



**Stuckenbruck, Loren T. and Wendy E.S. North, eds.**

***Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism***

Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series  
263

London: T&T Clark, 2004. Pp. vii + 264. Paper. \$84.00. ISBN  
9780567082930.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

*Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* is a “collection of essays that investigate the contours of early Christian beliefs about Jesus in relation to the one God of Israel” (1). The eleven essays, plus one bibliography, are divided into three sections: 1) Monotheism and the Religious World of the New Testament; 2) Monotheism and the New Testament; and 3) Asking Questions. The first section is concerned with situating early Christian devotion to Jesus within the spectrum of beliefs and practices in Second Temple Judaism while finding possible precedents for said devotion. The second section looks at these issues in more detail through an examination of various NT texts. The final section discusses the appropriateness of the term “monotheism” for Biblical interpretation and the conceptual baggage it has inherited from the Enlightenment. There is also a helpful bibliography to lead the reader into further study on the topic of monotheism & Christology in the Second Temple period.

By looking at the interpretive tradition of certain divine titles, Jewish apologetic and Christian polemic, as well as the Jewish recognition of Gentile monotheism, and a legitimizing trend concerning polytheism in the Hebrew Bible and other Second Temple literature, Horbury argues for an inclusive monotheism—i.e., a monotheism that could accommodate lesser divine beings such as angels, demons, intermediary figures, etc.—as the dominant form of monotheism during the Herodian age. The problem with Horbury’s argument, as I see it (and as Richard Bauckham

persuasively argues elsewhere<sup>1</sup>), is that exclusive monotheism can and does account for the existence and recognition of lesser “divine” beings such as those noted by Horbury. Their existence only becomes a problem for exclusive monotheism if they’re placed on the same plane as YHWH, which, of course, they never are (see R. W. L. Moberly’s contribution to this volume). Michael Heiser, who focuses on an earlier time period than Horbury, likes to refer to YHWH as a “species unique” among the *elohim*.<sup>2</sup> There is no indication from the later texts that Horbury examines that there was any significant shift from this understanding.

While admitting that there was never a Jewish cult that worshipped angels, and also that the “exalted position of angels did not directly contribute to the *inception* of early Christian devotion to Christ alongside God” (68), Stuckenbruck examines a number of Second Temple Jewish texts, both polemics against angel veneration and texts that direct honorific/worship language towards angels, in order to show that ancient monotheism could accommodate the cultic worship (in a broad sense) of angelic figures alongside God. In the narrow sense of temple worship, with the focus on offering sacrifice, angels could never have received cultic worship. Stuckenbruck’s case relies heavily on fragmentary texts, the reconstruction of which is speculative, and disputed points of interpretation, e.g., where the referent in the text could be either angelic or human.<sup>3</sup> But Stuckenbruck’s admission, in agreement with Hurtado, about the lack of (an) angel worshipping cult(s) speaks much louder than the limited rhetoric of angel veneration in a few texts. Not only does such rhetoric not directly contribute to the inception of early Christian devotion to Christ, it fails to serve as any real parallel.

Fletcher-Louis focuses on the account of Alexander the Great’s worship of the Jewish High Priest as told by Josephus (*Ant.* 11.326-38) and parallel sources (the *Alexander Romance*; *b. Yoma* 69a; *Josippon* 10.3-51; *Samaritan Chronicle II*). He sees in the telling of this story a polemic that challenges the Hellenistic ruler cults by way of making the Jewish High Priest—who Fletcher-Louis suggests functions in relation to YHWH as idols to pagan gods—the object of a divine king’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Bauckham, “The ‘Most High’ God and the Nature of Early Jewish Monotheism” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal* (eds. David Capes, et al.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 39-53; reprinted in *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 107-26.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature,” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> In nearly every text from Qumran examined, Stuckenbruck notes contrary interpretations from Crispin Fletcher-Louis. See Fletcher-Louis’ *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (STDJ 42; Leiden Brill, 2002). Of course, Fletcher-Louis has to take such a position in order to maintain his argument for the worship of a divine humanity.

worship. Fletcher-Louis' "High-Priest-as-God's-idol-and-therefore-worthy-of-worship" argument relies on a rather loose definition of worship (i.e., he seemingly treats any act of προσκύνησις as worship proper) and a questionable reading of his chosen texts, which explicitly identify God as the recipient of worship, not the high priest who supposedly bears the image of God.<sup>4</sup> With this understanding of the high priest as God's idol in place, Fletcher-Louis can suggest a precedent for the early Christian worship of Jesus as God's idol. Even if we grant Fletcher-Louis' interpretation of the texts we'd be hard pressed to find a precedent for the programmatic worship of Jesus from the isolated incident of Alexander worshipping the High Priest.

Dunn's essay asks the question, "Was Jesus a monotheist?" The obvious answer is, "Yes." Dunn draws inferences from Jesus' upbringing as a Jew in first century Palestine. He would have recited the Shema twice daily, which of course, is a firm acknowledgment of devotion to the one God of Israel. The Shema also stands at the heart of Jesus' speech about and attitude toward God. The impression that Jesus left on his followers, which is the best we can get when trying to peer into Jesus' self-understanding, was of a "more complex apprehension of divine reality" (119), whatever that might mean exactly. Without downplaying the importance of the question Dunn asks, one wonders why it's asked when the answer is so obvious. Jesus' monotheism is axiomatic. What are the alternatives, atheism or polytheism? Clearly those alternatives lack the merit to even be considered. What Dunn's question is really getting at is whether or not Jesus himself would have been comfortable receiving the devotion that was otherwise reserved for God. The answer, if we believe the Gospel tradition, is yes (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26; John 5:23).

Capes, who finds affinity with the arguments of Hurtado and Bauckham over and against those of Dunn and Fletcher-Louis, notes a considerable lack of attention to Christological exegesis in the literature to date, and proceeds to argue for an early high (= divine) Christology through an examination of Paul's intentional and unambiguous application of OT YHWH texts to Christ. The distribution of YHWH texts between God and Christ in Paul's letters is fairly even (7 for God [Rom. 4:7-8, 9:27, 29, 11:34, 15:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:20; 2 Cor. 6:18]; 6 for Christ [Rom. 10:13, 14:11; 1 Cor. 1:31, 2:16, 10:26; 2 Cor. 10:17]) with a couple of allusive uses that refer to Christ (2 Cor. 3:16; Phil. 2:10-11). Paul's use of these texts "expressed both his own devotion to Christ and reflected his expectation that his readers would share his interpretation of Scripture" (137).

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<sup>4</sup> Josephus' version of the event explicitly says that Alexander "worshipped the Name" (*Ant.* 11.331) and has Alexander responding to Parmenion's question about worshipping the high priest saying, "I did not worship him, but that God who has honored him with his high priesthood" (*Ant.* 11.333). Alexander subsequently sacrifices to God (*Ant.* 11.336). Clearly the high priest was not the object of worship proper, but rather the common reverence due to one in a position of authority. For a thorough critique of Fletcher-Louis' general argument (as published prior to this volume) see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 37-42.

Capes' case would have been strengthened through interaction with texts that appropriate the divine name for figures other than God or Jesus (e.g., *Apoc. Ab.; 3 En.*), which apparently he tackled in his published dissertation on the subject.<sup>5</sup>

Hayward's contribution is one of the most interesting of the volume. The Shema, which stood at the heart of Jewish life, affirmed God's uniqueness through the recital of the One Name. But the Shema, recited twice daily (in conjunction with the morning & evening sacrifices), also pointed to Temple service; hence the One Name/One God is inextricably linked to the One Temple. But the existence of two other temples (the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim and the Temple of Onias at Heliopolis) challenged the unity and uniqueness of the One God. After examining Targumic, Qumranic, and Rabbinic material Hayward turns to John's Gospel with its focus on oneness and unity. Hayward posits a possible connection between the Fourth Gospel and the Qumran Community's opposition to the Pharisees, namely their support of the Jerusalem Temple. For John, Jesus constituted the true Temple, and the Qumran Community understood itself as fulfilling that role. I would have liked to see Hayward flesh out his argument with more exegesis of John's material but I find his overall case to be intriguing.

W. North, following J. L. Martyn's community hypothesis<sup>6</sup>, discerns three groups in play in the Fourth Gospel: Hostile Jews; Non-Hostile Jews (i.e., believers in Jesus who nevertheless wish to remain in the synagogue); and Johannine Christians. She proceeds to examine each group's alleged view toward Jesus, Moses, and the Law. The first two groups hold a "Torah-focused piety" (162) but differ in their understanding of Jesus' relation to Moses. The non-hostile Jews see Jesus as the fulfilling the requirements of the prophet like Moses while the hostile Jews reject any such identification. The Johannine Christians see the Law and Moses pointing toward Jesus, who not only fulfills, but surpasses them as the way to God. While the hostile Jews saw Jesus' exalted claims as an affront to monotheism, the Johannine Christians saw it as a solution to the problem. North's essay is hindered by its dependence on the community hypothesis, which is nowhere near as influential as it once was.<sup>7</sup> It's also the least fleshed out of all the essays in the volume and would benefit from a more sustained argument and exegesis.

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<sup>5</sup> David B. Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology* (WUNT II/47; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 168-74.

<sup>6</sup> The community hypothesis suggests that the Fourth Gospel not only tells the story of Jesus but also reflects the situation of the community to whom the Gospel was addressed.

<sup>7</sup> See critiques in Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, repr. 2009) and *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Bauckham delivers a sustained examination of Hebrews 1. Presupposing his argument for “divine identity” (i.e., YHWH was marked out as unique via his being Creator and Sovereign Ruler of the universe), Bauckham proceeds to examine Jesus’ relation to the angels in Hebrews 1 via the author’s presentation of the Son’s sevenfold narrative identity in the opening exordium (Heb. 1:1-4) and his catena of seven OT passages (Heb. 1:5-13) in the remainder of the chapter. Every step of the way we see Jesus presented as superior to the angels. Where the angels are creatures, Jesus is the Creator. Where the angels are temporal, Jesus is eternal. Where the angels change, Jesus is immutable. The angels serve/worship the enthroned Jesus who sovereignly rules over and sustains his creation from his heavenly throne. Bauckham’s exegesis yields a positive result concerning the Son’s personal preexistence and when we turn to Hebrews 2 he notes a shift from Jesus’ identification with God to his identification with humanity, which may be construed as something akin to Chalcedon’s two-nature Christology. Bauckham’s exegesis is both rigorous and persuasive.

J. North returns to the focus on worship that we found in the essays of earlier contributors. He examines the *προσκυ-* word group and rightly notes that not every instance of *προσκύνησις* is worship proper. However, he draws too hard a line in identifying animal sacrifice as *the* defining act of worship to a deity. For North Jesus is never worshipped since sacrifice is never offered to him. Several problems arise from North’s myopic focus on animal sacrifice. On North’s reading, not only did Gentile Christians not worship Jesus, but they never worshipped God! North recognizes that after the destruction of the Temple there were certain bloodless sacrifices such as prayer that were offered to God; he contends that Jesus was never the recipient of such but this ignores the plethora of passages in which prayer is directed to Jesus,<sup>8</sup> as well as the force of Paul’s argument in 1Corinthians 10:14-21 where Jesus is contrasted with the pagan deities to whom sacrifice is offered. He also fails to do justice to Christian sacrificial theology in light of their view of Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of the sacrificial system.

MacDonald traces the origin of the term “monotheism” to 17<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who saw atheism, not polytheism, as the direct antithesis to monotheism. For More, monotheism was the primeval religion that would later be distorted; the organizing principle by which all religions could be measured. Many moderns, on the other hand, begin with an allegedly correct definition of monotheism (one that can almost always be traced back to More in some way, shape, or form) and then turn to the Biblical texts in order to find out when monotheism first arose. This procedure, while coming from the opposite end of the spectrum (i.e., assuming an earlier polytheism that later became monotheism), suffers the same problem

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<sup>8</sup> John 14:14; Acts 1:25-26, 7:59-60, 9:14, 21; Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 1:2, 16:22 cf. Rev. 22:20; 2 Cor. 12:1-9; 1 Thes. 3:11-13; 2 Thes. 2:16-17, 3:5, 16. See my series “Hear O Lord: Praying to Jesus” (<http://wp.me/p4R7h-55T>) for a more sustained engagement with these texts.

for interpretation in imposing an understanding of God beholden to Enlightenment thinking on ancient texts. MacDonald's chapter asks important questions but offers little in terms of answers. One will be pleased to learn of the origin of the word monotheism and of its subsequent development, but where do we go from there? Perhaps he addresses such questions in his detailed monograph on the subject.<sup>9</sup>

Moberly asks how appropriate monotheism is as a category for Biblical interpretation traveling the same path as MacDonald by noting the origin of the term and its conceptual ties to Enlightenment intellectualism. This is not the most helpful way to construe monotheism as it doesn't cohere well with the canonical picture of God's oneness. By exegeting the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9 with reference to Deut. 7 & 10), Moberly mounts a persuasive case for YHWH's *oneness* being understood as his *uniqueness* in relation to his elect people and the responsiveness (i.e., absolute love and exclusive devotion) that it demands of them. The Biblical portrayal of Israel's God has no concern for the (non-)existence of other deities but rather YHWH's uniqueness and superiority over them. The picture painted in Deuteronomy is seen likewise in Isaiah 40-55 where the pronouncements of YHWH's being alone with no others beside him are shorthand ways of saying something like there is no legitimate alternative, not because alternatives don't exist, but because they lead to ruin. This has significant implications for the NT portrait of Jesus as seen, e.g., in Paul's reformulation of the Shema.

The volume is rounded out with a helpful bibliography, compiled by James McGrath and Jerry Truex, of recent (at the time of publication in 2004) publications that focus on early Jewish and Christian monotheism as well as ancient source and author indices. Given the brevity (about 6½ pages) of McGrath & Truex's bibliography it would have been nice to have seen it annotated. Overall, *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* is a welcome contribution to the field, and a welcome addition to the student/scholar's library. Anyone who has read widely in early Christology or Second Temple monotheism will have noticed just how often the essays in this volume are cited in recent literature, and with good reason, they all merit engagement in one way or another. Those readers looking to examine a variety of explanations for the early devotion given to Jesus will profit greatly by consulting this volume.

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<sup>9</sup> Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (FAT II/1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).