
Review by Larry W. Hurtado (University of Edinburgh)

The stated main concern in this book is when and how Jews and Christians became ‘divided over the understanding of God’s oneness’ (2). McGrath aims to show that this happened ‘significantly later’ than the NT texts, sometime in and after the second century CE. So, throughout the book he argues that the Christian beliefs and practices reflected in NT texts ‘appear to fit nicely within the bounds of Jewish monotheism’, in which particularly various principal-agent figures featured along with God (37).

Chapter 1 introduces readers to some positions and issues in current scholarly discussion about Jewish ‘monotheism’ and earliest Jesus-devotion. Despite the controversies over the term, McGrath judges (rightly in my view) that ‘monotheism’ can be applied to second-temple Judaism, but must be defined with reference to the actual beliefs and practices of that religious setting. In Chapter 2 McGrath considers ‘whether and to what extent Judaism was in fact a monotheistic faith’, and what diversity there may have been in the matter (23). Among important evidence, he cites examples of pagan references to Jewish religion, which agree in describing it as restricting worship to the one God, and as having no cult-images: ‘The sacrificial worship of the one God without images was the make-or-break issue’ (35). He emphasizes, however, that Jewish concern for God’s uniqueness was able otherwise to accommodate ‘significant diversity’ (36).

In Chapter 3 McGrath considers selected passages in Pauline letters (particularly 1 Cor. 8:4-6), challenging claims (e.g., by N. T. Wright) that they reflect a reformulation of Jewish monotheistic faith, a ‘christological monotheism’. McGrath judges instead that Paul’s references to Jesus’ exalted status (e.g., Philip. 2:9-11) all represent noteworthy appropriations of Jewish principal-agent traditions, and that ‘monotheism is preserved’ because Jesus remains subject to God (50). Some of McGrath’s exegetical judgements seem to me forced, e.g., his proposal that Colossians 1:15-20 is ‘simply a poetical way of saying that God’s Wisdom is found in Jesus’, and that the references to Jesus as the agent of creation here may only mean ‘that Jesus is the one through whom God’s new creation takes place’ (46).

In Chapter 4, ‘Monotheism and the Gospel of John’, McGrath contends that ‘John was completely, undeniably, and without reservations a monotheist’ (55).
Whereas, e.g., J.D.G. Dunn and Maurice Casey (for quite different reasons) have argued that in the Gospel of John we first see a fully divine Jesus, and so a significant modification of Jewish beliefs about God, McGrath firmly insists (debatably, in my view), ‘John would not have been regarded by his Jewish contemporaries as having taken “a step too far” beyond the founds of what was acceptable’ within Jewish monotheism of the time (69). In McGrath’s view, the only controversial matter about early Jesus-devotion was the messianic claim. He does not address, however, the lack of evidence that a messianic claim would have been judged as blasphemous, and his handling of the charge of blasphemy against Jesus in John 10:33 that he makes himself God/a god will not persuade many I suspect. It makes more sense to see this passage as a reflection of Jewish charges of blasphemy and making Jesus a god, the Evangelist rejecting the charge and justifying devotion to Jesus as bearing divine status. To be sure, John 9:22 makes the messianic claim the cause of expulsion from ‘the synagogue’. But for the Evangelist it is clear that confessing Jesus as Messiah involves a much more elevated claim involving Jesus’ heavenly origins and sharing in divine glory. In short, in GJohn, ‘Messiah’ carries a super-charged meaning that non-Christian Jews found deeply offensive, even blasphemous.

Chapter 5 addresses ‘monotheism and worship in the book of Revelation’. Here as well, McGrath strives to show that unambiguous cultic worship is directed solely to God, and not ‘transferred’ to Christ (‘the Lamb’, 76). He grants that in Rev. 5:8-14 worship ‘includes the Lamb’, and that in 7:9-17 as well worship is ‘offered to God and the Lamb’, but McGrath then insists that in Revelation ‘God is always either the sole or primary recipient of the worship that is offered’ (73). Yes, in the praise-expression ‘to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb’ (Rev. 5: 13; and similarly in 7:10) God is mentioned first and so may be regarded the ‘primary recipient’. But McGrath fails to recognize that the paradigmatic scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation are utterly unprecedented in the inclusion of Jesus (‘the Lamb’) as co-recipient of the worship offered. Also, the obvious worship setting of these scenes distinguishes the meaning and function of the reverence given to the Lamb from the obeisance to be given to the elect by their opponents promised in 3:9.

McGrath also denies that the scenes in Revelation 19:10 and 22:8 where the angel refuses John’s worship have any special relevance for the christology of Revelation (79). McGrath’s alternate proposal, however, that the angel was not to be worshipped simply because he was a fellow creature fails to engage adequately the
strong cases laid out by Bauckham and Stuckenbruck that these refusal-scenes reflect a motif attested in second-temple Jewish texts emphasizing monotheistic worship, and so the novel inclusion of ‘the Lamb’ with God in scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation is exceptional and highly significant.

In the concluding paragraph of this chapter, McGrath briefly mentions Justin Martyr, claiming that in the Dialogue with Trypho the Jew there is no accusation that Christians ‘had denied or abandoned monotheism’ (80). In a supporting note (123 n. 23) McGrath attempts to support his view with cursory comments about passages in Dialogue, but in Dialogue 38:1 Trypho’s climactic objection is the Christian view that Jesus should be worshipped, and in 64:1 likewise Trypho rejects specifically both the confession and worship of Jesus. Moreover, in Dialogue 65, Trypho’s objection is precisely that God’s glory is not shared with any other, which makes Christian reverence of Jesus an unacceptable violation of God’s uniqueness.

In Chapter 6 McGrath engages critically Alan Segal’s influential study of rabbinic reports of ‘two powers’ heretics, contending that the earliest such heresy is likely the gnostic idea of a separate creator-deity, and that early christological claims are not in view. So (contra Segal), these rabbinic reports do not reflect Jewish concerns about Jesus-devotion being a potential violation of God’s uniqueness. The handling of rabbinic materials is demanding and it will be for Segal and others to respond adequately to McGrath’s argument. In any event, the question as to whether and why earliest Jesus-devotion was objectionable to many Jews does not rest upon this evidence. For a discussion of earliest evidence, see my essay, ‘Early Jewish Opposition to Jesus-Devotion’ in How on Earth did Jesus Become a God? (2005; pp. 152-78) and further references cited there.

Then, in his concluding chapter, McGrath briefly suggests some ‘theological implications’ of his line of argument, but it is not always easy to follow the somewhat sketchy discussion here. The general drift, however, seems to be the rather broad observation that living religious traditions develop and that Christians today should be open to theological developments. For McGrath, the particular relevance appears to be that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be regarded as binding or essential today.

Much of McGrath’s discussion of ancient Jewish tradition and NT christological rhetoric covers ground already familiar in recent scholarship. My 1988 book, One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism, presented the key evidence reviewed again here by McGrath, showing
that second-temple Judaism combined a strong monotheistic stance (especially expressed in restricting worship to the one God) with a readiness to accommodate this or that ‘chief agent’ figure set over all of the divine retinue, and that NT christological rhetoric seems to draw upon this ‘chief agent’ category. That is, Jesus’ significance is rather consistently expressed with reference to God (the Father) in the NT (and in subsequent ‘mainstream’ Christian tradition). This surely reflects the early Christian concern to maintain a ‘monotheistic’ stance within which they situated their remarkable christological claims and devotional practices.

Indeed, features of early christological belief have precedents and parallels in second-temple Jewish tradition, such as Jesus’ role as heavenly intercessor and priest (e.g., Rom. 8:34; John 14:15; Heb. 2:5-18; 4:14-16), his exalted status over God’s heavenly retinue (e.g., Philip. 2:9-11), his leadership of the elect, and, of course, his royal-messianic office. Moreover, Jesus’ humanity is crucial, enabling him to serve as redeemer of the elect, and in his resurrection as the exemplar and guarantee of the full redemption to be theirs as well (1 Cor. 15:20-23; Rom. 8:28-29; Philip.3:20-21).

But McGrath’s inquiry whether the NT shows Jews and Christians parting company over their respective doctrines of God seems to me a bit strangely conceived. Essentially, he looks for indications in the NT that earliest Christians saw themselves as departing from the monotheistic stance of their Jewish religious matrix. Finding none (unsurprisingly), he proceeds to conclude that there was nothing terribly unusual in their Jesus-devotion. There are, however, several problems with this reasoning.

First, why should we expect that early Christians would register their robust devotion to Jesus as a potential threat to God’s uniqueness? It seems to me, instead, that the NT texts affirm an astonishing Jesus-devotion and present it as obedience to God’s unique exaltation of Jesus and God’s requirement that Jesus be included into the devotion given to the one God (e.g., Philip. 2:9-11; John 5:22-23). In short, the NT does not reflect a conscious early Christian departure from a monotheistic stance, but this hardly means what McGrath asserts.

Second, McGrath presumes that the only two options to consider in the NT are either an unremarkable maintenance of, or a departure from, the monotheistic stance reflected in second-temple Jewish texts. He does not consider as another option that early Jesus-devotion might have constituted an innovative development within Jewish monotheistic tradition, in effect a novel kind of monotheistic devotion that included
Jesus as a second, distinguishable figure with an unprecedented place in early Christian devotional practice, and yet Jesus revered and defined in relation to the one God. I am convinced that this is a much more accurate characterization of what we see reflected in the NT, initially a novel ‘mutation’ within (and then alongside) ancient Jewish monotheistic practice and belief. It appears that non-Christian Jews often saw this Jesus-devotion as offensive and endangering God’s uniqueness; earliest believers, however, insisted that they were not religious renegades but were simply obeying God’s requirement that Jesus be included as recipient of their cultic devotion.

Repeatedly, McGrath also asserts that the absence in Paul’s letters of any defence of his Jesus-devotion shows that it was not controversial for Jews outside Christian circles. But this argument rests on the dubious assumption that Paul would have used his letters to defend the Christian gospel against Jewish critique. Instead, however, as should be obvious, Paul’s letters essentially address intramural matters that had arisen within the churches to which he wrote. So, e.g., his defence of the terms of his gentile mission (e.g., in Galatians) was directed against criticism by some other Jewish believers. That Paul felt no need to defend Jesus-devotion to fellow believers scarcely counts as evidence that it was uncontroversial in the eyes of non-believers.

McGrath contends that Jesus became ‘fully divine’ and the ‘parting of the ways’ between Jews and Christianity over their beliefs about God happened only in the second century and thereafter, and he ascribes all this to the emerging doctrine of divine creation ‘ex nihilo’. This, he asserts, involved a much firmer and clearer dividing line between God and the creation, and so required Christians to choose whether to place the Logos/Son either on the creation-side or the God-side of that line, e.g., Arius choosing the former and Nicaea the latter (92). But this rather simple cause-effect claim about the origins of Trinitarian theology is not given the supporting evidence needed to make it persuasive. Cf., e.g., Eric Osborn, *The Emergence of Christian Theology* (1993); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (1988). To be sure, the doctrinal explorations of the second century CE and thereafter that led to the doctrine of the Trinity progressively involved the appropriation (and innovative adaptation) of Greek philosophical categories. But the real impetus that drove and significantly shaped this exploration was the devotion to Jesus as uniquely sharing divine glory which we see rather fully in operation in our earliest NT texts.
McGrath agrees with other recent studies that in the ancient setting worship was the most sensitive matter for Jews. But in his discussion of what place the exalted Jesus held in early Christian worship, again and again he simply notes that the Greek verb *proskynein* can have a variety of connotations, not only cultic worship, and that prostration before a figure (including Jesus) did not necessarily mean worship offered as to a deity. These are correct observations, but not really the point under debate, which is, instead, the full nature of early Jesus-devotion. Over some twenty years I have repeatedly specified the constellation of ways in which Jesus functioned programmatically in earliest Christian devotional practice, contending that in that historical setting these practices collectively comprised a novel and highly significant development that I have labelled a ‘binitarian’ devotional pattern. By this term I mean that in the NT the worship of God is expressed and conducted typically with reference to (and inclusive of) Jesus. McGrath does not really engage these specific phenomena, however, which makes his attempt to challenge my view both unpersuasive and somewhat frustrating.

Several times McGrath contends that in second-temple Judaism sacrifice was the crucial test of worship (although Daniel 3:1-18 shows that *proskynesis* itself in the cultic setting could carry equivalent meaning), and so he reasons that the absence of reference to sacrifice offered to Jesus in the NT means that he really was not worshipped. But, of course, literal sacrifices did not feature at all in early Christian worship gatherings, so on McGrath’s argument one would have to conclude that early Christians did not worship God (the Father) either! Also, McGrath does not notice that in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 Paul directly compares and contrasts the (sacrificial) worship of ‘idols’ with participation in the Christian cult-meal, and that Paul appears to make Jesus the ‘Lord’ who functions here like a cult-deity with his ‘cup’ and (sacrificial) ‘table’.

Instead of asking when Jews and Christians parted over the doctrine of God, the more productive questions are how earliest Christians expressed their devotion to Jesus, and what this represented in that historical context. Unfortunately, as noted already, McGrath does not deal with the full range of relevant phenomena of Jesus-devotion, focusing almost entirely on christological beliefs and so not doing justice to devotional practices. As I’ve indicated already, earliest Christians did not see themselves as departing from the traditional Jewish concern for the one God. But it seems to me that in the historical context of second-temple Judaism their beliefs and
practices together comprise a novel and unprecedented form of monotheistic devotion, in which Jesus held a programmatic place. Indeed, for earliest Christians reflected in the NT their Jesus-devotion was constitutive for their worship of the one God. See now my book, *God in New Testament Theology* (Abingdon Press, 2010).

Although McGrath’s discussion has some significant shortcomings, he conducts it with admirable cordiality toward those with whom he disagrees. Also, he largely succeeds in making the demanding issues involved accessible to interested readers beyond the circle of fellow scholars in the field. There are also commendably few typos. Twenty-six pages of notes, an eighteen-page bibliography, and indexes of modern authors and ancient texts complete the volume. All those interested in the vital issues addressed will find this slim book a stimulating read. In spite of McGrath’s energetic efforts here to make the Jesus-devotion in the NT appear uncontroverisal and unremarkable, many will likely judge that the Jesus-devotion reflected in the NT in which Jesus is programmatically linked with God in worship and belief represents a unique (in its time) and highly significant variant-form of monotheistic faith.