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Monotheism

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THE
OXFORD
ENCYCLOPEDIA

of the

BIBLE

AND

ETHICS

ROBERT L. BRAWLEY, EDITOR IN CHIEF

narrowly defined to favor those who hold greater power. The ability to achieve equal access, redress, and treatment is diminished through the unequal power distributions. While these inequities exist in modern nation-states anyway, the role that monarchy has played in the shaping of nation-states and current geopolitical distributions requires critical engagement with the biblical expressions of monarchy given that it potentially further distorts unequal relationships.

[See also Colonialism; Feminism; Imperialism; Kingdom of God; Power; Social Classes; and Wealth and Possessions.]

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Steed Vernyl Davidson

MONASTICISM

See Community.

MONEY

See Economics.

MONOGAMY

See Marriage and Divorce.

MONOPOLY

See Economics.

MONOTHEISM

The term "monotheism" is relatively recent and has proved notoriously difficult to define, as well as controversial when applied to biblical texts and the religious groups associated with them. While some accept the Bible's own account of a monotheism that can be traced back to the patriarchs, or at least Moses, others have argued that monotheism requires an explicit doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and thus is not evidenced until many centuries later than the time in which the contents of the Bible were composed

(Hayman, 1991). Nevertheless, the broad concept denoted by the word “monotheism”—that there is one God who is supreme and alone worthy of worship—is firmly rooted in biblical texts and has a long history of connection with both the Bible and ethics. A connection between monotheism and ethics is found both within biblical literature itself and in the history of the interpretation thereof. Indeed, it could be argued that what distinguishes monotheism from other expressions of religion that at times used monotheistic-sounding rhetoric is precisely the conviction that exclusive allegiance to and worship of this one deity is a matter of supreme ethical importance.

Although monotheism has often been considered, at the very least, the most fundamental *assumption* of most Jewish and Christian ethics, if not indeed the most important ethical principle in its own right, nevertheless one may search in vain for an index entry labeled “monotheism” in most volumes focused on philosophical or theological ethics. This is a reflection of something more than merely the compartmentalization of scholarship. Nils Dahl famously referred to God as the “neglected factor in New Testament theology,” highlighting the neglect of treatment of God as a key point in any attempt to survey or systematize the theological content of the New Testament (Dahl, 1975). That God could be neglected in anything *theological* might seem ironic. But given that much about the figure of God lies at the level of assumption rather than explicit statement in New Testament writings (see Dunn, 1998, pp. 28–31), the failure to explore these axiomatic convictions is perhaps understandable, if still a regrettable oversight in some treatments of these texts. And if there was an oversight regarding God within a particular domain of biblical *theology* (and indeed within the scholarly study of the New Testament more generally, on which see Hurtado, 2010, pp. 1–3), it will come as no surprise to find that there has sometimes been a comparable omission in the exploration of the Bible and ethics.

Monotheism as Ethics in the Bible. Whatever one might conclude about earlier stages in the development of biblical literature, at least the final form of its contents has been edited to reflect the conviction that there is one God whom Jews should worship, a

view that its redactors and compilers considered normative for themselves and their people. Throughout the Bible’s pages, exclusive worship of Yahweh alone is depicted as an *ethical* concern. Tracing the origin and development of this emphasis requires drawing conclusions about the relative date of material embedded within the wide array of canonical texts. Because of the centrality within the Bible of the demand to recognize Yahweh’s supremacy and sole right to be worshiped, the notion that this viewpoint may have emerged later, and by more complex processes, than the Bible itself claims has been controversial.

It has been argued that the material preserved in Hosea reflects a key moment in this connection, an importance highlighted by comparison with the contents of the slightly earlier yet roughly contemporary Book of Amos, which lacks Hosea’s concern for exclusive worship (Lang, 1983, pp. 30–36). Hosea compares the worship of other deities by Israel to marital infidelity. Thus, rather than monotheism being the foundation upon which ancient Israel’s ethics are initially built, as many have assumed after a superficial reading of the biblical texts, precisely the reverse turns out to be the case. It seems to have been an ethical conviction—in this case, concerning the immorality of and injury caused by marital infidelity—which, when applied by analogy to the nation’s cultic life, played a key role in inspiring this crucial step in the direction of monotheism, namely the call for monolatry, exclusive worship of Yahweh alone.

The stance that the nation has been unfaithful to its divine husband in a manner parallel to infidelity in a human marriage is often accompanied by language about divine jealousy and anger and, indeed, depicts God as inflicting punishment on his wayward wife in a manner that would be considered a form of domestic violence if transferred into the human realm in the present day. The human attributes that are reflected in this way of depicting God are often deemed moral shortcomings. Thus the entire complex of images related to God as cuckolded husband of Judah and Israel is thus at once built on ethical assumptions at play in the ancient social context that witnessed their appearance and a source of problems for those who are prone to find

the depiction of the one God in these terms ethically problematic.

The legal prohibition of worship of other deities before Yahweh, as expressed in the first commandment, is difficult to date, and its precise relationship to the development of monotheism is challenging to pin down. The wording may be understood as a demand for exclusive worship or as indicating priority as first among many. The interpretation of the words may have changed over time, further complicating matters. Nevertheless, by the time the Ten Commandments were embedded in the literary works in which they are now to be found, they were understood to demand exclusive worship. In that context, the commandment that Yahweh be given paramount or exclusive allegiance was placed alongside other commands regarding more mundane ethical matters such as murder and theft. This placement communicates that matters of worship and religious devotion are ethical matters at least as important as the others, and perhaps more so, considering the order in which they are enumerated. More than that, the supreme power of God demonstrated in defeating the gods of Egypt and liberating the Israelites is offered as the basis for the entire body of legislation, thus reversing the earlier order of reasoning, making the supremacy of the one God the grounds for ethical demands.

The implications of this connection are worked out more fully across a variety of texts within the Jewish scriptures. In a classic polytheistic setting, mirrored on familiar bureaucratic arrangements in human society, one rarely had the need or opportunity to interact with the supreme ruler or emperor. In daily life, a variety of local authorities and functionaries had to be dealt with, often in different ways and on different terms. In the corresponding divine realm, one sought to placate or gain assistance from a variety of potential divine benefactors overseeing limited spheres, while the supreme god was given less attention. If one deity did not seek child sacrifice, for instance, that did not mean that such a practice could not be pleasing to another deity. It is arguable that the move in the direction of monotheism in the religion of the people of Judah led naturally to the expectation that certain practices—whether cultic ones or mat-

ters of human interpersonal interaction—could be defined in stark terms as either pleasing or abhorrent to the one God. We see the challenges this created for those involved in reimagining God and ethics in this framework in the contrasting statements about child sacrifice offered by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The latter has Yahweh say, “I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD” (Ezek 20:25–26). According to the former, Yahweh says, “The people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt-offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind...” (Jer 19:4–5). Despite the discrepancy on whether God ever ordered such a thing in the past, the prophetic voices agree that Yahweh finds such things abhorrent in the present and that this should be understood as grounds for rejecting the practice, no matter which other deities are thought to take pleasure in them. This provides the groundwork for a strong sense of moral absolutism, as well as illustrating how challenging it would prove time and again to reconcile current convictions about the will and character of the one God with elements in earlier literature and tradition. In all these instances, monotheism and/or monolatry are considered ethical issues, as well as closely connected with other ethical concerns.

Given the emphasis on not worshipping or serving other deities, interpreters have often found themselves perplexed by the proliferation of mediator figures in the Second Temple period, as well as by the apparent nonchalance about what may seem to a modern reader to be departures from a strictly monotheistic stance. In most instances, however, the phenomena in question result not from a lack of concern for fidelity to one God alone, but the fact that what “monotheism” constituted in this period is not identical to what it was understood to denote in later

times. It appears possible to detect a boundary or set of boundaries that fairly consistently delineated the “ethics of monotheism” for the biblical authors, as well as for authors of numerous extracanonical texts influenced by biblical literature. In both Jewish and Christian texts, the seating of a ruler or approved agent of God upon the divine throne, the bearing of the divine name by such an agent, and receipt of prostration but not sacrificial worship were considered appropriate in the case of a figure whose authority was subordinate to, in service of, and ultimately to the glory of the one God. Sacrificial worship appears to have been considered appropriate for the one God alone, this marking a sharp dividing line about which most authors agreed. And for figures understood to have set themselves up as authorities over against the one God, or to have usurped power or position inappropriately, even such acts as prostration might be deemed inappropriate. Worship practices appear to have served to effectively delineate what monotheistic devotion implied for Jews and subsequently for Christians within the period when the biblical literature was produced (on this see further North, 2004, pp. 196–202; McGrath, 2009).

Monotheism and Ethics in the Bible. As the conviction became increasingly widespread within Judaism that there is one God who is supremely powerful, without equal or rival, who demands certain ethical behavior and who will hold people accountable for their actions, it was inevitable that all ethics should come to have a distinctive monotheistic configuration and focus. Deuteronomy 4 and 6 provide extended examples of this, the latter featuring the famous Shema, which asserts that Yahweh is one, immediately followed by the command to love God. During the first century of the Common Era, Philo of Alexandria (*Decal.* 65) and Jesus of Nazareth (according to Mark 12:29–30) singled out that commandment as the greatest of all the commandments. Some viewed the worship of idols as the root of much or all other behavior viewed as sinful (a view articulated explicitly in Wisdom 14:27 and implicit in Ps-Philo, *Ant.* 44:7 and Rom 1:21–32, to provide but a few examples).

Yet while all ethical matters might ultimately be connected with monotheism within this framework,

there are several instances in which the oneness of God is explicitly connected with a particular line of ethical reasoning, and sometimes the same basic tenet has been appealed to in defense of radically divergent conclusions. For instance, while emphasis on the supremacy and oneness of God could be linked with the view that Israel had a special relationship with Yahweh, the same emphasis could also lead to a focus on Yahweh as the creator of all humankind. A tension has often been felt between such universal and exclusive emphases that correlate with biblical monotheism; and a variety of other ethical issues are raised in connection with that tension. In some instances, to marry a member of another people, or to fail to distinguish and separate oneself from others, is condemned, while in other cases, the exclusion of those who are of a different people or nation is itself condemned, all on the basis of the same monotheistic principles—or the same sense of a unique relationship to the one true God not shared by others.

Monotheism can be understood exclusively (our God is the only true God) or inclusively (there is only one God and so there cannot be multiple gods of various peoples, but rather we are all or should all be united). And so it is unsurprising that there are correspondingly different approaches to otherness in the human realm when drawing ethical implications from monotheism. It can be argued from the premise that there is only one God, that there must therefore be only one temple, or one mediator, or one people of God. But it can also be argued that, as there is only one God, all people are one and it is wrong to separate and segregate them. And in many instances, some combination of the two may emerge, reflecting the inherent tension.

Paul famously argued a point along the lines mentioned above in Romans 3:29–30, where he wrote, “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” N. T. Wright understands Galatians 3:20 to be making a similar point, with Paul arguing that since the mediator, Moses, does not represent “the one,” i.e., a unified people of God consisting of Jews and Gentiles, the covenant through him cannot be

the fulfillment that there would be a single unified “seed” of Abraham, which is therefore, Paul argues, fulfilled in Christ (Wright, 1991, pp. 162–172). This argument from one God to one people of God mirrors arguments found in Judaism, and these could take a restrictive, exclusionary form (as in the case of the Qumran *Yahad*) as well as an inclusive one akin to Paul’s (see Hayward, 2004). Paul’s argument is particularly striking, however, inasmuch as he argues his ethical point on the basis of traditional Jewish monotheism, while at the same time using the same logic to set aside requirements found in the Torah, which was the ethical foundation for Judaism par excellence. We thus see in Paul’s hermeneutic an approach to scripture that elevates principles (and in certain instances specifically the principle of *one God*) so that they take priority over and above what any specific text happens to say, an approach that has in turn been fruitfully applied to Paul’s own writings by later interpreters thereof.

In 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul engages in ethical reasoning about the eating of food sacrificed to idols. His conversation with that church illustrates the challenges of drawing practical implications from monotheistic beliefs. Paul agrees that since there is no God but one, the eating of food is not strictly speaking impermissible, simply because it had been offered to idols. He advises caution, however, on the basis that not everyone shares such monotheistic convictions, and as a result, they might misinterpret and even emulate the action of the Christian and so be led astray into the worship of those so-called gods. Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul adopts a slightly different stance, acknowledging once again that idols are nothing, but considering what is sacrificed to idols to have been offered to “demons,” and thus he advises avoiding all such connections. In that passage, emphasis is placed not only on the oneness of God, but also on the oneness of the community and of the communal loaf they share, a theme explored further still in other parts of the letter. Even though in what may be his earliest letter Paul summed up the impact of his proclamation in terms of turning from idols to “serve a living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9), his subsequent letters acknowledge the practical challenges of

avoiding all foods that might have some connection with the predominant forms of worship in the Greco-Roman world, and in them Paul appears to seek a *via media* that balances commitment to monotheism with a rejection of an approach that would require a complete withdrawal from participation in society.

The book of Revelation appears to reflect a stricter stance than Paul’s on the matter of food sacrificed to idols. This connects with the focus on worship within Revelation and the sharp contrast drawn therein between the worship of God and the Lamb on the one hand and of the beast on the other. The distinction between the two sets of allegiances is depicted as one of many decisive factors determinative of salvation in the final judgment. Those on Earth who participate in the worship that also takes place in heaven will be willing and perhaps required to give their lives in faithful martyrdom, while those who participate in the worship of the emperor are deemed to be rejecting the one true God. In the depiction of judgment upon humankind, books containing a record of all human deeds are mentioned as being opened and their contents considered (Rev 20:12–15). Whether they worshiped the beast is nevertheless viewed as of paramount importance (cf. 13:8; 21:27). It is not clear at times whether failure to have one’s name written in the Lamb’s book of life is the cause or the result of worshiping the beast, but in either case, they are connected in Revelation, and as so often in texts reflecting a strict Jewish monotheism, exclusive worship of the one supreme God is considered an ethical demand of crucial importance. Whether the references to sexual immorality that are closely connected to the eating of food sacrificed to idols in the early chapters of Revelation are literal—and thus represent a pairing of monotheistic and other ethical concerns—or metaphorical—and thus reflect the depiction of participation in worship of other deities, even indirectly, as infidelity to God—is a matter of debate among interpreters, but in either case the conjunction of monotheism and ethics is clear.

James 2:18–19 connects monotheism and ethics, emphasizing that mere belief (in the sense of assent to the proposition) that God is one is insufficient, but must be accompanied by actions that respond to the ethical

demands of that one God. John 17 attributes to Jesus himself an emphatic statement that the God whom he there addresses in prayer is the only true God, and in connection with affirmations of his own unique relationship to God, prayer is offered for unity among believers that should mirror the unity between Jesus and God, articulated in terms of “being one.” In 1 John, the axiom that God is love is closely connected to mutual love among the letter’s recipients, and at its conclusion (5:20–21), the emphasis on knowing the true God is followed immediately by a warning about idols. There has been some debate about whether the reference in that context is to Jesus as “true God,” which would place its terminology at odds with John 17:3.

Some interpreters have connected the theme of unity, in works such as 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of John, to a supposed early Christian *redefinition* of monotheism so as to include Christ, in a nascent if not in fact a full-fledged binitarianism or trinitarianism. Other interpreters consider it more likely that it is an unaltered emphasis on God’s oneness, as found in other strands of Judaism, that serves this function. As was mentioned earlier in this article, Jewish and Christian monotheism had a good deal of room for subordinate agents of God and personified divine attributes, with reverence and obedience to them understood as ultimately directed toward the true God, and thus not a form of worship or service to other gods of the sort prohibited in the Torah. Given the supreme ethical importance of monotheism in most if not all streams of Judaism in this period, it should be inconceivable that early Christians used characteristically Jewish monotheistic rhetoric and emphasized Jewish ethical perspectives, while at the same time significantly reinterpreting what was meant by monotheism, and yet somehow without this resulting in intense controversy. The resulting debates would surely have left their mark on our earliest Christian sources, just as we see controversy reflected in Paul’s letters as a result of his stance on the freedom of Gentile Christians from the need to be circumcised and the adoption of other “works of Torah.” And yet debates over the oneness of God are simply not reflected at all in our earliest sources, while even in later works such as the Gospel of John, accusations such as that Jesus

“makes himself equal to God” are rebutted rather than accepted (see further McGrath, pp. 58–61).

Monotheism and Ethics in Biblical Interpretation. In the passages from the New Testament mentioned above, we have already witnessed examples of the interpretation of biblical texts that have to do with the oneness of God. Beyond texts that became canonical for Jews and/or Christians, many more examples can be found of the coupling of monotheism and ethics in biblical interpretation. We also find the notion of idolatry being extended in a fashion that provides a precursor to the usage of the term and application of the relevant texts today. For instance, already in the first century C.E., Jewish and Christian authors had extended the Bible’s prohibitions against worship of other deities and idolatry and applied them to the love of money and wealth (see for instance Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.22–25; Col 3:5; Eph 5:5). The presence of idolatrous images on most coinage may have made such a coupling natural and a connection with idolatry more literal than in the present day (Marcus, 2006, p. 155).

Monotheism has been given credit for bringing people together in, if not unity, at least mutual respect and tolerance and conversely has been blamed for religious violence due to the exclusive claims inherent in monotheistic belief. Joining her voice to earlier authors from Sigmund Freud to Jan Assman, Regina Schwartz (1997, p. 63) articulates the latter claim, writing, “Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass.” Mark S. Smith (2008, p. 28) offers a counterargument when he writes, “In the history of the Ancient Near East, violence is not inherent in either monotheism or polytheism. It is not a function of the form of theism, whether polytheism or monotheism; it is a function of power and the capacity to wield it.” In fact, the criticism of monotheism as leading to increased violence appears to presume the outmoded evolutionary view of religion as progressing from animism through polytheism toward monotheism in linear fashion. It is not clear that shifts in either a more or a less monotheistic direction have always been accompanied by changes in the extent of

violence justified or inspired by religion. Within the Bible, the idea of one God is offered as reason to exterminate Canaanites in Joshua and as justifying mercy being extended to Ninevites in Jonah. Monotheism seems closely connected to exclusivism in the Gospel of John and to the overcoming of boundaries resulting in the inclusion of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female in Christ in Paul's letters. Any claim that monotheism can only be used to serve one sort of religious or ethical purpose inevitably encounters a wealth of counterevidence.

The outmoded evolutionary view of monotheism as the pinnacle of a fairly linear trajectory can also to be connected with the criticism of monotheism, and in particular Genesis 1:26–28, as being responsible for unethical treatment of the environment (White, 1969; contrast Adler, 2006). Such blaming of an ancient text makes sense only if one accepts the fundamentalist claim that the ancient text should and does address concerns of our later time, with its developed technologies and scientific understanding. Genesis 1, understood against the backdrop of its historical context, appears very different. Written for exiles returning to a land that most likely had begun to return to wilderness in the decades of their (or their ancestors') absence, and offering a complement to the already-existing narrative in Genesis 2–3 with its depiction of human dependence on and connectedness to the ground, Genesis 1 cannot be said to be inherently associated with exploitation of natural resources. That it has been used to do so simply illustrates once again that religious ideas and scriptural texts have been and continue to be put to any number of uses with respect to ethical matters. While monotheism may well have led to the desacrilization of nature, cultural contexts in which natural phenomena are still associated with deities show that nature's sacredness does not automatically translate into environmental concern in a modern industrialized or industrializing context. For instance, the view of the river Ganga (Ganges) in India as a goddess has not led to unified efforts to address the serious problems of pollution there. As for Genesis 1, it is a text that depicts a deity bringing order to chaos and proclaiming creation good, and depicts humanity as created in God's image to exer-

cise dominion in a manner that is presumably to reflect that divine image. It should not seem surprising, then, that the text has proven useful not only to those who wish to exploit the environment, or to blame the Bible for inspiring those who do so, but also to those who seek to find inspiration for their efforts to protect the environment.

Whatever one may say about possible connections between the Bible, environmental ethics and monotheism, the Enlightenment era did witness an increase in the popularity of what has been called "ethical monotheism," that is, the recasting of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions as focused on belief in one God and a concern to live ethically. Wendell Dietrich's 1986 study of the work of Hermann Cohen and Ernst Troeltsch popularized the term, which could be applied to any number of figures of the modern era, including the Deists (see further Vial and Hadley, 2001). These efforts, much in the same way as some of the work of allegorical philosophical interpreters long before, often involve a form of monotheism that is far removed conceptually from the impassioned and at times angry demands for exclusive worship that are attributed to the one God in ancient Israel's literature (McBride, 2006, p. 150).

In addition to ethical and unethical implications being attributed to, derived from, or blamed on monotheistic beliefs, there is also the matter of violence in the name of religion and the question of whether that itself is unethical or supremely ethical. Within the pages of the Bible, the call goes forth not merely to refrain from worshiping other gods, but also to put to death those who do so or seek to persuade others to do so (particularly in Deuteronomy and Joshua). That the depiction of events in the Book of Joshua is at odds with the archaeological evidence does little to comfort those who find its depiction of divinely ordained genocide disturbing. Although the Bible does not address ethical issues in these terms, it does provide ample opportunity for the discussion of notions such as objective morality, divine command theory, and the Euthyphro dilemma. Just as the concept of monotheism has continued to develop beyond the pages of the Bible along trajectories reflected therein, explorations of the intersection of the Bible,

ethics, and monotheism continue along new and interesting pathways down to the present day.

[See also Creation, subentries on Christian Perspective and Jewish Perspective; Ecology; and Violence.]

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James McGrath

MORAL FORMATION

See Education; Formation; and Theories of Ethics.

MORALITY (VS. ETHICS)

Herbert McCabe in his essay, "Teaching Morals" (2002, pp. 187–198), calls on the Christian tradition to point out how morality is chiefly concerned with a special kind of human behavior, i.e., it is characterized by practical intelligence, which means that morality is learning how to do something in this world, how to act well as humans. It is more akin to learning or playing a particular sport well than learning physics. If morality focuses on the actual performance of excellence in human actions with the required virtues for assisting our life stories of becoming good human beings, then ethics, according to McCabe, is the study of human behavior, which implies that critical reflection goes toward the actions that practical intelligence concludes. McCabe continues that morality