4

HERODOTUS, HOMER, AND THE CHARACTER OF THE GODS

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At the heart of his Egyptian *logos*, Herodotus contrasts his fellow-Greeks' knowledge of the gods with that of the Egyptians (2.53):

> ἔνθεν δὲ ἐγένοντο ἕκαστος τῶν θεῶν, εἴτε αἰεὶ ἦσαν πάντες, ὁκοῖοί τε τινὲς τὰ εἴδεα, οὐκ ἠπιστέατο μέχρι οὗ πρώην τε καὶ χθὲς ὡς εἰπεῖν λόγῳ. [2] Ἡσίοδον γὰρ καὶ Ὅμηρον ἡλικίην τετρακοσίοισι ἔτεσι δοκέω μευ πρεσβυτέρους γενέσθαι καὶ οὐ πλέοσι· οὗτοι δὲ εἰσὶ οἱ ποιήσαντες θεογονίην Ἕλλησι καὶ τοῖσι θεοῖσι τὰς ἐπωνυμίας δόντες καὶ τιμάς τε καὶ τέχνας διελόντες καὶ εἴδεα αὐτῶν σημήναντες. [3] οἱ δὲ πρότερον ποιηταὶ λεγόμενοι τούτων τῶν ἀνδρῶν γενέσθαι ὕστερον, ἔμοιγε δοκέειν, ἐγένοντο. τούτων τὰ μὲν πρῶτα αἱ Δωδωνίδες ἱρεῖαι λέγουσι, τὰ δὲ ὕστερα τὰ ἐς Ἡσίοδόν τε καὶ Ὅμηρον ἔχοντα ἐγὼ λέγω.

But whence the several gods had their birth, or whether they all were from the beginning, and of what form they are, they did not learn till yesterday, as it were, or the day before: [2] for Hesiod and Homer I suppose were four hundred years before my time and not more, and these are they who made a theogony for the Hellenes and gave the titles to the gods and distributed to them honours and arts, and set forth their forms; [3] but the poets who are said to have been before these men were really in my opinion after them. Of these things the first are said by the priestesses of Dodona, and the latter things, those namely which have regard to Hesiod and Homer, by myself.

Unlike other chapters in this volume, this paper does not seek to explore specific Homeric (or Hesiodic) intertexts. (The most obvious point of parallel with this passage would perhaps be with Hesiod's *Theogony*, where the gods

allocate themselves their *timai* rather than having them given to them.[1]) Nor will it directly explore wider parallels between Herodotean and Homeric worlds—the different ways, for example, in which gods operate in each text.[2] Instead it will attempt simply to elucidate the meaning of Herodotus' reference to Homer and Hesiod (or, rather, Hesiod and Homer) in this passage. What is their status for Herodotus here? In what sense did they give the gods their titles and indicate their 'honours' and 'skills' and their 'forms' or characters? In attempting to answer these questions, the emphasis—in keeping with other contributions to this volume—will frequently be on the influence of Homer and Hesiod as mediated through other authors. Like policemen or low comedians, moreover, the two poets will almost always feature as a double-act.

The promise 'simply to elucidate' such a passage should perhaps elicit a hollow laugh. The interpretative questions that arise from this passage are such that 'if you are not completely confused you have not begun to understand'.[3] In broad terms, there are two interpretative routes. On the one hand, this passage is commonly seen as sceptical of conventional Greek approaches to divinity.[4] So, for example, for Scott Scullion, it emerges[5]

> that much or all of what constitutes for us and constituted for the Greeks the essential personality of the various gods was, on what Herodotus explicitly calls his own view, *invented* 'yesterday or the day before' by the poets Hesiod and Homer …

Like many other scholars, Scullion then connects Herodotus' statement here both with a network of other passages in the *Histories* (notably Herodotus' statement at 2.3.2 that all men know equally about the divine[6]) and with some select pre-Socratic fragments. He then makes a wider case that

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[1] Hes. *Theog.* 111–12: 'Those who were born of them, gods, givers of good things, … and how they divided up their wealth and how each one chose his or her *tīmē*' (οἵ τ᾽ ἐκ τῶν ἐγένοντο, θεοὶ δωτῆρες ἐάων· | ὥς τ᾽ ἄφενος δάσσαντο καὶ ὡς τιμὰς διέλοντο).

[2] See here, e.g., the observations of Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 70–1.

[3] A catch-phrase of the late Oxford epigrapher and historian D. M. Lewis.

[4] Munson (2001) 165.

[5] Scullion (2006) 199–200. The italics are mine.

[6] For an alternative reading, that it is the names (excepted from his policy of 'reticence') that men know equally, see, however, Thomas (2000) 279–80; see here the discussion of Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 85–6.

individual gods only rarely make appearances in the *Histories* in Herodotus' own mouth, and that these rare exceptions can be explained away.

This approach is, in many ways, an attractive one. It situates Herodotus at the cutting edge of late-fifth century thought (who could object to that?). Moreover, this reading of 2.53 is arguably of a piece with the picture of Homer that emerges from other passages: with the suggestion that Homer or another early poet had invented the name Ocean (τοὔνομα εὑρόντα, 2.23); or with the Helen-*logos* (2.112–20), where Homer is seen as serving a distinctively poetic agenda.[7] There is no space here for the inspiration of the Muses; the critical historian instead envisages the Homeric texts as a resource to be read (and mined) against the grain of their authors' intentions.[8]

The alternative approach is to attempt to reconcile the apparent implications of this passage with 'conventional' Greek polytheism. 'This seems in no way to devalue those traditional sets of [divine] attributes', I wrote more than two decades ago, following on from the work of Rudhardt and Gould—a claim described as 'venturesome' by Scullion.[9] This paper ventures a more detailed attempt at making this difficult case.

I begin with the pre-Socratic parallels. A wide range of intertexts can be adduced for our passage. First and foremost, the opening of 2.53 ('whence the several gods had their birth, or whether they all were from the beginning, and of what form they are') is—together with Herodotus' statement at 2.3.2 (that all men have equal knowledge)—commonly connected to the famous fragment of Protagoras' *Peri theōn*:[10]

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντά με εἰδέναι, ἥ τε ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

About the gods I am not able to know neither that they exist nor that they do not exist nor of what kind they are in form: for many things

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[7] For the Helen-*logos*, see de Jong (2012).

[8] Cf. Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 61–2: 'L'investigation de l'enquêteur a remplacé l'inspiration des Muses'.

[9] Harrison (2000) 192; Scullion (2006) 207 n. 41. Cf. Rudhardt (1992a) 88, 103–6; (1992b) 233–4; Gould (1994).

[10] Protagoras 80 B 4 D–K = D 10 L–M. See, e.g., Burkert (1985) 131; Munson (2001) 165.

prevent me from knowing this, its obscurity and the brevity of man's life.

The basis for supposing a connection here is partly the pattern of the sentence as a whole, partly the verbal similarity (ὁκοῖοί τε τινὲς τὰ εἴδεα ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν). There is then a wider body of parallel statements that can be drawn in: Xenophanes' declaration of the impossibility of clear knowledge (τὸ … σαφές) about the gods,[11] for example, or the statement of Socrates in the *Cratylus*—a dialogue concerned with the thesis of the natural appropriateness of names—of a principle that sensible men must acknowledge in discussing the names of the gods: 'that of the gods we know nothing, either of their natures or of the names, whatever they may be, by which they call themselves' (περὶ θεῶν οὐδὲν ἴσμεν, οὔτε περὶ αὐτῶν οὔτε περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων, ἅττα ποτὲ ἑαυτοὺς καλοῦσιν, Pl. *Crat.* 400e).

Next, Herodotus' statement of the centrality of Homer and Hesiod in Greek culture is also common to pre-Socratic thinkers: 'The teacher of the most people is Hesiod; they are certain that it is he who knows the most things', according to Heraclitus—before he disabuses them.[12] 'Since the beginning, all have learned according to Homer', according to Xenophanes (ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ' Ὅμηρον ἐπεὶ μεμαθήκασι πάντες).[13] If one were to follow an interpretation of 2.53 such as Scullion's, i.e., that Herodotus is distancing himself from individuated 'Homeric gods', one might suppose also that he subscribed more widely to a critical stance towards the poets' centrality.[14] Xenophanes' famous fragments on the anthropomorphic representation of the gods might also be woven in; these have been seen, for example, as lying behind the statement in Herodotus' Persian ethnography that the Persians do not consider their gods to take human form (1.131.1–2).[15]

Finally, Herodotus' theorising in the previous chapter (2.52) on the original state of knowledge of the gods of the pre-Greek Pelasgians,[16] i.e., before they had acquired the names—their inchoate sense of the gods, their calling them *theoi* because they had placed (*thentes*) all affairs in order—can

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[11] Xenophanes D 49 L–M = 21 B 34 D–K.

[12] Heraclitus 22 B 57 D–K = D 25 L–M.

[13] D 10 L–M = 21 B 10 D–K.

[14] Cf. Raaflaub (2002) 157.

[15] Raaflaub (2002) 157; Xenophanes, D 13 L–M = 21 B 16 D–K; D 14 = B 15. For alleged Persian influence on Protagoras, 80 A 2 D–K = P 7 L–M.

[16] For the ambivalent ethnicity of the Pelasgians, see Sourvinou-Inwood (2003).

be connected to a whole series of broadly contemporary accounts of the origins of human perception of the divine: Democritus' account of how ancient men explained heavenly phenomena as caused by the gods out of fear;[17] Prodicus' narrative whereby 'first the things that provided nourishment and help were considered gods and were honoured, and afterward those who had discovered means of nourishment, protection, or the other arts';[18] the *Protagoras* myth (with the establishment of altars and *agalmata*, Pl. *Prot.* 322a); or the famous Sisyphus fragment attributed to Critias or Euripides,[19] with its very different emphasis on a cynical individual who invented fear of the gods so that there might be something to 'frighten bad men even if they do or say or think (something) in secret'.

But how should we read these intertexts? Herodotus has been seen as a 'follower of Xenophanes' (by Edward Hussey) or as a disciple of Anaximander (by Peter Derow).[20] Kurt Raaflaub (in the context of 1.131) has suggested that Herodotus 'incorporates' into his *Histories* Xenophanes' critique of Homer's and Hesiod's stories about all-too-human gods and of the concept of anthropomorphic deities'.[21] There are reasons for caution over such readings, however.

First, there are perhaps particular dangers which attach to pre-Socratic intertexts specifically. By virtue of their fragmentary nature, there is a risk that pre-Socratic positions take on the misleading appearance of clear doctrines. (This potential problem is exacerbated rather than assisted by the new Laks–Most edition with its division into P[erson], D[octrine], and R[eception].)[22] As Milette Gaifman has observed in relation to Xenophanes' anthropomorphic fragments, however, these do not 'necessarily [constitute]

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[17] Democritus D 207 L–M = 68 A 75 D–K.

[18] Prodicus D 15, 16 L–M = 84 B 5 D–K.

[19] Critias, Fr. 1 Nauck = 43 F 19 *TGrF* = 88 B 25 D–K.

[20] Xenophanes: Edward Hussey, quoted by Gould (1994) 94 n. 7. See discussion of Versnel (2011) 120. Anaximander: Derow (1994) 78; see my discussion in Harrison (2000) 116.

[21] Raaflaub (2002) 157. Cf. Gaifman (2012) 97 (Persian exclusion of images '*could* be interpreted as an implicit rejection of anthropo*morphism* specifically, but it does not *necessitate* such a notion').

[22] Some of the difficulties of categorisation (esp. the distinction between D and R) are explored by Mourelatos (2018), but the reviews of Laks–Most to date largely reflect the assumed primacy of the 'doctrinal' (so also Graham (2018)).

a reproof, but rather an observation on the tendency to project one's own appearance onto the divine'.[23]

There is then a consequent danger that the significance of pre-Socratic intertexts may be exaggerated. The identification of parallels encourages a sense of discovery, that we have unearthed a kind of explanatory key to one text in another, and that we can use the wider thought of one figure to extrapolate that of the other.[24] But, to develop the example of the intertext with Protagoras' *Peri theōn*, although Herodotus' phrasing may resemble that of Protagoras, it is striking that he does not follow Protagoras in all respects. There is no evidence at 2.53 that the existence of the gods is open to question. Scullion and Burkert in essence read that meaning into the text (again by making the link with 2.3.2). As Robert Fowler has written, they 'mistake Herodotus' reluctance to speak of theology for scepticism about the existence of gods'.[25] An allusion—even if we could securely identify it as such—to Protagoras or to Xenophanes cannot be read as an indication of wholesale investment in a wider set of 'doctrines'.

This is for a number of reasons. First, given the nugatory state of survival of the pre-Socratic authors, we can hardly gauge the level or extent of any author's familiarity with them. Robin Lane Fox once observed to me—in Oxonian style—that Herodotus had been to his pre-Socratic tutorials but could not remember them very well. (Influence can indeed occur in many ways. Books, it has been suggested, can be divided into four categories: those that you have read, those that you have forgotten, those you have only heard about, and those that you do not know at all.[26] In a society on the cusp of the oral and the written, in which 'publication' of a work such as the *Histories* should be thought of as a process rather than a moment,[27] the notion of any straightforward influence is confounded to an even greater extent.) Even, then, where a reader recognises an allusion from one author to another— with an internalised 'I see what you did there' (in Pelling's phrase, above, p. 40)—, the force of such a moment of connection between author, reader/listener, and reference-text may be as much to highlight differences in meaning, to create a jarring effect, as to signal a common perspective. Far

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[23] Gaifman (2012) 79. Cf., more broadly, Tor (2017).

[24] So, e.g., Roubeckas (2019) 142, building on Whitmarsh (2015) 87–91.

[25] Fowler (2010) 319 n. 5; see also Lloyd ad loc. (I.18), Munson (2001) 165 ('it is not Herodotus but Protagoras who denies the possibility of human knowledge about the gods').

[26] Bayard (2007) 17 n. 1, cited by Racine (2016) 197.

[27] See, e.g., Hornblower (2005) 19–38 for a review, and esp. now Irwin (forthcoming).

from being the passive receiver of the pre-Socratics' 'doctrines', it is possible that Herodotus may actively have been engaging in, or commenting on, their debates.[28] The more that we expand the range of possible pre-Socratic intertexts, moreover, the more likely it is that the relationship is less direct and mechanical than a mere alignment.

I look here at a group of overlapping areas: the evidence for Herodotus' 'monotheism'; the status of Homer and Hesiod; and finally, as a coda, the nature of the primordial religion that preceded the poets' allocation to the gods of their eponyms, honours, skills, and forms.

First, 'monotheism'. Scullion is drawn to the possibility of what we might term a Xenophonean Herodotus who distances himself from the Homeric gods—to the extent that he suggests that there are only three occasions on which he names a Greek god in his own narrative voice:[29]

> The first is Herodotus' argument that Heracles the god is primary and taken over from the Egyptians, Heracles the hero a late derivative of the god (2.43–5). He concludes this startling reversal of Greek tradition with a wish for benevolence from the gods and heroes (2.45.3). This passage may be paired with his later comment 'I suppose, if one may make suppositions about divine matters' that Demeter kept the Persians who had burnt her sanctuary at Eleusis out of that at Plataea (9.65.2). So straightforward an application of the sacrilege model needs no excuse, and the easiest explanation is that both here and in the controversial case of Heracles Herodotus is marking and excusing speculation about a named divinity undertaken on his own narrative initiative. There is finally the 'anger of Talthybius' (7.134–7), which Herodotus emphatically counts a 'divine matter' (7.137.1–2). This tale, pretty clearly invented by Athenians to whitewash their killing of Spartan heralds in 430 BCE, is not only very tendentious in itself but also tendentiously narrated by Herodotus. It seems then that a strong political rather than religious motive prompted him to endorse this story and the essential role played in it by the Spartan patron of heralds. By my reckoning Herodotus nowhere else chooses to speak *in propria persona* of named Greek gods, and, subjective as such reckoning inevitably is, there is at any rate a reticence here that needs explaining.

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[28] Cf. Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 73, seemingly conceiving of the pre-Socratic influence as one-way.

[29] Scullion (2006) 198; cf. Lateiner (1989) 66–7, Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 74 n. 50.

Reducing the number of such instances to three involves a certain strain. There are more cases in which the intervention of a particular god, if not always a particular identifiable god, is strongly implied. What distinguishes the intervention of Demeter at Plataea is that there is clear evidence to support the case that the goddess was responsible. Similarly, in the case of the Potidaea floodtide, the evidence points to the identity of Poseidon (8.129). Special pleading is also required then to undermine the significance of the three remaining instances. A political motive hardly excludes a religious one. As for Herodotus' expression 'I suppose, if one may make suppositions about divine matters' (εἴ τι περὶ τῶν θείων πρηγμάτων δοκέειν δεῖ), this cannot reasonably support the weight put on it, as effectively neutralising this passage as an instance of a named god's intervention.[30] Such expressions are widespread across Greek literature. 'If a mortal must make conjecture of the intention of the gods …' (εἰ δὲ δεῖ θνητὸν ὄντα τῆς τῶν θεῶν στοχάσασθαι διανοίας, Isoc. *Dem.* 50). 'If it is necessary to speculate about the gods …' (εἴπερ οὖν δεῖ τὰ τῶν θεῶν ὑπονοεῖν, Andoc. 1.137–9). What unites all these expressions of uncertainty over theologising is that they do not prevent subsequent speculation but are precisely a prelude to it. Isocrates' caution prefaces a statement of what 'all people believe' about the gods. Andocides, like Herodotus, makes a trenchant judgement on the operation of divine retribution for human crimes.

Overall, it seems, there is a strain in Scullion's account to render the wider fabric of the *Histories* consistent with the desired picture—the picture, that is, of a pre-Socratic Herodotus who distances himself from individual gods. How else then can we reconcile the seeming contradiction between 2.53 and the representation of the gods elsewhere in the *Histories*? The answer is, in essence, to embrace the contradiction. Xenophanes' 'one god' was, of course, 'One god, among both gods and humans the greatest | Neither in bodily frame similar to mortals nor in thought' (εἷς θεός, ἔν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος· | οὔτε δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίιος οὔτε νόημα, D 16 L–M = 21 B 23 DK). ('How are we to explain', as Versnel asks, 'that the first intransigent monist of Greek philosophy admits through the back door what he has just previously ousted triumphantly through the front door?'[31])

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[30] Contrast the position of Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 72 ('Cette remarque … atteste *a contrario* la réserve globale …').

[31] For Xenophanes, and for the manoeuvre of embracing contradiction, see Versnel (2011) 244–67 (quotation from p. 247).

Herodotus' attraction to 'monotheistic' usages can both be tied to context (such terms tend to appear in generalising contexts, or where divine intervention is being diagnosed but there is insufficient evidence to pin responsibility to a particular divinity[32]) and at the same time does not preclude a role for individuated divinities.

What then is the status of Homer's (and Hesiod's) characterisations of the gods? Again, the sceptical nature of Xenophanes' position can be exaggerated. Xenophanes' critique of Homer and Hesiod—his pointing out of the morally blameworthy actions attributed to the gods (thieving, adultery, deceit: D 8, 9 L–M = B 11, 12 D–K)—can be characterised as contemptuous of traditional piety (so, 'deriding (ἐπικόπτων) what [Homer and Hesiod] said about the gods'[33]). But it can also be given a more positive construction. So, according to Arius Didymus,[34]

Ξενοφάνους πρώτου λόγος ἦλθεν εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἄξιος γραφῆς, ἅμα παιδιᾷ τάς τε τῶν ἄλλων τόλμας ἐπιπλήττοντος καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ παριστάντος εὐλάβειαν ὡς ἄρα θεὸς μὲν οἶδε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, δόκος δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται.

Xenophanes was the first author of a discourse worthy of mention that came to the Greeks, playfully rebuking the audacities of other people and at the same time demonstrating his own piety, on the idea that god knows the truth, 'but opinion extends over all men'.

Since truth is a divine prerogative, we are freed up to express our own opinion without fear of impiety.[35] In a similar vein, the acknowledgement that the names of the gods (i.e., the names that the gods use amongst themselves) are unknowable allows for us to investigate the conventional human names without fear of impiety (Pl. *Crat.* 400). Such expressions of unknowability, however, do not merely qualify Greek beliefs concerning the gods.

If the gods are unknowable, how does one respond? Should one, first, desist from speculation on their nature? This is the approach credited to

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[32] See, e.g., Harrison (2000) 169–81; more exhaustively, François (1957).

[33] D 1 L–M = 21 B 1 D–K.

[34] Xenophanes D 5 L–M = A 24 D–K; cf. Heraclitus, esp. D 22, 25 L–M = 22 B 56, 57 D–K.

[35] Cf. Xenophanes D 49 L–M= 21 B 34 D–K.

Protagoras and others in Plato's *Theaetetus*. '"My good people, young and old"', Protagoras is envisaged as saying, '"you sit here orating; you drag in gods, whose existence or non-existence I exclude from all discussion, written and spoken …"' (Pl. *Theaet.* 162d; cf. 80 B 4 D–K = D 10 L–M). But there is also a contrary position reflected, for example, in the passing questioning of whether one can conjecture about the gods that we saw earlier: such questioning of the difficulty of conjecture about the gods is invariably a formulaic prelude to precisely that, or indeed to dogmatic assertion. How then should one *act* on the unknowability of the divine? Overwhelmingly, the answer is that one should proceed with the propitiation of the gods. For the Socrates of the *Cratylus*, the initial principle ('that of the gods we know nothing …') is followed by a second: 'namely to call them, as is customary (νόμος) in prayers, by whatever name and from whatever provenance they prefer to be called (οἵτινές τε καὶ ὁπόθεν χαίρουσιν ὀνομαζόμενοι) since we do not know of any other', Pl. *Crat.* 400e). A fragment credited to the late fourth-century new comedian Philemon adopts a similar stance, albeit coupled with an expression of the futility of 'seeking out' the god:[36]

> θεὸν νόμιζε καὶ σέβου, ζήτει δὲ μή
> πλεῖον γὰρ οὐδὲν ἄλλο τοῦ ζητεῖν ἔχεις.
> εἴτ' ἔστιν εἴτ' οὐκ ἔστι μὴ βούλου μαθεῖν,
> ὡς ὄντα τοῦτον καὶ παρόντ' ἀεὶ σέβου.

> Believe in god and worship him, but seek him not:
> you'll have no other profit than the search.
> Don't try to find out if he is or not,
> but worship him always as if he exists and is present!

In Versnel's paraphrase, 'Stop wasting your time with worrying and thinking'; just '*Do as if* by just performing the proper rituals'.[37] Or in the analogy of Simmias in Plato's *Phaedo*, in the absence of certain knowledge, one should 'adopt the best and most irrefutable of men's theories and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, unless someone

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[36] Fr. 118 a–b (Kock, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, II.515) from Stob. *Ecl.* 2.1.5; the attribution to Philemon disputed by Kassel–Austin, n. on Philemon fr. 198 (VII.317). I am indebted here to the discussion of Versnel (2011) 473, whose translation I adapt.

[37] Versnel (2011) 473.

should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine (λόγου θείου τινός, Pl. *Phd.* 85b–d).[38]

It is in this context then that 2.53 (and its sister passage, 2.3.2) should be seen. Both passages may reflect pre-Socratic influence (or, perhaps we should say, a pre-Socratic background), and yet there is no need to see a harsh distinction between revolutionary scepticism, on the one hand, and traditional piety on the other.[39] Herodotus' comment on human knowledge of the divine at 2.3.2 need not imply a lack of human insight (that all men understand 'equally badly'[40]); instead it may suggest that 'they all "really know" something', albeit 'an (indeterminably) equal amount'.[41] The closest parallel to Herodotus' expression of the equal knowledge of the divine comes arguably not from a philosophical context but from a fragment of a *paean* of Pindar (Pindar fr. 61 Snell–Maehler, from Stob. 2.1.8):

> τί ἔλπεαι σοφίαν ἔμμεν, ἂν ὀλίγον τοι
> ἀνὴρ ὑπὲρ ἀνδρὸς ἴσχει;
> οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπως τὰ θεῶν
> βουλεύματ' ἐρευνάσει βροτέᾳ φρενί·
> θνατᾶς δ' ἀπὸ ματρὸς ἔφυ.

> What do you imagine wisdom to be, which one man possesses in slightly greater degree than another? For it is impossible that he will search out the gods' plans with a mortal mind, since he was born from a mortal mother (tr. Race).

Here one man can (scarcely) exceed another in wisdom (implicitly, wisdom in relation to the gods' plans). But the position does not then render any speculation on the divine otiose. Unknowability indeed, far from diluting—

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[38] A similar pattern of thought is perhaps reflected at Eur. *Bacch.* 200–9.

[39] Cf. the comments of Rudhardt (1992a) 104 (of 'monotheistic' expressions): 'Cette tendance, contrairement aux apparences, n'est pas révolutionnaire; elle ne conduit pas au monothéisme. Loin de briser le cadre des habitudes ancestrales, elle correspond à l'un des traits fondamentaux de la psychologie religieuse hellénique, que nous avons déjà souligné. Le Grec saisit concrètement le dieu sous des formes et pour ainsi dire dans les incarnations diverses, mais il sait que la divinité reste au-delà, profondément inconnaissable.'

[40] Thomas (2000) 279; cf. Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 73–4.

[41] Munson (2001) 165; see also Schwab (2020) 36. Cf. Lateiner (1989) 65: that is, all men have beliefs and rituals which satisfy them, and they are inaccessible to testing for objective truth.

or somehow rendering *merely* conventional—the worship of individuated gods, is the necessary *complement* to that continued propitiation. It is *because* of (and not despite) the gods' unknowability that one can proceed with apparent and unquestioning conviction.[42] One can believe that the epithets, the honours, and the skills were given to the gods by Homer and Hesiod, and that it was they that indicated their forms—that the demarcation of the gods was, in effect, a human construct[43]—and nevertheless credit these characterisations with validity. One can believe equally that 'God is like no one, and on account of this fact no one knows him through an *eikōn*' (according to a fragment of Antisthenes[44]) and yet—as Milette Gaifman has argued—'these comments do not necessarily imply the rejection of figural images, nor do they promote an alternative.'[45]

Finally, some brief remarks on 'primordial religion'. If Homer and Hesiod first created a theogony, and gave to the gods their eponyms, their honours, skills, and forms, what did they have before that point? Scullion suggests reasonably that this 'leaves a remainder we might identify as their essential, existent personalities, but it is difficult to see what this remainder might consist of, unless a sort of disembodied ethos.'[46] Some kind of picture can be pieced together, however, with the help of pre-Socratic intertexts, accounts such as those of Prodicus, Democritus, and the Platonic *Protagoras*, as well as his own text. What one can discern is an evolutionary model in which an inchoate sense of the divine is gradually fleshed out with a more detailed recognition of the gods[47] and with the paraphernalia of worship. At 2.4.2, the Egyptians are credited with being the first to introduce altars, and images (ἀγάλματα) and temples. Implicitly, then, there is a previous stage of

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[42] Cf. Harrison (2000) 188–92, and more broadly Sourvinou-Inwood (2000) 20: 'The Greeks did not delude themselves that their religion incarnated the divine will'.

[43] Contrast Scullion (2006) 199. See also here Currie (2020) 155–6, countenancing various softenings of the meaning of the primacy of Hesiod and Homer (either that Herodotus' statement 'could amount to a claim that we are unable to point to any other named individual as having created a theogony for the Greeks', or that he might have allowed that there were Greek poets before Hesiod and Homer, but discounted these as, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant').

[44] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.* 6.71.2.

[45] Gaifman (2012) 80.

[46] Scullion (2006) 200.

[47] Cf. 2.145–6 where Herodotus concludes that the Greeks dated the origin of Pan and Dionysus to the time at which they first gained knowledge of these gods. I attempt to flesh out Herodotus' picture of the earliest human development in Harrison (forthcoming).

development—one of which we can still gain glimpses in contemporary foreign contexts—before any people possessed such things. The Pelasgians of 2.52 strikingly appreciate the plurality of the gods; they then obtain a basic level of confirmation of the names of the gods they receive from abroad from Dodona.[48] Homer and Hesiod fill out that picture: with a mythological narrative, eponyms (leading to the specificity of cult), worked-out characterisations or forms, and the honours they receive. 'The gods', according to another fragment of Xenophanes, 'have not indicated all things to mortals from the beginning. But in time, by searching, they find something more that is better' (οὔτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖσ' ὑπέδειξαν, ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον).[49] We are all, like the Pelasgians, fumbling in the dark. And so we hold on to whatever points of reference we can find. Do as if.

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[48] I will not explore here the vexed issue of the meaning of the gods' names, discussed, e.g., by Harrison (2000) 251–64; Thomas (2000) 275–81; Roubeckas (2019) 134; Pirenne-Delforge (2020) 75–7.

[49] Xenophanes D 53 L–M = 21 B 18 D–K, from Stob. 1.8.2; 3.29.41.

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