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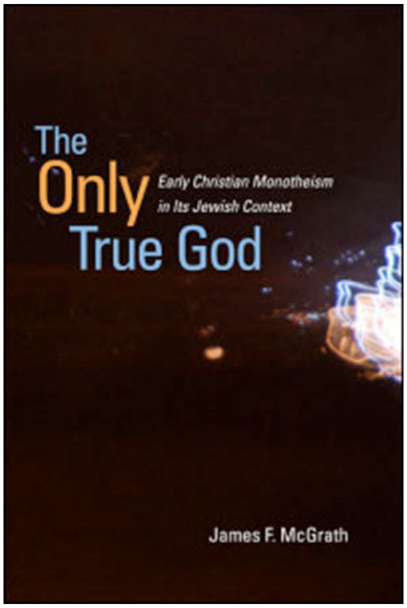

McGrath, James F.

The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context

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In his latest work, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context*, James McGrath advances the discussion of "the parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity, focusing on issues that have received a great deal of attention over the last few decades: the nature of Jewish and early Christian monotheism and the role of Christology in the separation of Judaism and Christianity into distinct religions. This monograph follows up and extends McGrath's work in *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), in which he parts ways with the scholarly narrative that would have John's high Christology mark a definitive break with Jewish monotheism. In his latest book, McGrath contends that none of the varied christological portraits found in any New Testament writings departs from Jewish monotheistic ideas from the same period. Through an analysis of Jewish and Christian literary and material sources in the Greco-Roman period, McGrath argues that understanding monotheism as the divisive issue in the first century is anachronistic and concludes that the schism "occurred significantly later than the period in which the texts now incorporated in the New Testament were produced" (2).

In chapter 1, "Monotheism and Method: An Introduction to the Study of Early Jewish and Christian Thought about God," McGrath addresses the problematic nature of the term “monotheism,” a modern designation that may impose later concepts, such as the denial of all other gods, agents, and intermediary figures, upon what Jews and early Christians actually believed. McGrath surveys contemporary approaches to the subject, interacting with the work of Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, and others. Hurtado identifies the incorporation of Jesus into Christian worship as the beginning of a departure from Jewish monotheism, and while McGrath essentially agrees with Hurtado’s approach, he narrows the problematic category of “worship” to animal sacrifice (7–8), concluding that early Christian worship, which did not involve sacrifice to Jesus, did not mark a precise departure from Jewish adherence to one God (more on this below).

Chapter 2, “Worship and the Question of Jewish Monotheism in the Greco-Roman Era,” presents McGrath’s findings on the monotheistic character of Hellenistic Judaism, which might be summarized as a kind of “flexible monotheism.” The testimony of Gentiles (Hecataeus of Abdera, Manetho) and Jews (Aristeas) confirms the centrality of Jewish worship of one God and antipathy for images. McGrath looks at material evidence as well: a funeral stela from Delos (first–second century B.C.E.) invokes “angels of God,” amulets were dedicated to foreign deities (2 Macc 12:39–41), and Jewish inscriptions give thanks to God in an Egyptian temple of Pan. For some strands of Judaism, heterodoxy of worship and practice did not seem to compromise monotheism.

In chapter 3, “Monotheism and the Letters Attributed to Paul,” McGrath challenges the view of James Dunn and N. T. Wright, who claim that in 1 Cor 8:4–6 Paul reinterprets the Shema, including Jesus within the divine unity in an unprecedented manner. Instead, according to McGrath, Paul’s addition of Jesus as “one Lord” *alongside* the one God reveals Jesus, not as God, but as God’s unique agent, appointed by God to reign over all things with and under God’s authority: “Paul uses this language of ‘one God’ and adds to it a reference to ‘one Lord.’ It is thus the addition of another element alongside this traditional affirmation of Jewish monotheistic faith that we must attempt to understand” (41). The problem with calling Paul’s statement an “addition” is that *kyrios* or *’adonai* is part of the Shema itself, as McGrath notes (39). Moreover, in Deut 6:4, “the Lord” *is* “our God”; if Paul is alluding to the Shema in 1 Cor 8, he is using one of its terms, predicated of God, to refer to Jesus. And while *kyrios* may not always designate divinity, it does in the Shema. So, while McGrath is surely correct in pointing out Jesus’ role as God’s agent here, that does not preclude the presence of divine overtones as well.

What McGrath finds true of Paul, he finds equally true of John in chapter 4, “Monotheism and the Gospel of John”: John’s portrayal of Jesus fits within the broad spectrum of first-century Jewish monotheism. Beginning with the Prologue (1:1–18), McGrath compares John’s Logos Christology to Philo’s use of Logos as a “second god,” concluding that Philo, John, and other Jewish authors found intermediary figures like the

Logos compatible with God's oneness. Concerns with Jesus "making himself [equal to] God" also center on agency: Jesus' responses to accusations against him focus on his obedience to the Father who sent him; his "blasphemy" is not claiming to be God but pretending to have been appointed by God when he is not. McGrath links John's "I Am" statements with Old Testament, New Testament, and extrabiblical agents of God who bear the divine name (e.g., Apocalypse of Abraham, Phil 2:6–11). Finally, McGrath deals with John 20:28, where Thomas uses *kyrios* and *theos* of Jesus, comparing this to other figures in Jewish literature who were called "gods" (cf. John 10). While McGrath's warning against reading later monotheistic ideas onto these texts is surely justified, one wonders what it was about Jesus that was so offensive in John, if it was not a claim to divinity. Additional discussion here would be helpful. More important, John's description of Jesus as the Logos who became *flesh* takes "agency" to a whole new level and was bound to be problematic for some non-Christian Jews.

Chapter 5, "Monotheism and Worship in the Book of Revelation," examines the way that various forms of devotion are directed toward God, Christ, angels, and even Christians (Rev 3:9). McGrath argues that God is the primary recipient of worship and that when Jesus is included he receives honor and praise, not sacrifice, which McGrath has defined as the "dividing line" that distinguished monotheistic worship. There are two problems with the choice of sacrifice as the distinguishing mark of monotheistic worship. First, McGrath notes that in at least two instances (14:4; 20:6) cultic imagery is used for worship of "the Lamb"; these are downplayed as metaphorical (73). More important, McGrath notes that "as the death of Christ was regarded as the sacrificial worship par excellence offered to God, there was no real way that he could be portrayed as both the one who offers such sacrificial worship, and at the same time the recipient thereof" (77). If Jesus *could* not be portrayed receiving sacrifice, then the fact that he *was* not says nothing about his divinity. One wonders if the distinction between "divinity" and "divine emissary" is not being pushed too far here; if Jesus, as McGrath asserts, is portrayed as God's agent par excellence, is it not possible that New Testament writers are using stock Jewish motifs of intermediaries and agents in order to make him both accessible to Jews and to counter the notion that Christ-belief violated the traditional Jewish concern for the uniqueness of God? Is it possible that for Paul, John, and the author of Revelation, Jesus was both God's agent and also uniquely divine? Describing Jesus in terms both familiar and yet innovative would have potent explanatory and apologetic value for an audience steeped in Jewish culture.

In chapter 6, "Two Powers Heresy: Rethinking (and Redating) the Parting of Ways between Jewish and Christian Monotheism," McGrath takes on the notion, famously argued by A. Segal, that the rabbinic "two powers heresy" had its roots in the first century and that Christianity was one of its primary targets. McGrath critiques Segal's dating of rabbinic sources and interprets them to say that negative beliefs about intermediary figures developed over time and that these figures were rejected by the rabbis in retrospect. He then traces the origins of the two powers heresy to the third century, when confrontations with gnostic thought forced Jews and Christians to clarify the boundary between God and creation; the rabbis began to condemn belief in divine agents only as these agents were redefined by both gnostics and Christians. Thus McGrath concludes that the polemic against two powers appears later than our New Testament documents and is no challenge to first-century Jewish monotheism.

As suggested above, McGrath may overstate the continuity between agency motifs in Jewish literature and New Testament portrayals of Jesus; there is no question that New Testament authors drew upon these motifs. But the ways these are applied to Jesus, and the way early Christians seem to have revered him, are unparalleled in Jewish texts from the same period. One of the great strengths of this book is how McGrath demonstrates that monotheism looked very different in the first century than it does today; his work provides an important corrective to the view that tends to interpret New Testament Christology in terms of Nicaea and later developments, thereby missing the Jewish intertextual and hermeneutical keys to interpreting many New Testament texts. His analysis of divine mediator figures in his sources not only illustrates the dynamic range of monotheistic thought and practice during this period but also serves as a warning against anachronistic readings of these texts. In his conclusion, McGrath draws out helpful implications for present-day theological development; for faith communities, the way forward is not a “return to earlier beliefs or an earlier world view” (103), but a living engagement of tradition in each new era.