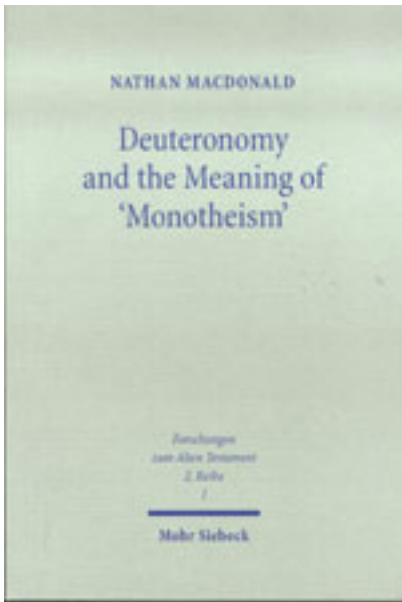


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MacDonald, Nathan

Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism

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This book is a revised version of a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Durham in September 2001. According to the author “The concerns of this thesis are the meaning and significance of YHWH’s oneness in Deuteronomy, the contemporary category of monotheism and the relation between them” (1).

The first chapter, “The Origin and Meaning of ‘Monotheism,’ ” deals with the meaning of the term *monotheism* and the history of its use in the Hebrew Bible. The chapter opens with the first use of this term by Henry More in 1660, because the author believes that it shared many features with later uses. The sketch of developments after More is brief and representative. It includes Kuenen, Wellhausen, Albright, Kaufmann, von Rad, Gnuse, and Dietrich, whose views problematized the reading of the biblical text, because they were influenced by the Enlightenment. The author is mainly influenced by the efforts of Sawyer, Clements, and Sanders to solve the problem of biblical monotheism in the canonical text. Their work convinced him to base his own approach on one book in the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy, which includes reflections on YHWH’s oneness. Subsequently, the remaining five chapters of the book are devoted to an examination of YHWH’s oneness in Deuteronomy, focusing particularly on chapters 1–11, the framework to the code of law.

The second chapter examines the Shema (Deut 6:4–9), the first commandment (Deut 5:6–7), and the statements of Deut 4 (4:35, 39) and 32:39. The main question is whether these texts are intended to deny the existence of other gods, while according to Macdonald they assume their existence. The third chapter analyzes the meaning and the significance of the command to love YHWH. In this context the command of the *herem* (Deut 7) is described as the natural expression of this love. The fourth chapter examines different ways for remembering YHWH, and the texts under consideration are Deut 6:6–9; 8; 9; 32. In the fifth chapter the theme of Israel as YHWH's chosen people is the main issue, and the examined texts are mainly Deut 7; 9; and 10 in comparison with Deut 4 and the Song of Moses (Deut 32). The sixth chapter explains the connection between the prohibition of idolatry and the oneness of YHWH and how Deut 4 provides the rationale for this prohibition.

In the conclusion MacDonald presents the results of the exegetical examination of Deuteronomy as a contribution to the modern understanding of “monotheism.” According to him, “many of the descriptions of Israelite monotheism reflect the intellectualization implicit in the term ‘monotheism’ and are strongly informed by Enlightenment ideas of God.... Themes such as love towards YHWH, the demanding nature of remembering YHWH, the problem of the human propensity to idolatry can again be seen as central to Deuteronomy’s affirmation that YHWH is one” (4). In other words, “Deuteronomy does not, at any point, present a doctrine of God that may be describes as ‘monotheism’. That it affirms that YHWH is one, who is unique, and there is no other for Israel is undeniable” (209).

MacDonald’s research seems to me, in some way, as a play of definitions. The argument that the biblical concept of monotheism differs from later use of the same term reminds me of the argument that modern democracy differs from ancient Greek democracy. No one expects these concepts to be identical. Terms and concepts change through the ages, and although biblical morality is unlike modern Western morality, it does not mean that there was no morality in ancient Israel. In other words, YHWH’s oneness is the beginning of monotheism. When Deut 4 describes YHWH alone as God, when it states that there is none beside him, when this God is described as the only one in the universe, in heaven above and on earth below—it is monotheism, even though Deuteronomy contains other texts that reflect henotheism. To interpret these verses (Deut 4:35, 39) not as a monotheistic statement of the nonexistence of other deities but as a henotheistic one, namely, that YHWH is merely the only God of Israel, strikes me strange and tendentious. When the writer claims to possess the truth and with no foundation of detailed exegetical work suggests that “it may be asked whether what has been shown to be true of Deuteronomy may also be true of the rest of the Old Testament, including the priestly material and Isaiah 40–55” (209), I have no alternative but to assume that the primary

aim of this work has been to take the idea of monotheism from the ancient Israelite culture. This does not mean that I am interested in the possession and the attribution of monotheism to the Hebrew culture, which I believe to have been a historical victim of this idea. I am, however, interested in objective exegesis that adopts the *peshat* (literal meaning). The dictionary of Second Isaiah does not include the term monotheism, but if the following phrasing, “I am the Lord and there is none else; Beside me, there is no god” (45:5), is not an attempt to declare it, what then is monotheism?