Plutarch and ‘God-Eclipse’ in Christian Theology
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Abstract
This article calls attention to the importance of Plutarch’s book De Defectu Oraculorum as a primary source on the development of the Greek oracle religion in the first century. It argues with an abundance of data from this historic literary document that Plutarch experienced a profound crisis about the disappearance of the oracles. This article also establishes that Plutarch’s view on the cessation of the oracles in the first century cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of lack of interest and the influences of Roman thought and politics. On a level of religious experience, Plutarch’s ideas prove stimulating for the consideration of the recent “God eclipse” in Christian theology.

KEY-WORDS: Plutarch, Oracles, God-eclipse, Delphi, Apollo, Pythia, Pan, Cicero, Defectu Oraculorum, Theology.

1. De Defectu Oraculorum in popular scholarship

On the Cessation of Oracles is a dialogue, discussing the reasons why divine inspiration seemed to be withdrawn from the old seats of prophetic lore. The real reason of their decline in popularity is probably very simple; when the Greek cities became Roman provinces the fashion of consulting oracles fell off, as unsuited to the more practical influences of Roman thought and Roman politics. In this way the classic Encyclopaedia Britannica (11th edition volume 25, 860) summarises a popular view about Plutarch’s book De Defectu Oraculorum (On the Cessation of the Oracles). This has more recently been abridged into:

On the Failure of the Oracles, in which the decline of the oracles is linked with the decline in population” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002, volume 9:529).