers *with an unnamed god*: from apparently none in previous centuries, the third century witnesses four prayers τῷ θεῷ,¹⁷ one τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ,¹⁸ and five παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ.¹⁹

This monotheistic impulse is reflected in other formulae. The phrase σὺν θεῷ (‘with God’) had always been more common than its polytheistic counterpart (σὺν θεοῖς). Thus the former is twice as common in second-century texts. Yet in third-century papyri it is ten times as common. The usage of σὺν θεῷ remains constant in numerical terms; the

12. Including such additional qualifiers as ἐνθάδε (‘the gods here’), or ἐπιξεν-οῦμαι (‘the gods I am hospitable with’).

13. PSI XII 1246 (ca. 219–222); PSI XII 1248 (after 235); PSI XIII 1335 (3rd century); P.Ryl. II 244 (3rd century); P.Oxy. XXXVIII 2862 (3rd century); P.Oxy. XIV 1766 (3rd century); P.Oxy. VI 933 (3rd century); P.Oxy. XXXVI 2783 (3rd century); PSI III 206 (3rd century); P.Mich. III 214 (297) (bis); P.Oxy. VII 1070 (3rd century); P.Oxy. IX 1217 (3rd century); SB XII 11050 = PSI XIV 1556 (3rd century); P.Iand. VI 115 (3rd century); StudPal V 100 (3rd century).

14. P.Mich. VIII 465 (19.2.108); P.Mich. III 203 (114–116 BL); P.Alex.Giss. 50 (ca. 113–120); P.Alex.Giss. 58 (ca. 113–120); P.Harr. I 103 (2nd century?); P.Mich. VIII 484 (2nd century); P.Mich. VIII 499 (2nd century); P.Mert. II 82 (late 2nd century); P.Haun. II 33 (2nd century).

15. BGU IV 1081; P.Oxy. IX 1216.

16. In terms of survival of private letters, the centuries are virtually identical: the Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens (<http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~gv0/gvz.html>) lists 606 private letters for the second century and 611 for the third, with 200 dated second/third century.

17. P.Oxy. XIV 1773 (3rd century); P.Oxy. XLII 3065 (3rd century). PSI IV 299 (end 3rd century); SB III 6222 (end 3rd century).

18. P.Wash. I 31 (3rd century? cf. N.Gonis, *ZPE* 119 [1997], p. 140).

19. P.Oxy. XIV 1678 (3rd century); P.Princ. II 73 (3rd century); P.Mich. III 216, 219, 221 (297).

changed levels are caused rather by a decrease in the use of $\sigma\upsilon\nu$ θεοῖς.

The genitive absolute θεοῦ θέλοντος, ‘god willing’, barely used before the third century, becomes more frequently used then; its polytheistic counterpart, used nine times in second and second/third-century texts, is used only twice in third-century letters. Again we are left with the impression of a steady decrease in the usage of polytheistic phraseology.

So too with ‘giving thanks’ to the gods/God, in which the polytheistic form, especially as regards the verbal construction εὐχαριστῶ (τοῖς) θεοῖς *vel sim.*, drops off dramatically in the third century. In letters dated 3rd/4th century, by which time polytheistic usage of this phrase has apparently ceased, two monotheistic examples may be cited, P.Berl. Zill. 12 and P. Oxy. LV 3816. The former of these, which gives thanks ‘to the Lord our God’ (κυρίῳ ἡμῶν θεῷ) is generally (and probably rightly) held to be Christian;²⁰ the second might be taken as Christian with its prayers and thanks given τῷ θεῷ (ll. 3, 11). But the re-occurrence of rare names from this letter in a contemporary one which indicates members of the family worshipped Sarapis counsels caution.²¹ Once again, although parallels for the formula in a monotheistic form may be found in the New Testament,²² the monotheistic phraseology cannot offer direct confirmation of a Christian writer in papyrus letters.

Prayer before (παρά) the God(s)

Given this apparent general move towards monotheism, we have chosen a specific case study. The aim is to determine whether either Christian influence or the adaptation of a polytheistic formula can be proven. Prayer ‘before’ (παρά) a god/gods makes a useful case study, in particular seeing that prayers made παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ, ‘before the Lord God’, have remained contentious as an indicator of religious beliefs.²³

20. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, no. 26; Tibiletti, *Lettere private*, pp. 51-52.

21. P.Oxy. XIV 1670; on the possible connection, see P.Oxy. LV 3816 Intro.

22. See e.g. Lk. 18.11; Acts 27.35, 28.15; Rom. 1.8; 1 Cor. 1.4.

23. For contributions, see G. Ghedini, ‘Di alcuni elementi religiosi pagani nelle epistole private greche dei papiri’, *Stud. del. Scuol. Pap.* 2 (1917), pp. 51-76, at p. 55; *Lettere cristiane*, p. 96 n. 4; ‘Paganesimo e cristianesimo’, p. 338 n. 3; Cavasini, ‘Lettere cristiane nei papiri greci d’Egitto’, p. 272; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*,

short) treatment,³¹ the principal suggestion of which was that formulaic contamination had occurred with the *proskynema* phrase, customarily made παρά + the god concerned in the dative, and frequently occurring in close proximity to a εὐχομαι formula at the beginning of letters.³² Yet he was not prepared to extend this explanation to the five examples of prayers παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ known to him,³³ which generally followed the pattern εὐχομαι σε (ὀλοκληρεῖν καὶ) ὑγιαίνειν παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ. With one exception³⁴ he held all to be ‘perhaps’ by Christians: in these letters, for reasons which he did make clear, Ghedini considered it more likely that παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ was a ‘locativo psicologico’ dependent on σε ὑγιαίνειν. Perhaps, he advanced, it was constructed on analogy with Christian prayers ἐν κυρίῳ θεῷ.³⁵ The implication is that here the prayers are not made παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ; rather, the hope is expressed for health from the Lord God for the addressee. This position was followed by Naldini,³⁶ but not by Zilliacus,³⁷ and it is hard to not agree with the latter: despite the lack of classical precedent, it is difficult to believe that the παρά phrase is not to be taken with εὐχομαι, and that we deal here with prayers ‘before the Lord God’.

To assume that πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαι σε ὑγιαίνειν παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ *vel sim.* operates in a grammatically completely different manner to πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαι σε ὑγιαίνειν παρά τοῖς θεοῖς requires there to have been a decisive conceptual break between polytheistic and monotheistic usage. And despite initial hesitation, it is clear that Ghedini saw this break in Christian influence on the mono-

31. ‘Εὐχομαι παρά τοῖς θεοῖς nella formola di saluto’, *Aeg.* 3 (1922), pp. 191-92.

32. See G. Geraci, ‘Ricerche sul proskynema’, *Aeg.* 51 (1971), pp. 3-211.

33. P.Oxy. XIV 1678, P.Oxy. XII 1493, P.Oxy. X 1299, P.Oxy. XIV 1495, P.Lond. II 414 (= P.Abinn. 5).

34. P.Oxy. X 1299, which the presence of the παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ formula later caused him to regard as a Christian letter; see ‘Paganesimo e cristianesimo’, pp. 338-39, revising his opinion from ‘Alcuni elementi’, p. 55 (founded on the phrase ἐθύκαμεν τὰ χυρίδια in l. 7); cf. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, no. 76.

35. Ghedini, ‘Εὐχομαι παρά τοῖς θεοῖς’, p. 192. Cf. *idem*, *Lettere cristiane*, pp. 95-96, commenting on P.Oxy. XIV 1678.3.

36. *Il cristianesimo*, p. 95 n. 3.

37. H. Zilliacus, *Zur Sprache griechischer Familienbriefe des III. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (P.Mich. 214-221) (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1943), pp. 42-43.

theistic examples. In the third century, prayers $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ $\tau\hat{\omega}$ $\kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega$ $\theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$ occur in P.Oxy. XIV 1678, P.Princ. II 73, P.Mich. III 216, 219 and 221; two further examples are dated third/fourth century, P.Oxy. XII 1493 and XXXIV 2728. All except the last have been claimed for Christianity,³⁸ but in every case except P.Oxy. XII 1493, this identification depends directly on the $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ phrase.³⁹ Thus it is not at all methodologically sound to simply assume that all the third-century letters which pray $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ $\tau\hat{\omega}$ $\kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega$ $\theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$ are Christian. Nor, indeed, is it immediately obvious why this should make any difference. A comprehensive approach to these questions requires the evidence to be viewed together.

Initial doubts notwithstanding,⁴⁰ Ghedini eventually considered that $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ $\tau\hat{\omega}$ $\kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega$ $\theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$ was used ‘in modo assoluto’ only by Christians.⁴¹ Naldini could find no ‘securely pagan’ letter which used the phrase, which appears in certainly Christian fourth-century letters.⁴² He thus felt justified in including it among his list of criteria which pointed towards Christianity. But was he correct?

Despite imaginative arguments, it seems clear that the correspondence of Paniscus (P.Mich. III 214-221; Koptos, 297) is *not* Christian: the polytheistic formulae in P.Mich. III 214 cannot be explained as a habit continuing after conversion,⁴³ and to attribute the variance to a change of scribe seems forced.⁴⁴ Thus, Naldini’s logic cannot hold. But it is not our intention here to perpetuate the futile debate as to whether

38. See e.g. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, nos. 9, 12, 14, 16, 17 and 33; Tibiletti, *Lettere private*, pp. 6-22, marks all these as ‘uncertain’. On P.Oxy. XXXIV 2728, see I. Cazzaniga, ‘Un’osservazione al testo della lettera di Capitolino a Sarapamone (P. Oxy. 2728, sec. III-IV d.C.)’, *Studi in onore di Vittorio De Marco* (= *Acme* 23 [1970] fasc. 1-2), pp. 67-70 (69), who leaves the question open.

39. See the *nomen sacrum* for ‘Lord’, $\kappa\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ ($\kappa\epsilon\zeta$) in P.Oxy. XII 1493; on these contracted ‘sacred names’ see C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1979), pp. 26-48; cf. L. Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kürzung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

40. Ghedini, ‘Alcuni elementi’, p. 55.

41. ‘Paganesimo e cristianesimo’, p. 338 n. 3.

42. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, pp. 10-12.

43. The suggestion of U. Wilcken, so too Ghedini, and Naldini; see J. Schwartz, ‘Autour du dossier de Paniskos’, *Aeg.* 48 (1968), pp. 110-15; cf. the summary of Farid, ‘Paniskos: Christian or Pagan?’.

44. Cf. Nobbs, ‘Formulae of Belief’, p. 234 n. 8.

παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ as used in third- and fourth-century letters is ‘pagan’ or Christian: usage clearly cut across cultural boundaries. This does not rule out Christian influence in a wider sense, but this must be proved. Thus we focus rather on the interesting questions of how the use of the formula came about, and what its antecedents, literary or otherwise, might be. Is it a monotheistic transformation of a polytheistic phrase? Can Christian (i.e. New Testament) influence be detected? Or is the answer to be sought elsewhere?

A direct polytheistic antecedent for παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ cannot be found, as prayers παρὰ τοῖς κυρίοις θεοῖς do not occur, in this or any other period.⁴⁵ Yet as seen, prayers παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς occur in a number of second- and third-century letters,⁴⁶ where Ghedini and Naldini saw formulaic innovation, we see formulaic continuity in prayers made παρὰ divine beings, with the ‘innovation’ being that they are made before the Lord God (κύριος θεός).

As noted, Ghedini and Naldini supposed that παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ in these formulae was not dependent on the verb of praying. Thus, it was not necessary to explain the fact that prayer παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ is not a New Testament concept. παρὰ τῷ θεῷ and παρὰ κυρίῳ are found in the New Testament, where they have the sense of ‘in the sight of God’,⁴⁷ and ‘in the presence of the Lord’ respectively.⁴⁸ In line with his and Ghedini’s interpretation, Naldini cites Lk. 1.30⁴⁹ as a possible parallel

45. Nor, in fact, are there any *proskynema* addressed to κύριοι θεοί; Geraci’s no. 24 (PSI XIV 1437) (‘Ricerche sul proskynema’, p. 195) should be restored instead as a *proskynema* to the ‘ancestral gods’ (πα[ρὰ τοῖς πα-][τρώ]οις θεοῖς); see N. Gonis, ‘PSI XIV 1437 and its Ghost Proskynema’, *Comunicazioni: Istituto Papirologico “G. Vitelli”* (Florence, Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli, 1997), pp. 35-43. Cf. Zilliacus, *Zur Sprache griechischer Familienbriefe*, pp. 42-43; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, p. 95 n. 3.

46. P.Alex.Giss. 50 (ca. 113–120); P.Oxy IX 1217 (3rd century); P.Oxy. XX 2273 (3rd century); SB XII 11050 (3rd century). Prayers are made (εὐχὰς ποιεῖν) this way in P.Mich. VIII 499 (2nd century); see also ἡ προάγουσα παρ’ ἐμοῦ παρὰ πᾶσι θεοῖς εὐχή in P.Oxy. VII 1070 (3rd century). Thanks are also given (in a variety of formulae) παρὰ (πᾶσι τοῖς) θεοῖς in P.Giss. 77 (Apollonopolis Heptakomias, 98–138?); P.Mich. VIII 499 (2nd century); P.Mich. VIII 502 (Karanis, 2nd century). Cf. greetings παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς τῆς πόλεως τῶν Ἀντινοέων in P.Oxy. XII 1489 (3rd century).

47. E.g. Rom. 2.11; 1 Cor. 3.19; 7.24; Jas 1.27.

48. See, e.g., Rom. 2.11; 1 Cor. 3.19; 7.24; Jas 1.27; 1 Pet. 2.4, 20. For παρὰ κυρίῳ in the sense of ‘in the presence of the Lord’, see 2 Pet. 3.8.

49. καὶ εἶπεν ὁ ἄγγελος αὐτῇ, μὴ φοβοῦ, Μαριάμ, εὗρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ

for παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ as used in the papyri.⁵⁰ But if we assume (as it seems we must) that the παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ phrase is to be taken after εὐχόμεαι in the papyrological examples, then these New Testament passages are not analogous, and cannot be used to explain the papyrological material or argue for its Christian character. If Christian influence in the third-century growth of the use of $\text{εὐχόμεαι παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ}$ is to be seen, then Christians must have taken up the phrase without scriptural precedent. Common scriptural use of $\text{κύριος (ἡμῶν) θεός}$ in itself seems too weak a ground to support the implication that Christians introduced the phrase into prayer formulae.

Leaving aside the verb of prayer (εὐχόμεαι), one parallel for the formulation $\text{εὐχόμεαι παρὰ + dative}$ is immediately obvious: the *proskynema* phrase.⁵¹ To make obeisance before ($\text{προσκύνημα ποιεῖν παρὰ}$) a god/gods on behalf of someone (with numerous variations of the god(s) before whom the obeisance is made), is commonplace in second- and third-century letters, no less so in the epigraphic record.⁵² παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ , followed by the name of a god in the dative, appears as the object of προσκύνημα ποιεῖν in many *proskynema* formulae.⁵³ In the third century, the specification of the god before whom *proskynesis* is being performed becomes (slightly) less common;⁵⁴ generalized polytheistic objects (before the gods / ancestral gods / local gods) occur more frequently. In the few fourth-century *proskynemata* we have, the divine specification has largely disappeared: *proskynesis* is performed simply ‘before the Lord God’.⁵⁵

As seen above, Ghedini proposed that prayers παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς arose

θεῷ .

50. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo*, p. 95 n. 3.

51. See Geraci, ‘Ricerche sul proskynema’.

52. On epigraphic *proskynemata*, see E. Bernard, ‘Réflexions sur les proskynèmes’, *Mélanges François Kerlouégan* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994 = *Annales littéraires de l’Université de Besançon*, 515), pp. 43-60.

53. Examples are listed by Geraci, ‘Ricerche sul proskynema’, pp. 203-208; cf. Farid, ‘Paniskos: Christian or Pagan?’, p. 113 n. 33.

54. Indeed the fourth century sees a dramatic drop-off in the use of the formula anyway, typically (and, despite necessary nuances, plausibly) explained by the ‘Christianization’ of Egypt; see H.C. Youtie, ‘P.Mich. inv.346: A Christian ΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΗΜΑ’, *ZPE* 28 (1978), pp. 265-67 (265).

55. See, e.g., P.Oxy. LIX 3998 (which the ἐν κυρίῳ formula shows to have been written by a Christian); P.Oxy. XIV 1775 (where the *proskynesis* is performed $\text{παρὰ τῷ δεσπότῃ θεῷ}$); P.Oxy. LXV 4493.

through conflation with the *proskynema* formula. It seems likely that he was correct, but given that he (wrongly, we believe) excluded monotheistic prayers from his hypothesis, it seems necessary to rehearse it to some extent.

The *proskynema* formula customarily occurs at the beginning of a letter, either as the first or second clause, depending on whether a prayer formula exists. A typical example of the latter (selected at random from many) is P.Mil. II 80 (? , 3rd century):⁵⁶

3	πρὸ μὲν τάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιάινειν	Before everything I pray that you are healthy
4	καὶ τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ καθ' ἑκάσ-	and make obeisance for you each
5	την ἡμέραν παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ Σαράπιδι	day before the Lord Sarapis

The proximity of the εὐχομαι and προσκύνημα phrases suggests the potential for conflation. In some letters it almost seems as if the formulae have the same object, as in *SB VI 9251* (Syene, 2nd/3rd century):

2	πρὸ μὲν πάντων σε εὐχομαι καὶ τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ
3	παρὰ τοῖς ἐνθάδε θεοῖς.

‘Before everything I pray for you and perform obeisance for you before the gods here’

Some letters make the contemporaneity of the actions explicit, such as in P.Mich. XV 751 (? , 2nd century):⁵⁷

2	πρὸ τῶν ὅλων ἐρρῶσθαί σε εὐ-
3	[χομαι.] ἅμα δὲ καὶ τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶμαι ἡμερησίως
4	[παρὰ τῷ] κυρίῳ Σαράπιδι.

‘Before all things I pray that you are healthy, and at the same time perform obeisance for you daily before the Lord Sarapis’

In other letters (such as *BGU I 332* [Arsinoite; 2nd/3rd century]) a participial construction serves a similar function:

4	τὸ προ[σ]κύνημα ὑμῶν ποιῶ παρὰ τῷ
5	κυρίῳ Σεράπιδι, εὐχομένη ὑμᾶς ὑγιαίνοντας ἀπολαβεῖν...

56. Here and in the following examples spelling is standardized.

57. See also P.Heid. VII 400 (? , 2nd century); *SB III 6263* (?; Roman era); P.Mich. III 209 (?; 2nd/3rd century).

‘I perform obeisance for you before the Lord Sarapis, praying to receive you in health...’

Ghedini’s hypothesised collapse of prayer and *proskynema* formulas seems unavoidable, and monotheistic παρά prayers should be seen as part of this continuum. But why prayers παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ? As seen, neither a scriptural nor a direct polytheistic antecedent is obvious. The answer may lie again in the *proskynema* phrase, at least in its most common form, addressed to Sarapis. As suggested by Tibiletti,⁵⁸ the common *proskynema* formula made παρά τῷ κυρίῳ Σαράπιδι may have more commonly become παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ in the third century, in reference to Sarapis or ‘una divinità sincretistica’.

‘Syncretistic divinities’ are too elusive to build hypotheses on, and it seems just as likely that it is Sarapis who is often the κύριος θεός in question. Thus, the increase in prayers ‘before the Lord God’ in the third century may have more to do with the growth in popularity of the cult of Sarapis than in the spread of Christianity.

In explaining the spread of this formula, we might conjecture a collapse of formulae of belief, involving a number of possibly contemporaneous stages:

1. Through constant juxtaposition of *proskynema* and εὐχομαι formulae, the παρά phrase common in the former became used in the latter.
2. Perhaps because of the popularity of Sarapis, *proskynema* and prayers παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ were commonly substituted for those made παρά τῷ κυρίῳ Σαράπιδι.⁵⁹
3. As part of a common (and conveniently neutral) epistolographic vocabulary, such prayers were incorporated into Christian letters.

Thus, prayer παρά τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ is part of a more general change, and depends not on Christianity, but on a wider move towards monotheistic formulae, perhaps driven primarily by the popularity of a competing

58. *Lettere private*, p. 51.

59. By far the most common formula; see Geraci, ‘Ricerche sul proskynema’, pp. 203-204; cf. Z. Aly, ‘The Popularity of the Sarapis Cult as Depicted in Letters with Proskynema-Formulae’, in *idem, Essays and Papers: A Miscellaneous Output of Greek Papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Athens: The Greek Papyrological Society, 1994), pp. 77-119.

cult. That prayers $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\ \theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$ occur only in the ‘transitional’ period of the third and fourth centuries⁶⁰ suggests that the background to the use of the formula should be located within this transitional period. If the phrase was truly a Christian innovation, why did its use fade with the coming of the Christian *oikoumene* in the fifth century? A parallel might be found in other former epistolary commonplaces, such as the *proskynema* formula and the *abaskantos* phrase, which denoted protection from the ‘evil eye’.⁶¹ These are used in some fourth century Christian letters, but their employment ceases in the late fourth century, relatively contemporaneous with the last prayers $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\ \theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$. A residual association in the minds of Egyptian Christians between $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\ \theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$ and the *proskynema* formula might account for the falling off in use of the former at around the time the latter disappears.

Change in Beliefs or Change in Formulae?

The move towards monotheism in Mediterranean non Judeo-Christian (i.e. ‘pagan’) traditions in the Imperial and Late Antique periods has received considerable treatment in recent years. The Neoplatonic emphasis has long been known;⁶² epigraphic testimony from Asia Minor shows movement towards monotheistic expression outside the philosophical schools.⁶³ Egypt has no texts which bear witness to the popularity of syncretistic monotheistically expressed cults such as that of the ‘Most High God’. Yet the papyri testify to a shift in formulaic usage in the second through fourth centuries. As we have seen, Christian influence alone will not account for the shift: several expressions, in particular prayer $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\hat{\omega}\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\ \theta\epsilon\hat{\omega}$, find no plausible New Testament antecedent. If anything, their antecedents seem to lie in ‘pagan’ formulae.

It is not merely that polytheistic formulae are being ‘converted’ to their direct monotheistic counterparts. And within the change itself, we

60. With PSI VII 825 redated from ed. pr.’s 4th/5th century to c. 325–330, P.Köln II 109 (4th/5th century) is the latest example.

61. E.g. $\tau\acute{\alpha}\ \acute{\alpha}\beta\acute{\alpha}\sigma\kappa\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\ \pi\alpha\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$, ‘the children, may they be protected from the evil eye’.

62. See recently M. Frede, ‘Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity’, in Athanassiadi and Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, pp. 41–67.

63. S. Mitchell, ‘The Cult of Theos Hypsistos in Late Antiquity’, in Athanassiadi and Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, pp. 81–148.

lack detail on its mechanism. Are more people taking on a monotheistic faith in a god with a title (e.g. ‘God’, as in e.g. Christianity, or the cult of the ‘most high God’) rather than a name (i.e. Hermes, Isis, etc.)? Or is the practice of not naming the god becoming more common? That is to say, is the movement within the register of ‘expression’, rather than ‘belief’? If this is the case, how can we determine this, or measure it?

Egyptian religion came to have an increasingly ‘local’ focus in the Late Imperial period; a move towards a domestic context, rather than one dominated by the temple.⁶⁴ Yet it seems too easy to talk about ‘syncretism’ and ‘local gods’, as if their mere mention was sufficient to explain the apparent increase in monotheism. Neither (particularly not the latter) explains why people would stop naming their god; neither explains clearly why prayers would start to be made to a κύριος θεός only in the third century; neither explains why such prayers should have been made *before* the Lord God (παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ) rather than simply *to* him (τῷ κυρίῳ θεῷ). It may be, as suggested, that we deal here more with changing modes of expression; that this is a stylistic device, reflecting as much a blurring of epistolary formulae, as any profound change in beliefs. This is not to deny the importance of formulae as indicative of belief; change in them is not random, and does reveal something. But it can reveal something about letter-writing habits, and turn of phrase, as much as beliefs.

It is clear that monotheistic modes of thought became more prevalent in the Late Antique Mediterranean world in the period. The building and maintenance of Empire was arguably enhanced by an overarching monotheistic belief structure,⁶⁵ but this cannot be the only, or even the prime, explanation for the wider process detected and discussed in more recent scholarship. A range of emphases, modes of monotheism, and agendas for their propagation is apparent. For the process we have examined here, no ‘agenda’ can be readily extrapolated from the simple and passing references; and there seem few criteria on which one might read into this evidence programs developed or apparent in, say, philosophical discourse. Such connections, while they might seem apposite,

64. See especially D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 97-144.

65. See especially the discussion of the Christian Byzantine and the Islamic Empires by G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

can always, to our mind, be subject to the charge of arbitrariness, and we here eschew them.

The increasing recourse to monotheistic prayers which one detects in letters from the second to fourth centuries may reflect as much a growing tendency not to name the god to whom prayer or obeisance is being made as it does a conscious statement of 'monotheism' (however broadly the latter be defined). Such a hypothesis already takes us beyond what can be 'known' on the basis of the papyrological evidence. But it seems methodologically more sound to base such a hypothesis on the material itself, rather than importing an explanation from a source body which may not be at all temporally, culturally, or geographically appropriate. Still, the historical processes which stand behind the formulaic changes discussed here remain to be elucidated, and this requires more than the habitual reference to 'local gods' and 'syncretism'. We believe we have eliminated a common hypothesis, that this formulaic change can be directly attributed to Christian influence: the process clearly seems far wider, and it lies with those who would elucidate 'religious change' in the late Imperial and early Byzantine world to explain it.