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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Hugh W. Nibley

# The God of the Philosophers

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## Summary:

This packet consists of a collection of translated statements by ancient Greek philosophers concerning their perceptions of divinity. It quotes Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and others on such abstract concepts as Absolute, causes, the One, the Nous (mind), and the uncreated.

Paper  
Old Testament, Ancient Israel

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## THE GOD OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

Thales (d. 546 B.C.): "Thales says that the God of the Universe (kosmos) is Mind (Nous), and that the Universe (to pan="everything") is alive and full of divine power (daemones); also that the basic element of water pervades all things through God's divine animating power."

"And some say that Spirit is mixed in with everything; which is perhaps what Thales means when he says 'Everything is full of gods.'" (Aristotle).

"From the record it would seem that Thales supposed that there was a moving (or animating) spirit, since he says that even a stone has a soul (psyche)." (Arist.)

Anaximander (d. cir. 532 B.C.): "Anaximander says that the beginning and the fundamental substance (stoicheion) of things is an infinite something--"The Boundless", as he designates it. It is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but something different--infinite, from which all the heavens have sprung and all the universes they contain. Out of these we have the genesis of all things, just as all things will necessarily dissolve into these."

"Anaximander of Miletus says that the Infinite (apeiron--absolute) is the source of all things; for out of it all things arise, and into it all things are dissolved. For which reason infinite universes come into being and then are absorbed again into that from which they arose. At any rate he calls it infinite, so that no possible genesis remains unaccounted for.

...for the passing away of one thing is the genesis of another, the extent of the All being constant." (Arist. Phys.)

The other elements are constantly being exchanged for each other. The Boundless cannot partake of this changableness, or else all would pass away; the other elements all arise from it, but it is NOT like them.

"There is no beginning to the Boundless (or Absolute), otherwise it would have a limitation. It is uncreated and indestructible, being itself primary. Whatever is created must necessarily have an end, which can only mean destruction or dissolution. Therefore, as we say, it has no cause, but rather to be the cause (arche) of all other things, and to embrace all things and to govern all things, as those say who will not accept any other cause of things but the Absolute,..which for them is God (to theion, the Divine principle). Immortal and indestructible, as Anaximander and most of the "physiologoi" maintain." (Arist., Phys. III, 4).

Heracleitus (fl. 500 B.C.): "God brings all things together in perfect harmony, administering everything...To God all things are fair and good and right, though to men some things seem wrong and some right."

"The wisest man seems like a monkey compared with God, in wisdom and appearance and everything else...The handsomest ape looks repulsive to other species."

"Heracleitus says that...when we are living our souls (psyche) are dead and buried in us, but that when we die our souls mount up and live."

"the deathless are dead, the dead are deathless; the living face death, the dying, life."

"He says the the resurrection of the flesh is clearly confirmed by the miracle of birth, and that God knows the cause of that resurrection."

Pythagoras (fl. 532 B.C.): "There is one cause of everything."

"He says that the ruler and cause (arche) of all things is one eternal God, unique, unmoving, wholly like himself and different from all else." (Philo).

"The Pythagoreans teach that the One is the beginning of all things; but another teaching of theirs is that there are two principles at work (One vs. Number)...but the higher is the one, which is God."

"Plato and the Pythagoreans...allow a sort of antithesis between the infinite dyad and the One...As a result those who ascribe to God the cause of everything do not leave him free and unlimited power to achieve the best, except as far as the theory allows..."

"They say that being is one and there can be none else...but others say that numbers are responsible for being, putting in the place of the Boundless or Infinite is derived from the idea of large and small, while that idea itself is primary and underived."

"Pythagoras believed in a spirit which embraced and invested all nature, from which our own spirits are also derived." (Cicero).

"Excellence (arete) is harmony, and soundness (hygieia) and whatever is good--it is God. Hence the whole is a harmonious whole..."

Xenophanes (fl. 536 B.C.): "God is one and incorporeal."

"There is one God, greatest among gods and men; neither in appearance nor in mind does he resemble mortals."

"Men think of the gods as having raiment, voices and forms like their own...But if oxen or lions had hands and could write and do things like men do, horses would for horses and oxen for oxen depict the gods as having minds (ideas) and bodies like their own.

"There is one God...  
He sees all, he knows all, he hears all...

"He says that God is eternal and one, without parts (*homoion pantei*), defined (*peperasmenon*), spherical (equally distributed) and perceptive (aware--*aisthetikon*) in all parts."

"Sometimes he calls God the unmoving, sometimes the effective cause, but most simply 'The Existing One'" (Theophrast).

"A thing can only come into existence from something that is like it or from something that is unlike it. Both are impossible...Therefore being must come out of non-being, which is also impossible. From that it follows that God is eternal."

There can be only one, and this one-and-all Xenophanes calls God, whose existence he demonstrates from the necessity of there being one greater than all...For where there is a multitude there must be a rule, and the mightiest and best of all is God. (Simplic).

If God is the mightiest of all, then he must be one, for if he were two or more, then he could not be the mightiest and best of all...The nature of God and God's power is to rule but not be ruled and to be the strongest of all...If there are more gods than one, then some must be greater or lesser than others, i.e. they cannot be gods...For them to be equal is not of the nature of godhood, which is to be strongest, for to be equal is to be neither better nor worse than another. So that by the very nature of divinity there cannot possibly be more than one god. Otherwise, God could not do whatever he wanted to, since there would be others to consider...So it follows that there is only one God.

God being one has no parts; he is all seeing, all hearing, all awareness. Otherwise his parts would be subject to a control outside of themselves, which is impossible--

they would not then be God: he cannot be different in one part or respect from another part, but must be all the same.

Since he is eternal and one and equally distributed (spherelike), he can be neither boundless nor bound, for he has neither center nor definition (telos) or any other part.

He is everywhere the same; he is all-knowing, and animates and controls (kradainei) all things without effort through the thought of his mind (nous).

He neither is moved nor is he motionless. For not to move is not to exist...yet to move is to go from one place to another--motion is a form of change and requires at least two objects; but not to move is not to act, which is not to be. So God is eternal, one, uniform, sphere-like, neither boundless nor bounded, neither motionless nor moving.

Parmenides (fl 450 B.C.): "In the midst of all things is a Daemon which governs all, and brings about the mingling of things. She is responsible for the gods, first and mightiest of whom is Eros."

Sitting in the midst of all things, the Daemon is responsible for all creation...Its monadic nature is represented by Vesta, seated in the midst of her cosmic circle.

Melissus (fl. 440 B.C.): "If nothing exists there is nothing to talk about. If something exists it is either created or timeless; if created it must come out of something else--it cannot come out of what does not exist, yet neither can it come out of what does exist...Therefore what exists has always existed. That being so, it is imperishable and uncreated, therefore it is boundless, and hence One, since if there were two it could not be boundless (infinite)...If it is One it is also unmoving, because the One is always just like itself; motion is relative, and it has no place to go anyway. There is no empty space, or the one would fill it.

It is the eternal, infinite, one, uniform All, unmoved and unchanging, impossible, incapable of damage or injury.

Since it is One it can have no corporeal substance; if it were vulnerable it would have parts, and having parts it would not be One.

"Only ONE exists," multiplicity is a delusion, a product of human weakness.

Anaxagoras (d.428): "There is no creation and passing away, but only a constant mixing and re-shuffling of elements.

"All things (elements, matter) were originally equally distributed, then Nous came and organized them."

"For infinite ages all things were inert and disorganized; then Nous imparted motion to them and orderly distribution."

Only Nous is independent of all other things, it is completely simple and unmixed and pure; it know all things and moves all things.

"Anaxagoras says that matter in infinite but consisting of minute, identical particles; at first these were mixed without order, but then the Divine Mind imposed order upon them." (Cic.)

"All other things have parts and mixture; only Mind in unlimited and self-subsistent, unique, and like nothing else but itself, mixing with nothing...It is the lightest of all things and the purest, it knows all things about all things, and it controls all things...Mind imposes order on all things...It is always the same, nothing else resembles it...It is the great mover, itself unmoved and invulnerable.

Mind gives meaning, and hence being, to all things.

Empedocles (fl. 444): "On the nature of God, Empedocles says:

'He has no human head or limbs, neither from his back do two arms grow, nor legs, nor trunk nor other parts, but he is sacred, ineffable (indescribable) Mind (Phren), filling the whole vast universe with his thoughts.

He is the One, the Unity that was before the division which produced the multiplicity of our world.

He is known not through the senses but through intellect, right reasoning--dikaios logos.

Protagoras (fl. 440): "As to the gods, I do not know whether they exist or do not exist; for there are many obstacles to finding out--the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.



Socrates (d. 399 B.C.): "He who orders the whole universe and sustains it, in whom is all that is good and fair...who plainly does mighty works but carries out his plans invisible to us."

"The wind is not seen, but its effects are visible to us, and we feel it when it comes; so it is with the human souls, the divine part of us, which obviously rules us, though invisible."

Antisthenes (b. 444 B.C.): "According to tradition (nomos) there are many gods, but according to nature there is but one."

"No one can ever know God, because there is nothing to compare him with," (no eikon).

Euclid (b. 440): "He is manifestly the One Good, designated by many names: Some call him Intellect (phronesis), some God, some Mind (nous), and so forth."

Only the Good exists: its opposite is non-existence. This One Good is one, uniform (simile), and always the same." (Cic.)

Plato (d. 347 B.C.): The four genera are 1) the boundless (material), 2) the limit or definition (number, measure), 3) the mixture of 1 & 2 (our universe), 4) the creator and cause of it all: God.

The common conception of Zeus is figurative--God as the universal ruler. Actually He is one, simple, eternal, pure mind.

The operation of the Mind is apparent in the motion of the celestial bodies.

"God is good, the cause of all good, as everybody says..." (Rep.)

It is not enough to say things were created by necessity; Mind also plays its part--that is the divine part.

"Now we say that whatever exists must necessarily have a cause; but it is impossible to discover the creator and father of all, or to describe him to others if you do."

"Should we say as everybody does that everything came into existence simply by natural law, spontaneously and without the operation of any mind, or that it was

created by God using reason and divine knowledge?" (Soph.)

God created the world "because he wanted all good things...this cosmos is a living organism with a mind (nous), truly created by the providence (pronoia) of God." (Tim.)

Aristotle (fl. 347 B.C.): "Today as in the beginning man is led by wonder to philosophize. From the first man Wondered about the things around him, first things that were close at hand, and then about greater things such as the phases of the moon, the nature of the sun, the stars, and finally the origin of everything. Wonder and puzzlement are an admission of ignorance, and man the myth-maker is a sort of philosopher. For the myth is a product of wonder. Men first became philosophers as an escape from ignorance; it is clear they pursued knowledge just because they had to know, and not for any practical reasons." (Met.)

The ultimate object of the search is always to discover causes. (Eth. Nic.)

It is the business of the philosopher to speculate about everything.

Dialectical knowledge is tentative, philosophical knowledge is positive (gnoristic), sophistic knowledge is for show.

Only Philosophy contemplates the immobile, immaterial, self-existent substratum...Physics contemplates tangible things.

The most basic of all first principles is that nothing can be and not be at the same time. (Met.)

To be identified, everything must be like something else (must belong to a class), yet unlike anything else.

Things move. In order to move something must move them; something must also move the mover, etc., and so there is endless succession; motion is eternal and never ceases. At the end of the chain of movers there must be a prime mover with which all the motion begins; whether one of many, it is not moved by anything else and is therefore itself motionless, being its own mover. It is to be thought of as one rather than many and as bounded rather than boundless--the first mover is one and eternal. (Phys.)

It cannot be conceived of as having any size or parts or division, since it is not limited, as every dimension must be, and to be infinite is to have no dimensions.

(Met.)

It begins with intelligence (noesis); Nous itself is moved by intelligence. That is the primal simplest form of being; it is the awareness that some things are good and to be chosen for themselves; the idea of the best is fundamental...What exists must exist--it cannot help it, or else it would not be there; this necessity implies that existence is good and right. Nothing is forced to exist: everything approves of its own existence, and desires motion. What is desired is good and beautiful.

The great primal body, moving on its own axis, is uncreated, indestructible and not subject to increase or diminution. (De Caelo)

Epicurus (fl. 306 B.C.): "God is an immortal (imperishable, *aphtharton*) and holy (*makarion*) being (*zoom*)...able to watch over all things. There are gods, for the evidence for that is plain, but they are not what people think they are...most popular ideas about them are false."

Cleanthes (fl. 270 B.C.): Hymn to Zeus:

"Most glorious of immortals, He of many names, almighty eternal ruler, Zeus, primal by nature, governing all things by law. Hail, for it is proper for mortals to sing thy praises. For our own begetting is of thee...and whatsoever lives and moves upon the earth. For this I sing to thee and praise thy might...There is nothing done on earth without thee, Lord, nor in the divine pole of heaven, nor on the sea...Thou imposest order on chaos, and thou lovest all things...grant that we may share that knowledge by which thou governest all things in righteousness...for there is no greater boon to mortals or to gods than to sing the hymn of the universal law in truth."

Epictetus (fl. 90 A.D.): "The body is common to all animals, but reason and comprehension (*gnoma*) are common to gods...that is the divine element in man that makes him a son of God."

Philo (fl. 39 A.D.): "God is absolutely one, unmixed, simple. Everyone of us, and everything else is complex; even as I consist of body and soul, the souls having a rational and an irrational part, the body warm and cold, heavy and light, wet and dry. But God is not thus compounded or consisting of many parts; he is unmixed with anything else...For nothing can be equal to him or greater than he, and anything

which is less than he is can have no part in him, for that would diminish him; and that would mean that He is destructible, which we are not allowed to think. God is therefore to be conceived of as a One and a Monad; or say rather that the Monad itself is a concept derived from God. For time and number come into existence only with and after the cosmos itself, while God is older than the cosmos, of which he is the creator." (Leg. Alleg.)

"Do not think that That which Is (Sometimes, He who Is) can be comprehended by any human mind: we have no organ for such a thing--either to imagine what it is like or to perceive it--for it is imperceptible. Moses, the contemplator (theates) of the invisible nature (the oracles say that he entered into a crevice, thereby indicating its invisibility), searching into all things tried to behold the thrice-longed-for One shining from afar. He found nothing--not even an idea of what he was seeking, and so he abandoned the teaching which he had from others and fled for refuge to the object of his search, saying: 'Show me thyself, that I may know thee truly' (Exod. 33, 13); and yet he failed in his project...for He said: 'Thou shalt see my back parts, but my face thou shalt not see.' ...And why should That Which Is not be incomprehensible to men, when the very Nous that is in each of us is unknown to us? Who knows the nature of the soul? (DE Nut-Nom)"

It is impossible for him to be viewed by another, since it is only right that he should be comprehended by himself alone...All we can comprehend about him is his existence, everything beyond that is beyond us. (De Praem.)

Appollonius (IC A.D.): God is one and apart from all things...he is utterly unlike anything corporeal...he needs nothing...He is Mind and needs no organs.

Plutarch (120 A.D.): He is not like a man or any living thing, he has no body great or small, but is unutterable, indefinable, incomparable, to anything else, divine, alone...

The good is the opposite of anything corporeal.

"God being self-existent from the beginning is simple because he is absolutely indivisible...He did not need to create anything in the first place; it is necessary to think of God the creator as father--the primal God.

Plotinus (fl. 242 A.D.): God embraces all; all Nous, all God, all Soul. being all good, why should he change? Having all things present with him, where would he go? Being perfect what more can he seek?...Mind is all, embracing all in itself, it is one and

eternal, having no past, present, or future...The all is all mind (nous) and all Being.

Mind supports being and being is the substance of mind, for to know is to be...each is the cause of the other, but though they are two they are one, since the content of Nous is what it knows--the known and the knower are the same.

To seek is the act of an unsatisfied mind...Nous and being are the same...The idea is inseparable from the Nous that has it: the substance of thought is thought.

The existence of anything else is an act of presumption (Enn. III, 2,2)...All matter is evil, there is nothing true or good in it, since it is the opposite of perfect Being.

The soul, of heavenly origin (part of the One) is imprisoned in matter on the earth.