

# The Fruits of Monotheism

## HILR; Fall 2018

### Welcome Letter

Welcome to The Fruits of Monotheism!

I've come up with a new way to describe the course!

Where did the worldview of Christianity (which is to say, Western Civilization) come from? A common answer is that, since Jesus was an observant Jew, it came from Judaism. But there's a problem: for the two hundred years preceding Jesus, there were many Judaisms (just as, after him, there were many Christianities). From Josephus, we know about the four Jewish sects he described but, for our purposes, we're interested in the less distinct group who wrote and preserved the texts now described by scholars with the label "Jewish Apocalypticism": Daniel ch7-12 written in 164 BCE (and last-written of the canon) along with other non-canonical texts written from 250 BCE to 100 CE.

This group is labeled "sectarian" because its understanding of the world differed dramatically from the traditional biblical view. For example, it was convinced that there was a second force antagonistic to YHWH which was having a highly destructive impact on the history of Israel. In part for that reason, and also because the prophets' claim that YHWH rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked seemed clearly not borne out by experience, they also believed that divine justice was to be expected not in this life but as the result of a judgment of merit in the future (but immanent) end times, when many righteous Jews will have died.

Our job as a study group is to discover why these deviant views became popular and how they played out in the early history of Christianity. My claim is the divergence was prompted by the shift from monolatry to monotheism following the exile and by the similarly new expectation that divine justice should be expected on a personal level (in addition to the community level, as tradition had it). A major expression of the "crisis" brought on by monotheism is the Book of Job.

As an aside, let me say that there are two fundamental aspects of Christianity as we know it that are unrelated to Judaism. The most important is the contribution of Paul (and was later reflected in the Gospel of John): that salvation depended on holding a particular belief in the role of Jesus. In no aspect of Judaism is it significant what one believes; one's membership in Israel and one's righteousness depends on one's participation in the ritual traditions and obedience to the commandments. Period.

The other fundamental aspect was the contribution of Augustine: the notion of original sin has no Jewish antecedents but is certainly central to much Christian theology. So, while we'll recognize that these later developments had their own consequences for the Christian worldview, they are not in our sights.

We'll focus on the origins of cosmic dualism (Satan), the resulting need for a definitive showdown (the Battle of Armageddon; the Last Judgment), and the system of post-death rewards and punishments (heaven and hell) developed by apocalypticists. (I hope I don't need to repeat that they were Jewish!)

I've spelled out our task in order to convince you that we'll be dealing with ideas which developed over many centuries (500 BCE to 100 BCE) and that we won't have time to place them in context. Therefore, I want to suggest two ways in which you can deepen your overall understanding and therefore have a framework within which to put our discussions.

First, it's really helpful to have a clear understanding of the major eras in the history of Israel, particularly from the exile onward. To learn this at the highest level, I suggest that you memorize the dates and events shown on this timeline: [ruml.com/thehebrewbible/timelines/overview.html](http://ruml.com/thehebrewbible/timelines/overview.html). Hover your cursor over each era for the events. Here's a printable version of the timeline: [ruml.com/fruitsofmonotheism/pdfs/01FullTextOverviewTimeline.pdf](http://ruml.com/fruitsofmonotheism/pdfs/01FullTextOverviewTimeline.pdf).

Second, it's really useful to understand what we know about the historical Jesus and for that goal nothing beats Bart Ehrman's "Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium" (1999; accounts for the title!). Although you might wonder about reading an entire book to prepare, you'll find it thoroughly engrossing and very well written; an amazing collection of the things one needs to know as background to the course. (I would however advise you to skip Chapter One which appears to be an anomalous insertion required by the publisher's marketing department!) At Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Apocalyptic-Prophet-New-Millennium/dp/019512474X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Apocalyptic-Prophet-New-Millennium/dp/019512474X/ref=sr_1_1)

Finally, we'll be focussed on the Book of Job for an entire session but the whole book is too long an assignment for one week. If you'd like a full appreciation of this text, read it now. It's a difficult text to translate (many words which appear in the Hebrew Bible only once here) and it's been badly mangled in transmission. The Jewish Study Bible has a fine translation and Robert Alter's is highly regarded.

Of course, I'd be happy to hear any questions (or comments) you have about the course!

Please respond to this email (to confirm that I have your correct address) by telling me briefly about your background (if any) in biblical or historical study. Many thanks!