

BOOK REVIEW

Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E.S. North (eds.), *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (London: T. & T. Clark [Continuum], 2004). viii + 264 pp. Pbk. US\$59.95.

Christianity has always received an uneasy acceptance within the monotheistic grouping of the world's major religions. While most Christians would loudly proclaim their monotheism, Jews and Muslims may consider charges of tri-theism, and even some Christians may wonder how belief in the deity of Jesus Christ fits within their monotheistic claims. *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, while focusing on ancient texts and beliefs, is an important step in helping Jews and Christians (and to some extent Muslims) to understand what they have in common in their understanding of the One God. This book is divided into three sections: (1) Monotheism and the Religious World of the New Testament, (2) Monotheism and the New Testament and (3) Asking Questions.

Since we understand that Christianity began as a Jewish sect, the logical beginning is an examination of variations within Jewish monotheism. Did Christianity emerge as a radical new movement claiming a divine Jesus in the midst of a firm and standardized monotheistic Judaism? Or was there, in an embryonic form, the potential within pre-Christian Judaism for the claims of a divine person in addition to God? The first section examines this by looking at three different areas in which there may have been some flexibility within Jewish monotheism.

William Horbury begins with a look at Jewish and Christian monotheism in the Herodian age. The assumption is that there is something distinct and definable about religious thought in the two centuries in which the house of Herod dominated Jewish life, an age that shaped Judaism and gave birth to Christianity. Horbury sees within

the texts of the Herodian age, and earlier texts that were still influential, three areas of flexibility that he terms ‘inclusive monotheism’, that is, monotheism with some room for the existence of other divine beings: (1) descriptions of God *and* fate; (2) belief in an exalted messiah in terms of the Gentile ruler-cult; and (3) titles of God that refer to other gods and spirits. These seem to suggest an acknowledgment of other divine powers. Horbury’s work is a good overview of the texts of this period and of how they looked at the oneness of God. The weakness of this essay is that it seems to overreact to theories of many Judaisms by citing a wide variety of texts including apocalyptic material, Qumran, Philo and even rabbinic texts, as if combined they give a full picture of the one Judaism in the Herodian age.

Loren T. Stuckenbruck looks at the important role of angels and how that challenges the traditional view of monotheism. Stuckenbruck concludes that there is no evidence of an organized Jewish cult of angel worship, despite the accusations of some Church Fathers. He also points out the difference between ‘veneration’, which there is evidence for, and ‘worship’, which is organized and often expressed in terms of sacrifice. In addition, the texts of this period are considered ‘insider’ literature, which make certain assumptions and are willing to take liberties in language. Early Judaism in no way saw veneration of angels as a violation of monotheism.

Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis looks to descriptions of attitudes towards the high priest for keys to Jewish monotheism. Focusing on Josephus’s description of Alexander the Great’s seeming worship of the high priest, but including later parallel accounts, Fletcher-Louis sees the high priest as the one acceptable idol of God. The claim is that the high priest is ritually and dramatically Yahweh and therefore worthy of worship. Fletcher-Louis makes some assumptions and takes some steps that do not adequately differentiate between worship of the man and the worship of the God who is served by the man. Fletcher-Louis’s suggestion that the high priest was an appropriate object of worship in Judaism seems to be overstated.

Moving on to monotheism in the New Testament, James D.G. Dunn begins the discussion with the question of Jesus’ own monotheism. Dunn shows that Jesus’ pious upbringing and use of the *Shema* in his teaching demonstrate Jesus’ commitment to the oneness of God, despite some implicit claims to divinity in his teaching and life.

David B. Capes gives an excellent survey of Paul's use of Yahweh texts from the Old Testament in reference to Jesus. While some Yahweh texts are used by Paul to speak of the Father, there are some indisputable applications of Yahweh texts to Jesus. According to Capes, this is evidence for Paul's high Christology and even a binitarian monotheism.

C.T.R. Hayward attempts to evaluate the role of the *Shema* in the Gospel of John from a Jewish perspective, particularly using sources from Qumran. Hayward looks at the importance of one central Temple in Judaism (in the context of the other competing temples) and how that relates to the Jewish idea of unity. This chapter is difficult to follow and at times seems to be trying to accomplish too much. There are other weaknesses, such as interpretations of Qumran material based on later rabbinic sources that detract from the important study of the Jewish concept of unity.

Wendy E.S. North provides another study of the Gospel of John, this time focusing on different Jewish groups in John's Gospel and how they relate to Moses. There are the hostile Jews who are completely Moses-centred and reject Jesus as the prophet like Moses. There are the non-hostile or faithful Jews who accept Jesus as the prophet like Moses but who are timid in their faith. Finally there are the Johannine Christians who also accept Jesus as the prophet like Moses but who reject the idea that Moses's role is superior to that of Jesus. It is this final high Christology that John offers over all the other competing Christologies.

Richard Bauckham offers a study of Hebrews 1 and how that informs our understanding of early Christology. Bauckham sees monotheism in terms of the identity of God rather than of divine nature and sees early Christianity as using a christological monotheism, understanding Jesus as being included in the unique identity of the one God of Israel. Angels are used in the first two chapters of Hebrews as indicators of the ontological status of Jesus in the Jewish monotheistic world view. Against Dunn, Bauckham sees Hebrews 1 as evidence for the pre-existence of Jesus, but he is not willing to go so far as a two-nature Christology, since the emphasis is on identity rather than nature.

J. Lionel North provides a very interesting examination of the role of worship in determining Jesus' divine identity. North offers some much-needed caution regarding the limitations of languages as they undergo the process of translation. North focuses on worship as an act of respect

to a human and worship as a sacrifice to a god. It is demonstrated that sacrifices are never offered to Jesus, even in places where sacrifices are spiritualized (Rom. 12.1). While North may rely too much on arguments from silence, he does show that if Jesus was seen as divine, it is not revealed through the type of sacrificial worship reserved for the gods.

The final section of *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* is entitled 'Asking Questions', and it focuses on the terms and definitions related to monotheism that are taken for granted by so many. In some ways, this section should have been first to prepare for the other essays that use these terms.

Nathan McDonald discusses the origin of the word 'monotheism', especially in its original use by Henry More. McDonald shows that monotheism was first used in opposition not to polytheism but rather to atheism. McDonald also gives an overview of how monotheism has been understood in the evolution of religions, most often as the pinnacle of religious development.

R.W.L. Moberly takes a look at the appropriateness of the term 'monotheism' for biblical interpretation. Moberly brings up a number of challenges for using monotheism as a category in biblical interpretation including the development of the word in modern thought, epistemological problems of what questions we can ask about God, and the diversity of methods by which the biblical text can be studied. Moberly then proceeds with exegesis of the *Shema* in Deut. 6.4-9, showing that the point of the *Shema* is not the non-existence of the pagan gods but rather their irrelevance in comparison to Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

As with any multi-author book, the chapters of *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* are of varying quality and depth. Some, such as those by Fletcher-Louis and Hayward, seem to stretch their points, perhaps because they need more space or they rely on arguments made in other works. However, the cumulative effect of each chapter is a well-informed study on biblical monotheism. Well-known biblical texts and some lesser-known extra-biblical texts are examined in ways that challenge long-held assumptions about the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity. Overall, the book succeeds in its goal to demonstrate that there was flexibility in Jewish monotheism that helped prepare the way for some Jews to accept a divine Messiah. It also provides greater clarity of early Christianity's understanding of Jesus' identity in terms

of its monotheistic concept of God. While this book will not break down all of the barriers between Judaism and Christianity, it does show that the early Jews and Christians were not as different as later polemics would suggest.

One criticism of this book is in terms of the focus on Jesus and his relationship to Jewish monotheism. While Jesus may be of most interest in a study on Jewish and Christian monotheism, some examination of the Holy Spirit would have been very beneficial. Since the Spirit of God is common to both the Old and New Testaments, a study of Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Spirit would have been helpful. Despite this, *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* is an important study in the development of Judaism and Christianity as well as an opportunity for communication among modern adherents of these faiths.

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