

# *The Only True God*

by James F. McGrath

A Review by Barbara Buzzard



As stated on the book jacket, “*The Only True God* explores the extent to which Christianity began to move in new directions in the earliest period of its history...James McGrath argues that even the most developed Christologies in the New Testament fit within the context of first-century Jewish ‘monotheism.’ In doing so, he pinpoints more precisely when the parting of the ways took place over God’s oneness.”

At this point, I think we should be alerted to two phrases which could signal a great and dangerous divide: “move in new directions” and “parting of the ways.” Unless Christianity can trace its beliefs back to the early church, its authority is self imposed and therefore most questionable. While moving in new directions may sound innocent enough, once the golden thread of Messiahship being traced back to descendance from David is broken, all connections with the parent faith are at least suspicious and at worst bastardized.

McGrath writes: “Monotheism has also been at the focus of numerous debates, in particular between Christian Trinitarians on the one hand, and other monotheists, in particular Jews and Muslims, on the other. Questions that tend to be asked in the context of such debates include whether Christians are in fact truly monotheists at all or whether, on closer inspection, they prove to be ‘tritheists’ whose commitment to monotheism is at best questionable.” On page 2 of his book McGrath states that it is not clear when and how the parting of the ways took place, but he certainly admits that it did take place. Between page 2 and the last page McGrath details historic data about this great divide. He sets the stage: “Many readers less familiar with recent scholarly debates on this subject may well take it for granted that early Jews and Christians considered themselves to be monotheists — and may likewise take it for granted that Jews did not consider Christians to be such because of the beliefs they held about Jesus.” McGrath speaks of a “*development on the part of early Christian theology away from its roots in Jewish monotheism,*” and he feels that the word “departure” was an accurate one to describe Christianity leaving the strict monotheism of its Jewish parent religion.

Serious Bible students will already have their hackles up at several of the terms used and will perhaps be thinking that a more Biblical word would be apostasy. Note this: “Early Christians made innovations that moved them not away from

monotheism but toward *a different sort of monotheism, one redefined* so as to incorporate the exalted status of Jesus.”

McGrath agrees that a *mutation* took place in early Christianity and states that “Thus Christianity’s ‘worship’ of Jesus is a mutation within early Jewish and Christian monotheism” and he actually feels that this mutation led to the “production of a new species (Trinitarian monotheism)”!

While McGrath defends mutations, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* gives as one meaning: “a hypothetical sudden fundamental change in heredity believed to result in the production of new individuals that are basically *unlike* their parents.” Good thing or bad thing?

McGrath agrees that *earliest* Christianity did not depart from Jewish adherence to the idea of one God alone. However, this statement and the reasoning surrounding it make one wonder if he is not saying that later Christianity *did!* We are reminded of John 17:3. He then explains that he feels that the most sensible view is that “the early Christian view of Jesus represented an *adaptation* within Judeo-Christian monotheism rather than a departure from it.” (Hmm. I guess that adaptation would allow one to alter numbers.)

McGrath is very keen that we understand the various types of monotheism: rhetorical, creational, liturgical, and inclusive or exclusive, but as he says, “Early Christians do not engage in debates about whether God is one, and they often cite the oneness of God as a presupposition.”

McGrath is also keen to make it understood that it is just not that simple in terms of comparing monotheists to polytheists; that monotheism occurs in varying degrees and changes over the course of history. I personally remain unconvinced of this angle, remembering how stunningly clear it was to Jesus, who was a genius and would have made note of any vagaries and inconsistencies. He proclaimed loud and long that only his Father was God, a simple enough proposition to me. Please compare it with this quotation from McGrath’s book. He quotes Paula Fredriksen: “While not every ancient polytheist was a monotheist, all ancient monotheists were, by our measure, polytheists.” McGrath balances this by saying: “But in emphasizing this diversity, it would be wrong to neglect the underlying unity evidenced throughout available sources regarding Hellenistic Judaism, namely, the core belief that only one God is to be offered sacrificial worship, the form of worship par excellence in the ancient world.”

McGrath explains that “In the view of the majority of New Testament scholars, in 1 Cor. 8:6 Paul has ‘*split* the Shema,’ the traditional affirmation of Israel’s faith in one God, *in order to include* Jesus Christ within it.” Emphasis mine and apologies to those who haven’t seen before how the Shema is treated (abused?) by some, a fact without parallel in Jewish literature. He quotes New Testament scholar Tom Wright who affirms that this verse “functions as a Christian *redefinition* of the Jewish

confession of faith.” Thankfully, our author sees through this and finds that “it does not do justice to the nature of the Shema itself...The fact of the matter is that Paul does not say that there is one God who is both Father and Son; he says rather that there is *one God and also one Lord*. The fact that a human figure is called ‘Lord’ does not of course imply for Paul that God is thereby divested of his lordship.” McGrath then goes on to present evidence to challenge the popular notion that Jesus has been included *inside the Shema* and gives an alternate understanding that Jesus is *alongside* the Shema. He notes that the word Lord “has a range of meanings and nuances running all the way from ‘sir’ to ‘Yahweh.’”

In a fascinating look into Paul’s theology McGrath notes that Paul had to defend his new Christian views against his former Jewish views. How very odd that there is no record of an enormous battle between himself and the Jews with regard to monotheism, if indeed he had departed from belief in one God and one God only. That there is not a heated dialogue similar to his battle in relation to the law is indeed something to be pondered. McGrath compares it to the dog that did not bark in the Sherlock Holmes story — a dead giveaway. McGrath states: “We have seen much evidence indicating that the language applied to Jesus in the Pauline letters would not have involved a departure from the Jewish monotheism of the time.” He then goes on to say that Paul’s use of “Lord” as applied to Jesus can easily be misunderstood and he argues that “it was not felt to be incompatible with monotheism for God’s supreme agent to bear God’s name as part of his empowerment to serve in this capacity.” The important point here is that to be *given* a name (as angels were) is not to be *confused* with the real holder of that name.

McGrath is honest in making this very telling statement: “One of the criticisms often made of the doctrine of the Trinity as formulated by the Council of Nicaea, or the doctrine of the person of Christ as formulated at Chalcedon, is that these doctrines attempt to say two things at once that cannot be logically held together. Phrases like ‘three persons, one substance’ and ‘one person, two natures’ stretch human language to breaking point.”

James McGrath’s description of agency is superb, simply that “God is regularly depicted as sharing his sovereignty with an appointed agent.” This gives the agent (Jesus) the right to carry out divine functions (forgiveness), be depicted in divine language and bear the divine name. What an absolute breakthrough in understanding this can be!

“That Paul’s application of the divine name ‘Lord’ and of Yahweh texts from the Hebrew Bible to Jesus is intended to present Jesus as God’s agent, who shares in God’s rule and authority, becomes clear when one considers Romans 14:9-11, where Paul takes up the language of Isaiah 45:23 once again, but here emphasizes that the throne of judgment is ultimately God’s even though Christ is the Lord through whom judgment is carried out. In 1 Cor. 15:27-28, Paul makes clear the roles played by

Jesus and God. Jesus is the ‘(son of) man’ to whom all things are to be subjected. That is to say, Jesus is the representative of humankind whom God has chosen to be his agent and mediator of judgment, and through whom he intends to bring all things into subjection to himself.”

This is crystal clear and merits many bravos. It is also enough to get McGrath labeled as a heretic because all through this description of Jesus, he did *not* say that Jesus is God, as one is required to do in evangelical circles. This quotation continues and is brilliant: “Thus however united and ‘at one’ with God the agent may be, the two remain ultimately distinguishable for Paul. Monotheism is preserved not because Jesus is absorbed into God or included in the divine identity but because even though Jesus reigns over absolutely everything else on God’s behalf, God himself is not subjected to Christ, but Christ is subjected to God.” The last word on this incredibly important subject of agency: “The authority conveyed to the agent shows both the importance of the agent to God and the confidence God has in the agent to wield that power.”

McGrath goes against the grain of orthodoxy when he says: “Paul’s use of Yahweh texts in connection with Jesus, while distinctive and thought-provoking, would not have represented an attempt to redefine monotheism, and thus should not be read in light of the later developments in Christology to which Paul’s writings, in their own way, contributed....Paul keeps the ultimate and incontrovertible boundary marker of Jewish monotheism in place.”

And shockingly, of the Apostle John, McGrath says: “In terms of Jewish monotheism as it existed in the first century, the evidence suggests that John was completely, undeniably, and without reservations a monotheist” (from McGrath’s earlier work, *John’s Apologetic Christology*). He brings to bear the weight of C.K. Barrett’s logic with respect to John 8:28 where Barrett points out that “it is intolerable to suggest that John presents Jesus as saying, ‘I am Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, and as such I do exactly what I am told.’”

Another shock: this very popular writer and theologian actually says that John 20:28 is the only certain reference to the human person of Jesus (rather than the preexistent Word) as “God.” McGrath surveyed enough evidence to convince him that it was quite possible to give allegiance to the one true God and yet use language of the Son as God’s supreme agent. He summarizes: Jesus “is allowed to share God’s throne, titles, and other prerogatives...Thus, against Dunn, and the majority of New Testament scholars, I am forced to conclude that John would not have been regarded by his Jewish contemporaries as having taken a ‘step too far’ beyond the bounds of what was acceptable within the context of Jewish allegiance to the one true God and him alone.”

Along with the wonderful testimony as given above, McGrath weakens his case with many cautionary words and phrases: compromise, abandoned, redefinition,

expansion, appending, additional, drift, rift, departure, adaptation, etc. James McGrath has used these words to explain what he sees as justifiable advances in the faith, but I fear that many are weasel words. They do not describe nor accurately portray Jesus' Truth. McGrath said early on that the "New Testament sources appear to fit nicely within the bounds of Jewish monotheism." He stated that the Jews who reserved worship for the Most High God displayed and constituted the most highly advanced form of monotheism in existence. In truth, I am spectacularly disappointed with his conclusions. He puts forth two models: one being a parting of the ways, the other a more developed Christianity. He speaks of monotheists who were willing to give up their lives rather than compromise their devotion to one God alone.

Then this shocker: "It is of course true that, within the course of the next few centuries, Christianity's monotheism would develop into what we today know as trinitarianism." This, after stating that 1 Corinthians 8:6 was a *statement of faith* for early Christians, contrasted with pagan polytheism. This, after highlighting the unadulterated monotheism of both Paul and John. This, after not being able to defend the logic of the Trinity with its attempts to say two things at once. As he said, it stretched human language to its breaking point. I would submit the possibility that the faith has in fact, departed from its roots and is no longer true to its parents' DNA . McGrath puts this thought forward: "Neither these Jewish beliefs nor even those found in the New Testament writings can be said to express the fully developed doctrine of the Trinity current in most branches of Christianity." I would have thought this to be in clear opposition to his conclusion.

I fear that McGrath has fallen into the trap of saying two things at once that cannot be logically held together. He argues that the *invention* (my word) of the Trinity was a good thing. I am left gasping. It does not follow, nor does it bear witness to the very logic the author has otherwise urged upon us.

McGrath defends himself: "Some may assume that because I have insisted on the monotheistic character of early Christianity, I am in some way challenging the legitimacy of trinitarian theology. This does not follow. It is certainly true that the earliest Christians were not trinitarians in the modern sense." (He argues that neither were they monotheists in the modern sense.) McGrath tragically, in my opinion, leaves his readers with a God Who is not the same God as the One Jesus worshipped.

Respectfully submitted,  
Barbara Buzzard