

Jewish Monotheism in the First century

Andrew Perry

Introduction

In 1 Cor 8:6, Paul states that “to us there is one god, the Father, out of whom are all things, and we for him, and one lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him”. This assertion at once delineates our topic: it affirms monotheism in relation to the Father, and is thus consistent with the Judaism of Paul’s day, as well as the Hebrew Scriptures;¹ but it juxtaposes Jesus Christ alongside the Father, which would not be acceptable to devout Jews of the first century. Our questions then are: What was Jewish monotheism in the first century? Is this different from the monotheism in the Hebrew Scriptures? Does Christian belief about Jesus change either or both of these two belief systems such that Christianity should be seen as different in its monotheism?

These are important questions because Trinitarians today affirm that their doctrine is a **form of monotheism**. Our objective in this essay is to evaluate Jewish monotheism and how this is analysed and handled by Trinitarian NT scholars. We will counter-argue that Jewish ‘monotheism’ is about *what there is*—one God, the Father—and that this is not a doctrine which the apostles and prophets of the first century church could have or would have changed in a direction leading to Trinitarianism.

Context

Our topic is Jewish monotheism in the first century and we should distinguish this from the monotheism to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jewish scriptural writings contribute to the picture of Jewish monotheism, but they are only one component in the picture that the historian draws. This may seem like a neutral point to make, but it is often made in an historically positivist² way in relation to tracing the sources of Christian ideas. This positivism is seen when the teachings and ideas expressed in the NT are just sourced in a Palestinian Jewish environment, the nature of which is determined by the surviving literature of the period, only one part of which were the Jewish Scriptures. (A second source is the wider Greco-Roman world including the Diaspora.) However, in explaining the teaching of the Christian writers without reference to the phenomenon of the bestowal of the Spirit, the historical account is irredeemably positivist. (Instead, a naturalistic category such as ‘religious experience’ will be deployed.)

Historical explanation that works with only the human dimension is positivist when divine agency is excluded. It looks upon events and circumstances and the expression of ideas in a *closed* way; the bestowal of the Spirit, necessarily, is an input from the ‘outside’ and historical explanation that admits of divine agency sees history as *open* to God. If we take up this latter stance as historians, the writings of the NT become ‘of the Spirit’ because they are the writings of apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). This requires us, in practice, to privilege the Hebrew Scriptures when identifying textual affinities with the NT because they were, according to apostles and prophets, likewise ‘of the Spirit’ (John 10:35; 2 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 1:21). The intertextuality of the NT writings is dense in respect of the OT and this is proof of a use by the Spirit of writing engendered under earlier bestowals, for example, such as that in the days of the eighth century Hebrew prophets BCE.

The use of Jewish writings other than scriptural ones is very sparse in the NT (or absent or unrecoverable depending on your view). While we are interested in the broad historical context of Jewish monotheism, we take the view that the dense intertextuality that the NT writings have with the OT directs our historical analysis to see the monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures as the primary context for any understanding of the monotheism of the apostolic church. In this way we can take on board the parallels offered by scholars between the NT writings and the Judaism of their day (if they are worth noticing), but

¹ We use the term ‘Hebrew Scriptures’ to refer to those Scriptures of Jesus’ day that became the Masoretic Text that we have in our Hebrew Bibles. This includes the Aramaic portions, but we are obviously excluding any translations extant in Jesus’ day when we use this term, for example the Old Greek or any Aramaic Targums.

² For an account of ‘positivism’ in the philosophy of historiography see D. Bebbington, *Patterns in History* (Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1979), chap. 7.

still give priority to the Spirit as the source of ideas about the exaltation of Jesus alongside God in heaven and the consequent expression of monotheism.

Jewish Monotheism

It is not difficult to enumerate texts³ that illustrate Jewish monotheism and/or the monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures. Here our principal and unexceptionable result is that there is one god but that he has agents that do his will. The one god is worshipped but agents are not worshipped (they may be venerated). This framework is often dubbed as ‘inclusive monotheism’ by scholars because it countenances divine beings alongside God.⁴ However, this is not how the Hebrew Scriptures⁵ set up monotheism. This result does not mean that all Jews (Diasporan or those living in the homeland) held this view; the Jewish writings from the Second Temple period illustrate diverse ideas in this area. For example, some Jews were syncretistic in their approach—they saw commonalities between their tradition and the gods of other ethnic groups.⁶

Above, we have offered a definition of Jewish monotheism. How a scholar defines monotheism affects his analysis of the situation in the first century. We have offered a metaphysical definition: monotheism is about *there being* one God. We could change the basis of our definition and say that monotheism is the *belief* that there is one God. This changes our perspective from metaphysics to epistemic states and epistemology. If we do, we draw in the human being to our definition: monotheism is about what he or she believes. We could also change our definition again and say that monotheism is about what or who is worshipped. This definition draws in the human being but it is not so much concerned with intellectual belief as with religious practices.

L.W. Hurtado defines monotheism in this way:

I suggest that in the interests of historical accuracy and clear communication the term ‘monotheism’ should be used only to describe **devotion to one god** and the rejection of the pantheon of deities such as were revered throughout the Greco-Roman world.⁷

This may appear a neutral and accurate definition but it is a self-serving definition. If we define monotheism in relation to devotion (or loyalty), then as soon as we observe that Jesus is part of the pattern of Christian devotion, then either we have included him within a monotheistic pattern or we have to abandon ‘monotheism’ as a term for Christianity. Since the earliest Christians⁸ did not consider themselves to be anything other than monotheists (as evidenced in texts such as Mark 12:32; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Jms 2:19), we are forced to see a ‘binatarian’ (two-ness) pattern in Christian ‘monotheistic’ devotion.

³ We are restricting our examples to *discursive* textual evidence rather other kinds of textual and non-textual data. How broadly you define a ‘text’ is moot for our purposes, since we are selecting *discursive* texts; a text could, for example, be a short inscription, but by choosing discursive texts we gain more ready access to the *thinking* of the day. Or again, the burying of coins with the dead is an example of non-textual data that we are not using here, but nevertheless relevant to popular beliefs about gods/demons that escort the dead, see J. Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 175.

⁴ M. Mach, “Concepts of Jewish Monotheism during the Hellenistic Period” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (eds. C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila & G. S. Lewis; Leiden: E J Brill, 1999), 21-42 (24); W. Horbury, “Jewish and Christian Monotheism in the Herodian Age” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (eds. W. E. S. North and L. T. Stuckenbruck; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 16-44 (17); R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), chap. 4.

⁵ We are not considering the development of Israelite thinking about God on the basis of ‘evidence’ in the Hebrew Scriptures; rather, we are taking the Hebrew Scriptures as an authoritative collection with a single theology about God—an holistic way of reading common enough in Jesus’ day.

⁶ This was a common Hellenistic attitude to the gods—that local ethnic gods were to be equated across ethnic boundaries, so that, for example, the Greek Zeus was another name for the Roman Jupiter or, vis-à-vis the Jews, Yahweh; see J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 19.

⁷ L. W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord* (2nd ed.; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 129 n. 1; my emphasis.

⁸ While there are many texts outside of the NT that also purport to be Christian, their date and provenance tends to be later than NT writings; on the questions of date see, respectively, H. Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels* (London: T & T Clark, 2003) and J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976).

This is a self-serving definition because the orthodox NT scholar is seeking a beginning in the NT for the Trinitarian view of God. If s/he can *include* Jesus within a monotheistic frame of reference on the basis of NT evidence, then a start has been made for Trinitarianism. It is important though to realise that this strategy depends on first defining Jewish monotheism in relation to devotional practices. If instead we define monotheism in terms of **what there is**, i.e. there is one God, the Father (following 1 Cor 8:6), or in terms of **belief**, i.e. the belief that there is one God, the Father, then this particular ‘beginning’ for Trinitarianism is blocked.⁹ G. F. Moore correctly observed,

The exclusive worship of one God, whether by the choice of individuals or by the law of national religion, is not monotheism at all in the proper and usual meaning of the word, namely, the theory, doctrine, or belief that there is but one God.¹⁰

Jewish monotheism is not about devotion; it is about *what there is* or what Jews thought there was with regard to gods.¹¹ So, Paul can affirm of Jesus that “God also hath highly exalted him” and that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11), and monotheism is here clearly maintained, while at the same time devotional practices for Christians have been enlarged, naturally, to include *confession* about Christ. The obvious historical construction to put upon the evidence in the NT is to say that **Christian devotional practices were not monotheistic** because they included Jesus, but that Christian beliefs about gods were monotheistic because they believed, like the Jews, that there was only one God, the Father. As A. Marmorstein observes,

The common Jew, as well as the ordinary Jewish Christian, found the deification of a human being in general unbearable, if not abominable. Both saw in such a doctrine an unpardonable falsification of the pure Jewish monotheism.¹²

Above, we introduced the term ‘inclusive monotheism’. This is a term of art used in the analysis of first century Jewish monotheism. It is applied to texts that speak of there being one God, but which include information about other exalted heavenly figures, such as angels, the Word, Wisdom, Enoch, the Son of Man, or the patriarchs. The expression ‘exclusive monotheism’ is applied to texts that do not affirm anything in particular about divine/heavenly figures.¹³ The value in such an analysis for a Trinitarian scholar lies in what it allows: it facilitates the use of ‘monotheism’ to describe the *inclusion* of Jesus within a monotheistic framework. This may appear a neutrally descriptive thing to do, but it becomes less so when the expression ‘inclusive monotheism’ is applied to Trinitarianism and the three-in-one.

The term ‘inclusive monotheism’ does not have to be used to describe the monotheism of first century Judaism (or that of the Hebrew Scriptures). To do so is a choice made by the historian to configure the data and steer the understanding of his or her readers. In contrast, we would say that the etymology of ‘/mono/theism/’ makes it an unsuitable term for such usage. The term ‘monotheism’ is about what there is or what is believed about the gods, viz. that there is only one God. If, in addition, you believe in demons, spirits or angels (or any other divine beings), then this is something to be characterized separately as an additional part of your overall beliefs, unless you are a polytheist or henotheist. Jewish

⁹ Scholars use the language of a ‘trajectory’ to root Trinitarianism in the devotional practices of the apostolic church; see W. E. S. North and L. T. Stuckenbruck, “Introduction” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (eds. W. E. S. North and L. T. Stuckenbruck; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 1-13 (3).

¹⁰ G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (2 vols; Reprinted—Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:222-223. Moore is writing in 1927 what would become a standard handbook about Judaism, and so he could go on and say then of ‘monotheism’ that, “This is the only sense in which the term has hitherto been used of Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism”. Hurtado, writing in 1998, is introducing ‘religious practices’ (worship) as the defining context for ‘monotheism’ so that he can retain the *kudos* of this term for orthodox Trinitarian Christianity.

¹¹ Jesus’ controversy with the Jews in John 10 (vv. 34-35) shows that Jews felt no problem for monotheism with humans being ‘called gods’ because of texts like Ps 82:6.

¹² A. Marmorstein, “The Unity of God in Rabbinic Literature” in *Studies in Jewish Theology* (eds. J. Rabinowitz and M. S. Lew; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 72-105 (101). Marmorstein’s essay is a review of the Tannaim and Amoraim.

¹³ This consequence of monotheism—the denial of deity to other divine beings—led to the charge of atheism being levelled against Jews (Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2.148).

monotheism of the first century is not an inclusive monotheism precisely because there is nothing else included within what is otherwise said to be one; further, there is no differentiation of the one for us to identify that something has been included in that one. Thus, 'monotheism' is not descriptive of Jewish cosmology; it is descriptive of what Jews thought about the category of 'god'. Accordingly, we would eschew the use of the expressions 'inclusive monotheism' and 'exclusive monotheism' when describing either Jewish monotheism (or that of the Hebrew Scriptures); they mislead the reader in widening the scope of 'monotheism' to embrace cosmology and confuse the picture of what Jews said was one. Instead, when Jews elaborate upon their cosmology, they use terms like 'angel', 'spirit' and 'demon', and they refer to divine attributes as agents of divine action.

It is not difficult to enumerate Jewish texts extant in the first century that enunciate the view that there is one God; in this they are consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. The basis of Jewish devotional practices in respect of gods was the belief that there was one God, i.e. loyalty to the one God arose from the concomitant belief that there was one God. For this reason, 'monotheism' is more descriptive of *belief* rather than the extent of any religious devotions. Thus, some Jews evidently had devotional practices in respect of angels (Col 2:18), but this does not mean that such Jews were not monotheists in respect of 'the gods'; in the case of Colossae, we do not know.

Illustrating Jewish Monotheism

Judaism in the first century was, no doubt, a varied religion, allowing us to speak of Judaisms as well as Judaism; it would make little sense to speak of the plural while denying the singular. We can illustrate its monotheism from a variety of texts. In doing this, we are not saying that some assertions are true and some false, or that only some writings are definitive of Judaism; the texts are just illustrations of monotheism.

(1) Philo (50 BCE to 50 CE) might not be paradigmatic for the religion of the common man of his times or the religious groups in Judaism based around the synagogue, but he does illustrate a philosophical Judaism. He grounds monotheism in the beliefs of Abraham:

But this man, having formed a proper conception of him in his mind, and being under the influence of inspiration, left his country, and his family, and his father's house, well knowing that, if he remained among them, the deceitful fancies of the polytheistic doctrine abiding there likewise, must render his mind incapable of arriving at the proper discovery of the one true God, who is the only everlasting God and the Father of all other things, whether appreciable only by the intellect or perceptible by the outward senses; while, on the other hand, he saw, that if he rose up and quitted his native land, deceit would also depart from his mind, changing his false opinions into true belief. *Vir.* 1:214; cf. *Leg.* 3:4, 82; *Decal.* 65¹⁴

This text illustrates a common apologetic stance in Judaism: to contrast its monotheism with the polytheism of the nations (contemporary or historical). Nevertheless, Philo also has a particular view of the Word (*logos*) as *second* to God:

Why is it that he speaks as if of some other god, saying that he made man after the image of God, and not that he made him after his own image? Very appropriately and without any falsehood was this oracular sentence uttered by God, for no mortal thing could have been formed on the similitude of the supreme Father of the universe, but only after the pattern of the second deity (*ton deuteron theon*), who is the Word of the supreme Being; since it is fitting that the rational soul of man should bear before it the type of the divine Word; since in his first Word God is superior to the most rational possible nature. But he who is superior to the Word holds his rank in a better and most singular pre-eminence, and how could the creature possibly exhibit a likeness of him in himself? *Quaest.* 2:62

¹⁴ All Philo texts are taken from the edition C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo*, (New York: Hendrickson, 1993); our emphasis.

Is Philo a monotheist? The answer depends wholly on *our* analysis. The Father is supreme but the Word is a second god. We could say that he is a monotheist in respect of his view of the Father because the Word is evidently not equal to the Father. Or, we could say that he is not a 'strict' monotheist; perhaps he is an 'inclusive' monotheist? Certainly, his views about the Word go beyond anything in the Jewish Scriptures, and so we might legitimately affirm that he is not true to his own traditions. The answer to our question, therefore, as to whether Philo was a monotheist, depends on how we are using the term. Is it a term for a broad cosmology with a supreme deity, or is it a term for statements that use adjectives like 'one' or 'only' or 'unique' in relation to gods to affirm there is one God?¹⁵

(2) In the *Letter to Aristeeas* (2c. BCE) we read,

Our Lawgiver first of all laid down the principles of piety and righteousness and inculcated them point by point...For he proved first of all that there is only one God and that his power is manifested throughout the universe...Beginning from this starting point he went on to show that all mankind except ourselves believe in the existence of many gods...For when they have made statues of stone and wood, they say that they are the images of those who have invented something useful for life and they worship them, though they have clear proof that they possess no feeling. *Letter to Aristeeas*, 131-135¹⁶

This is a strong statement of the exclusivity of Jewish views. It affirms the existence of only one God (the metaphysical dimension) and then describes what Jews *believe* in contradistinction to 'all mankind' (the epistemic dimension).

(3) Josephus (30 CE – 100 CE) gives expression to the Jewish monotheism in several places in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, for instance,

...he [Abraham] was the first that ventured to publish this notion: That there was but one God, the Creator of the universe; and that, as to other [gods], if they contributed anything to the happiness of men, that each of them afforded it only according to his appointment, and not by their own power. *Ant.* 1:155

The first commandment teaches us that there is but one God, and that we ought to worship him only... *Ant.* 3:91

And let there be neither an altar nor a temple in any other city; for God is but one, and the nation of the Hebrews is but one. *Ant.* 4:201

Now when the Israelites saw this, they fell down upon the ground, and worshipped one God, and called him The great and the only true God; but they called the others mere names, framed by the evil and vile opinions of men. *Ant.* 8:343¹⁷

The doctrine here is serving Josephus' nationalism: God is one and so he has only one favoured nation, the Jews (*Ant.* 4:201). He sees a spectacular demonstration of the doctrine in the contest between Elijah and the prophets of the Tyrean Baal (*Ant.* 8:343).

The above examples, (1)–(3), are not illustrations of 'Exclusive Monotheism'—just 'Monotheism'.¹⁸ This belief is presented alongside a broader cosmology of other divine beings (spirits, angels, and divine agents

¹⁵ This issue in Philo is introduced by K. Schenck, *A Brief Guide to Philo* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2005), 43-44; it is further discussed as a "fourth sphere of ambiguity" in Philo's thought in R. Radice, "Philo's Theology and Theory of Creation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (ed. A. Kamesar; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 124-145 (128-129).

¹⁶ Text taken from R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (2 vols; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

¹⁷ Texts are taken from W. Whiston, *Complete Works of Josephus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987).

like Wisdom and the Word). The texts do not centre their monotheistic statements upon devotional practice but instead *derive* the principle of what/who to worship from the theory.

The claim to be stating the truth is an important characteristic of Jesus as well as the first Christians (e.g. John 14:6; 16:13; Acts 26:25; Gal 2:5; 2 Pet 1:12; Jms 5:19). Historians may well treat all groups within Judaism on an equal footing without regard to any distinction between truth and falsity in respect of ‘the faith’ of the Jewish Scriptures. All groups contribute to the complex phenomenon that is the Judaism of the first century. However, this does not answer the question of who was a ‘true Jew’ (Rom 2:29; Rev 2:9) in respect of the traditions of the fathers (Acts 26:6; Gal 1:14). If we have a paradigm of the faith in the Law and the Prophets, then we can offer an historical judgment as to whether this or that Jewish writer or group is faithfully following their Scriptures.

Scriptural Monotheism

This essay, so far, has been concerned with the use of the term ‘monotheism’ by scholars to describe Judaism in the first century. Today, the term is valued by Jews, Christians and Muslims, but Trinitarianism is not obviously a monotheistic system (it is more obviously a tri-theistic doctrine). Consequently, orthodox Christians use ‘monotheism’ to embrace the Jewish cosmological beliefs about angels, other divine agents, and exalted heavenly figures alongside the one God. This allows them to dub Trinitarianism a type of monotheism, even though the analogy with ‘inclusive monotheism’ is weak (there being no comparable internal distinctions within the Godhead in Judaism). In any event, this isn’t an analytical strategy deployed by OT prophets, who do not use an abstract noun like ‘monotheism’, but do inveigh against the gods of the nations. The book of Isaiah is the classic source, for example,

I *am* the Lord, and *there is* none else, *there is* no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me... Isa 45:5 (KJV)

This statement is addressed to Cyrus, a pagan potentate, and so it is a claim made in an international context with regard to the gods of the nations; it is a claim that Yahweh is the only God. It reflects the *Shema* of Deut 6:4 which is likewise made in the context of having no other gods (from the Canaanite nations) before God (Deut 6:14). While we do not have the abstract noun ‘monotheism’ in the Hebrew Scriptures, we do have this analysis: there is one God (ours) in contradistinction to the gods of the nations. We use the term ‘monotheism’ to describe this contrasting analysis rather than the cosmological analysis that there is one God who has angels and other agents that do his will. When scholars and theologians use ‘monotheism’ to describe a first century cosmology of at least God and his angels, they are not capturing what the Hebrew Scriptures are presenting in their emphasis of what it means to say that there is one God.

The basic doctrine that there is one God does not mean that the Hebrew Scriptures do not reference gods or position God in relation to gods. For example God is a ‘God of gods’ (Deut 10:17; Ps 95:3; 136:2; Dan 2:47; 11:36). Yahweh is a great God above all gods, but to say so isn’t an admission that other gods exist and that therefore you are a polytheist or henotheist. It is, rather, recognition that there are many gods and lords (1 Cor 8:5) ‘out there’ among the nations and that your god is the only real God. So, for example, this rhetoric is taken up by Philo in his treatise, *On the Confusion of Tongues*,

Some persons therefore, admiring exceedingly the nature of both these worlds, have not only deified them in their wholes, but have also deified the most beautiful parts of them, such as the sun and the moon, and the entire heaven, which, having no reverence for anything, they have called gods. But Moses, perceiving their design, says, “O Lord, Lord, King of the gods”, in order to show the difference between the ruler and those subject to him. *Conf.* 173

The point here is that *within* Israel, and for the faithful, there was one God and not many, but *outside* Israel among the nations (and within Israel among the unfaithful), there were many gods to which God was as a

¹⁸ For other texts that stress there is *one* God, or that the God of Israel is the *only* God, or that there is no god *besides* God, see 2 Macc 1:14; Wisd 12:13; Jdt 8:20; 9:14; Bel 1:41; Sir 18:2-3; 24:24; 36:5; *Sib. Or.* Frg 1:7-8; Frg 3:3-4; and 2 *Enoch* 33:7-8; 36:1; 47:3.

king by comparison. There were polytheists and henotheists among the people, as shown in the Law and the Prophets, but the witness of the Jewish Scriptures taken up by Jews in Jesus' day was that there was one God, Yahweh, and the gods of the nations were not to be called 'God'.

Angels, Divine Agents and Exalted Figures

In the Jewish writings around in the first century there are angels, various exalted figures such as the patriarchs, Enoch or the Son of Man, and divine agents such as the Word or Wisdom; there is also a world of demons and a prince of demons. Do such define Jewish monotheism or are they complementary to that monotheism? Scholars might say that Jews countenanced a variety of intermediaries because God was seen as completely transcendent; there needed to be such beings to make contact with humanity. Whether this is true or not for some of the implied authors of first century Jewish writings is not our concern; certainly, it is not a particularly OT picture, which has Yahweh immanent with his people. Our question is *whether Jewish intermediaries characterize monotheism.*

Angels

Angels are well known from the Hebrew Scriptures,¹⁹ but until Daniel they are not differentiated by name. Further, until Daniel they are not given any individual back-story, but rather they are the transparent agents of God's will. In Jewish writings, following Daniel, there is more information about angels and more are named. For instance, God is praised as the 'prince of gods and the king of glorious ones, lord of every spirit, ruler of every creature' (1QH 18.8) and a 'ruler of the spirits' (2 Macc 3:24). The argument to consider here is that, whether 'angels' or 'spirits', they are heavenly beings that have oversight of the affairs of humanity (Sir 17:17; *Jub.* 15.31), and as such they are lesser 'gods' under a high God, and that this is an *inclusive* monotheism.

A variation of this argument surrounds the figure of the Angel of the Lord²⁰ who appears in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as Jewish literature of the first century. The speech and action of the Angel of the Lord appears to be identical to the speech and action of Yahweh. In contradistinction, other materials present an angel simply in the role of a messenger, an intermediary, or an agent of Yahweh. The prominence afforded to a persistent figure such as the Angel of the Lord raises the question in another way of whether angels are part of an *inclusive* monotheism.

The problem with this argument is the **lack of parity**. Angels are generally called such in Jewish writings, distinct from God, and subordinate agents. We might say that they manifest God in action and show certain attributes of God, but to say this still places God at the centre of our cosmology as a distinct being. In terms of choosing between two terms—'monotheism' or 'inclusive monotheism' to describe this cosmology, there doesn't seem to be anything in the model of a divine council with a 'king' (God) and his servants (angels) to merit the word 'inclusive'—a more accurate word would be 'associative': there is one God (monotheism) and he has an **associated divine council of angels**.

Exalted Figures

Various exalted figures feature in Jewish writings about the 'last days'; these are given the role of someone acting directly for God, but someone without peer among the angels or other heavenly agents. For example, the Son of Man from Daniel is such a figure that appears as a 'messianic' figure in the last days. One text identifies this figure as Enoch of the seventh generation from Adam, who was widely assumed to have been taken to heaven:

And he (i.e. the angel) came to me and greeted me with His voice, and said unto me: 'This is the Son of Man, who is born unto righteousness, and righteousness abides over him, and the righteousness of the Head of Days forsakes him not'. And he said unto me: 'He proclaims unto thee peace in the name of the world to come; for from hence has proceeded peace since the creation of the world, and so shall it be unto thee for ever and for ever and ever. And all shall walk in his ways since righteousness never forsaketh him: With him will be their

¹⁹ W. G. Heidt, *The Angelology of the Old Testament* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1949), 69-101.

²⁰ For a diachronic introduction see W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J. Baker; 2 vols; London: SCM Press, 1961-67), 2:23-29.

dwelling-places, and with him their heritage, and they shall not be separated from him for ever and ever and ever. And so there shall be length of days with that Son of Man, and the righteous shall have peace and an upright way in the name of the Lord of Spirits for ever and ever.' *1 Enoch* 71:14-17; cf. *1 Enoch* 46:1; 48:5; 62:9²¹

The exaltation of Jesus in NT writings is predicated upon various OT prophecies, for example Ps 2:2 or 110:1; Jesus' use of 'Son of Man' in reference to himself is based on Daniel 7, as is Stephen's vision of Christ in Acts 7. This is not out of step with Judaism insofar as there were contemporary visionary texts which portrayed an exalted figure acting with and on behalf of God. The difference with the Christian view lies in the fact that Jesus was a recent historical person who had been exalted, whereas Jewish apocalypses referred to historical figures like Enoch. The exaltation of Jesus to a position next to God is shocking if you have a low estimate of humanity. The purpose of man was to be an image of God and to exercise dominion (Gen 1:26-27). The exaltation of Jesus is a fulfillment of this divine intention. Theologians use the expression 'high Christology' for views that see Jesus in exalted heavenly terms; what they have is a correspondingly low anthropology. Rather, we should have a high anthropology in terms of the intended destiny of man. The conviction that Jesus was exalted to heaven, or that Jews believed figures such as Enoch had been so exalted, does not give us grounds for defining monotheism to include whoever has been exalted; such individuals were men and the visions that describe them distinguish them from God (this is true for Jesus in say, the *Letters to the Ecclesiast* as well as for Enoch in *1 Enoch*).

Divine Agents

In studies of Jewish cosmology the category of 'hypostasis' (roughly speaking, for our purposes, an entity) is important, but the conceptual category is vexed as a result of confusion between 'linguistic' hypostatization and 'attributive' hypostatization.²² Hurtado has argued that proposals in this area are "neither very clear nor compelling".²³ An attributive hypostatization is one where an attribute of the deity, like his word or his wisdom are spoken of as agents acting in the world. A linguistic hypostatization is one where the attributes of the deity are presented in a *narrative* as agents without any implication as to their actual existence in reality.

Scholars are divided as to whether Jewish writings use one or other type of hypostatization (or both); and different judgments might be offered for different texts. Philo has an elaborate philosophical understanding of the Word, which appears to be an attributive hypostatization,

But the divine word which is above these does not come into any visible appearance, inasmuch as it is not like to any of the things that come under the external senses, but is itself an image of God, the most ancient of all the objects of intellect in the whole world, and that which is placed in the closest proximity to the only truly existing God, without any partition or distance being interposed between them... *Fug.* 1.101

In the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom likewise appears as an attributive hypostatization,

Give me Wisdom, that sitteth by thy throne; and reject me not from among thy children...O send her out of thy holy heavens, and from the throne of thy glory, that being present she may labour with me, that I may know what is pleasing unto thee. *Wisd* 9:4, 10 (KJA)

Whether these two examples are attributive hypostatizations is not something we need to settle; it seems that the more elaborate the writer's description of the Word or Wisdom in terms of an agent of God acting in the world, the more plausible is the judgment that the writer saw the Word or Wisdom as a hypostasized attribute of the deity. In contrast, the Hebrew Scriptures lack any metaphysics for attributive

²¹ Text is taken from Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*.

²² See C. A. Gieschen *Angelomorphic Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 36-45, for a methodological discussion of 'hypostasis' terminology.

²³ Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 37.

hypostatization, nor are they given ‘voice and face’ and personified;²⁴ rather we have brief linguistic hypostatization of divine attributes (e.g. Ps 33:6).

Whereas angels and exalted figures are less plausibly made part of a definition of monotheism, the divine attributes are an integral part of the divine nature: God is wise and has wisdom; God speaks and his word is powerful. If the Hebrew Scriptures use personification or linguistic hypostatization in respect of God’s wisdom and his word, this is not inclusive monotheism; God’s attributes are essential to his nature. Furthermore, if Jewish writings of the first century hypostatize divine attributes as beings, they are not *being inclusive* in their presentation of monotheism but **composite**—they are presenting God and his attributes in a composite way. The divine attributes are separated off from God and referenced independently and this is the opposite of what is happening when figures are exalted and included among the heavenly beings.

Devotion

We began this essay with a rebuttal of the argument that monotheism should be defined in relation to devotional practices. As we draw the essay to a close, we will briefly consider the question of the ‘worship’ of Jesus. J. D. G. Dunn observes,

‘Worship’ as such is a term rarely used in reference to Christ...Cultic worship or service (*latreuein, latreia*) as such is never offered to Christ, and other worship terms are used only in relation to God. In the case of the most common words for praise and thanksgiving (*eucharistein*), they too are never offered to Christ.²⁵

Dunn counsels here that a Bible reader needs to be aware of distinctions among the Greek words translated as ‘worship’ because not all are used in relation to Jesus. The argument, “Jesus was worshipped and only God should be worshipped, therefore Jesus is God”, is popular, but too simplistic because ‘worship’ is too imprecise a word. Jesus states that, “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Luke 4:8), but the ‘worship’ word is *proskunein*, a word meaning ‘to bow, give obeisance’. He does not say that it is only to God that you should bow and give obeisance, but rather that that it is only God that you should ‘serve’. The word used for ‘serve’ is *latreuein* which Dunn observes is never used in relation to Christ. Instead, we find that NT writers use *proskunein* in respect of Jesus, for example, when the author of Hebrews states, “Let all the angels of God worship him” (Heb 1:8).

With the exaltation of Jesus, the role of Jesus as a high priest, and with his future role in establishing the kingdom of God, it should occasion no surprise that Jesus is integral to the devotions of the apostolic church: veneration given his exalted heavenly position beside God; reverence and respect for him as lord; and obeisance (*proskunein*) towards him as the ‘image of God’ (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). These attitudes express themselves in the devotional life of a Christian, but they do not arise from an inclusion of Jesus within a monotheistic pattern of *latreuein*.

R. J. Bauckham affirms of first century Jews that,

Their self-conscious monotheism was not merely an intellectual belief about God, but a unity of belief and praxis, involving the exclusive worship of this one God. Monolatry (the worship of only the one God) as the corollary of monotheism (belief in only the one God) is an important aspect of Jewish monotheism...²⁶

Bauckham illustrates the mistake in analysis that we have been highlighting. He treats ‘monotheism’ as a term embracing belief and praxis (worship), but he does so without arguing that ‘monotheism’ as a term *should* pick out a kind of worship. He makes this move because he wants to argue that the worship of Jesus is evidence that he was included in the divine identity of the one God. We should not grant his

²⁴ On the relative distinction between hypostatization and personification, see J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 2.

²⁵ J. D. G. Dunn, *Did the first Christians worship Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 2010), 27.

²⁶ R. J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2008), 5.

premise that worship of one God is an *aspect* of Jewish monotheism, but rather insist that worship of one God is a *corollary* of Jewish monotheism. Since actions (praise, prayer) flow from beliefs, it is natural to see them as corollaries to belief; in fact, beliefs distinguish actions, so that we can distinguish the praise of a polytheist from the praise of a monotheist. The quote above seems to point in two directions and is inconsistent. What he offers for Jewish worship is the term ‘monolatry’, which is derived from the Greek *latreuein*, which as Dunn observed is used only of God and never of Christ.

Conclusion

The Hebrew Scriptures present God in singular terms: he speaks with one voice; intentions, attitudes and emotions are attached to one subject; the singular pronoun is used. In terms of the *genus*, there is said to be one God and that God is presented as a person with the personal qualities that are illustrated in human beings. The nature of God is not particularly described; rather, his character is emphasized in his dealings with men and women. There is nothing in the data to suggest differentiation in the Godhead or that God is anything other than a single person, the Father.

First century Jewish monotheism is broadly in line with the scriptural tradition; there may be writings that reference a number of divine agents, but this is data that makes up a rich Jewish cosmology rather than describes an inclusive monotheism. The singular emphasis in Jewish texts that reference God, even when there are other divine agents in the surrounding verses, needs to be given due weight in our historical description of Judaism. The best term for this singular emphasis is just ‘monotheism’.

The reverence of Jesus, the acknowledgement and honour ascribed to him, and the obeisance, the calling upon him, and the remembrance of him—all these actions are part of Christian devotion and reflect Jesus’ exaltation as ‘lord’ and Davidic king. Whilst this belief was no doubt rejected by Jews in the first century, it is entirely compatible with the Jewish monotheism of the time, because it is the Father who is said to be the one God by Jews and the earliest Christians alike, different from angels, exalted patriarchs, and the heavenly divine agents.

This document archive has been made available
to you with the assistance of the publishers of:



inWORD

<http://inwordbible.com>