

The Fruits of Monotheism

HILR; Fall 2018

Longer Description of the Course

Western Civilization since the Middle Ages has been built on an understanding of the world taught by the Christian church. That world-view includes the assertion that each person has an immortal soul which survives death, and that it will be judged according to the choices made during life and consigned forevermore to a glorious existence or unrelieved punishment. This world-view also asserts that there is a force antagonistic to God which operates during an individual's life to tempt one to act improperly and which acts more broadly in the world to produce evil effects like earthquakes and tsunamis.

Although it's well-known that Christianity derived from and extended Judaism, even going so far as to adopt the Hebrew Bible as scripture (the Old Testament), it's not often remarked that the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of the last 6 chapters of Daniel, the last book to be written, in 162BCE) contains not a single reference to any of these ideas. This study group in intellectual history will consider where these ideas came from (since the answer is not Jewish tradition) and how they are viewed today by Judaism and Christianity.

Our six sessions are arranged chronologically. In each one we'll explore one or more assertions which support the thesis that **Satan, an immortal soul, heaven and hell, and resurrection all emerged in the last two centuries BCE as a consequence of the adoption of monotheism by Israel in the fifth century BCE.**

Week 1: Assertion: Abraham was not the first monotheist; in fact monotheism was a distinctly minority view in Israelite religion until, following the exile, it became mainstream. We'll review the Hebrew Bible passages which demonstrate that Israelite religion was monolatrous: it accepted the existence of many gods but required that Israel worship only YHWH.

Week 2: Assertion: Among the logical consequences of the adoption of monotheism is an unanswerable conundrum: if YHWH is the only cosmic power, then where does evil come from? We'll prefer the term "cosmic monism" to monotheism because it focuses attention on the single extra-natural force believed to be responsible for historical events. Also, it contrasts nicely with "cosmic dualism" which was the solution to the conundrum.

Week 3: Assertion: The prophets' description of divine justice, that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished in this life, simply ran out of

steam (that is, it was widely seen to be false). We'll look at the Book of Job as a *cri de coeur* in response to the resulting vacuum.

Week 4: Assertion: **Satan, an immortal soul, heaven and hell, and resurrection all emerged in the last two centuries BCE and are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible** (save for Daniel ch7-12). We'll survey the Hebrew Bible for its mentions of a second antagonistic force and discover that later Christian interpreters had to stretch to see a talking snake as a personification of evil and we'll see the basis for the Jewish notion of *yetzer hara* (the "evil inclination"). We'll also look at *sheol*, where Israelites went following death. SGMs are invited to contribute any further biblical references to the ideas said above to be absent in the Hebrew Bible.

Week 5: Assertion: Satan solved the fatal flaw; the soul and the afterlife solved the puzzle of when divine justice could be expected if not in this life; and a general resurrection of the deceased solved the problem of how judgment was to be rendered to them once YHWH reclaimed control of the cosmos. These were all views adopted by Jewish apocalypticism, a sectarian minority which included John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul.

Week 6: Assertion: Rabbinic Judaism effectively ignored Jewish apocalypticism, considering it to be the aberration it was; the problem of evil remains unsolved. Christianity declared cosmic dualism to be a heresy but fashioned Satan, a fallen angel created by God, as the antagonistic force (*viz.*, the effective equivalent).

By the end, we'll have good reasons to find the thesis of the study group persuasive or not, with some fun along the way. (The only major Christian idea we'll ignore is original sin (not in any way Jewish!): don't get me started!)

A note about style:

Every study group has different expectations of SGMs. Because I want no one to be disappointed, let me spell out what sort of experience you can expect. The thesis for the study group has been devised by me and I know of no similar assertion in the biblical literature. This means, among other things, that it's a conjecture which must be made persuasive by the presentation of evidence which supports it. As for every conjecture, there is evidence which undermines its persuasiveness and I will report what I know but I also hope the SGMs will challenge the thesis with whatever evidence they can cite.

The readings in preparation for class will be biblical texts and some secondary material. You'll be expected to have completed it so that we can have an

informed discussion. The emphasis will be on the presentation of persuasive reasons for your conclusions.

I'll try my best to present the material in a clear and organized manner. My habit is to prepare a set of slides containing the questions we'll discuss and then limit discussion to the question being projected at the moment. There will of course be designated times for questions or comments on any topic. I'm grateful at any time to hear suggestions for how the study group could be improved and hope that you won't hesitate to tell me your opinions.

A note about the books:

There aren't any. The readings will be posted on this course website and the Canvas version at HILR.