

The Fruits of Monotheism

Week 2: November 12, 2018

Monotheism and Theodicy

Having gotten our historical bearings and looked at some biblical passages suggesting monolatry, we now consider the triumph of monotheism. What distinguishes monotheism from polytheism? Does it prohibit multiple supernatural beings? What's the nature of evil? Is it satisfactory to see evil as the consequence of the choices humans make in their behavior?

Reading:

Additional expressions of monolatry:

Psalms 81:10-11 ¹⁰You shall have no foreign god, you shall not bow to an alien god. ¹¹I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

Deuteronomy 4:15-20. ¹⁵For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—¹⁶ not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, ¹⁷ the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, ¹⁸ the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. ¹⁹ And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the LORD your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; ²⁰but you the LORD took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case.”

Assertions of monotheism:

Isaiah 43:10-12. ¹⁰My witnesses are you—declares the LORD— My servant, whom I have chosen. To the end that you ^bmay take thought, And believe

in Me, And understand that I am He: Before Me no god was formed, And after Me none shall exist— ¹¹None but me, the LORD; Beside Me, none can grant triumph. ¹²I alone foretold the triumph And I brought it to pass; I announced it, And no strange god was among you. So you are My witnesses—declares the LORD—And I am God.”

Isaiah 44:6-10. “⁶Thus said the LORD, the King of Israel, Their Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last, And there is no god but Me. ⁷ [†]Who like Me can announce, Can foretell it—and match Me thereby? Even as I told the future to an ancient people, So let him foretell coming events to them. ⁸Do not be frightened, do not be shaken! Have I not from of old predicted to you? I foretold, and you are My witnesses. Is there any god, then, but Me? “There is no other rock; I know none!” ⁹The makers of idols All work to no purpose; And the things they treasure Can do no good, As they themselves can testify. They neither look nor think, And so they shall be shamed. ¹⁰Who would fashion a god Or cast a statue That can do no good?”

Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 60-62 [[pdf](#)]

As difficult as it may be to do so, you *must* absorb the idea described here that religion prior to Christianity (and Judaism afterwards) had nothing to do with belief.

Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 13-17 [[pdf](#)]

A very quick but useful enumeration of the events from 587 BCE to 135 CE.

Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 20-24 [[pdf](#)]

A summary of the changes from pre-exilic practice during the second temple period.

Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 80-87 [[pdf](#)]

An excellent discussion of the second temple conceptions of God arrayed along four axes.

Background for Hayes:

Genesis 6:1-8. ¹When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, ²the divine beings [KJV: “the sons of God”] saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them.—³The LORD said, “My breath shall not abide ^εin man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.”—⁴It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.

⁵The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. ⁶And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. ⁷The LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.” ⁸But Noah found favor with the LORD.

Christine Hayes, *Kaufmann on Monotheism*, transcript of lecture 2 of Yale Open Course ([link](#)) “Introduction to the Old Testament” [[pdf](#)]

This excerpt from Prof Hayes’s excellent Yale course is central to our understanding of monotheism. Please read it carefully and be prepared to ask about any aspect you find puzzling.

Christine Hayes, *Evil in Genesis 1*, transcript of lecture 3 of Yale Open Course “Introduction to the Old Testament” [[pdf](#)]

Expresses a notion of evil derived from Genesis chapter one; is this enough?

[*optional*] Richard Elliot Friedman, *Exodus*, p. 149-195 [[pdf](#)]

Yet another description of the emergence of monotheism with the differences that: 1) the conversion is said to have been accompanied by the explanation that the other gods had died; and 2) Friedman puts the general acceptance of monotheism at a much earlier date than other scholars. On the latter point, what’s his evidence and is it persuasive?

Prior to page 149, the book has described the general consensus among a substantial fraction of scholars that the Israelites were settled in Canaan worshipping a deity called El for a long time prior to the arrival from Egypt of a small group (later called the Levites, who had no tribal territory but served all the tribes as priests) which worshipped a god called YHWH. This migration around the twelfth century BCE is said to be the basis for the story told in Exodus.

For class discussion:

The Problem of Evil

The monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, believe that there exists a single omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God.

The problem of evil asks whether both such a God and evil can coexist. The logic can be stated:

1. God exists.
2. God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient.
3. An omnipotent being has the power to prevent that evil from coming into existence.
4. An omnibenevolent being would want to prevent all evils.
5. An omniscient being knows every way in which evils can come into existence, and knows every way in which those evils could be prevented.
6. A being who knows every way in which an evil can come into existence, who is able to prevent that evil from coming into existence, and who wants to do so, would prevent the existence of that evil.
7. If there exists an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient God, then no evil exists.
8. Evil exists (logical contradiction).

In common parlance, theodicy is often used to refer to what I've called the problem of evil. Technically, however, a theodicy is a response to the problem of evil which explains how God and evil can coexist.

The idea we want to focus on is not exactly the problem of evil which is too abstract. Instead of being philosophers, we put ourselves in the position of post-exilic Judeans who have just been told that there are no other gods than YHWH. How does this monotheistic view change the way they view the world? A major change is that the traditional understanding of the Babylonian conquest (or any conquest of one group by another) is no longer available: it cannot be the case that the god of the Persians was more powerful than YHWH and vanquished him. In fact, the only available explanation is that the defeat was the will of YHWH and the question

remaining is why YHWH would wish that result. This was a major, major problem.

The single biblical acknowledgment of the logic of monotheism (that God must be the origin of evil): Isaiah 45:5-7.

⁵I am the LORD and there is none else;
Beside Me, there is no god.
I engird you, though you have not known Me,
⁶So that they may know, from east to west,
That there is none but Me.
I am the LORD and there is none else,
⁷I form light and create darkness,
I make weal [i.e., good] and create woe [i.e., evil]—
I the LORD do all these things. [JSB]

⁵ ¶ I *am* the LORD, and *there is* none else, *there is* no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me:
⁶ That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that *there is* none beside me. I *am* the LORD, and *there is* none else.
⁷ I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these *things*. [KJV]