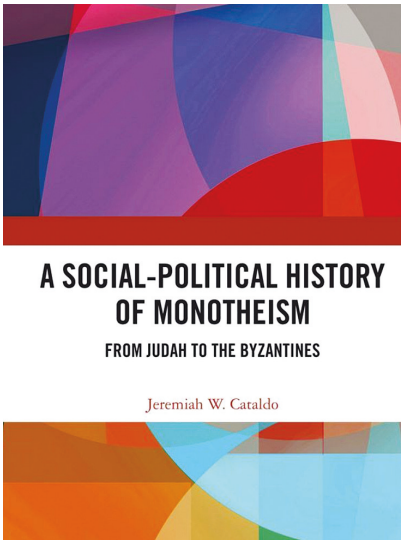
A Social-Political History of Monotheism



CATALDO, JEREMIAH W. (2018). *A Social-Political History of Monotheism: From Judah to the Byzantines*. London & New York: Routledge. xi, 241 pp., 45,00€ [ISBN 978-1-1382-2280-9].

ROBERTO ALCIATI
Università di Firenze
roberto.alciati@unifi.it

As the a. of the book writes at the beginning of the *Preface*, "enterprising is a word that comes to mind when [somebody] thinks of monotheism" (p. vi). This is true and probably the reason why he continues by saying that the present is built "on the foundations" laid out in two previous works, *Breaking Monotheism: Yehud and the Material Formation of Monotheistic Identity* (London, Bloombsbury, 2012) and *Biblical Terror: Why Law and Restoration in the Bible Depend Upon Fear* (New York, Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016). It could be a trilogy, but the a. does not say so explicitly. Since, however, there is a close dependence, it is likely that many theoretical questions relating to the concept of monotheism have already been dealt with in those volumes. In keeping with the *Preface* of the book examined here, we read that fear and conflict must be considered the driving forces behind the development of

monotheism through history. The reason for establishing monotheism is the creation (and then protection) of boundaries between the known (identity) and the unknown ("everything else that doesn't fit within the community's prescribed boundaries" [*ibid.*]). This is the case with Judeo-Christianity between the 6th c. BCE and the 4th c. CE. To conduct such an analysis in 227 pages is far from easy, and it is inevitable that the a. has made choices that might seem arbitrary or too selective. However, the book has a great merit: to present a clear and easy-to-handle history of that particular period in which two religious systems confront each other and clash for the definition of new theologies. This process – and this is the central thesis of the book – does not *also* have a socio-political aspect, but *is* constitutively socio-political.

This clarification is the subject of the first chapter ("Understanding monotheism as a cultural institution"), to be read, more properly, as the theoretical introduction to the entire book. Here the a. dwells on his idea of monotheism, without avoiding some references to the more general concept of religion. Monotheism needs an analysis which goes beyond "religious agenda" and with a special focus "on those social and political forces that shaped it" (p. 2). In other words, monotheism should be investigated as any other product of a cultural system and as something related to the social world which believers live in. To do this, Peter Berger, Alain Badiou and Jonathan Z. Smith are very useful. The same cannot be said for Robert N. Bellah and his re-discovery of the axial age, because any interpretation that wants "to save religion from social constructionism" is completely useless (p. 4). At the same time, however, the typological approach proper to the social sciences must be reconciled with an "effective social-scientist analysis" focussed on the historical framework within which this approach is elaborated and shaped (p. 13).

This first introductory chapter is followed by nine others: chapters 2 to 6 are dedicated to Judaism; the eighth, ninth and tenth chapters are dedicated to Christianity; the seventh deals instead mostly with the relations between the two religions.

The second chapter, entitled "The prophetic paradigm", opens with a critique of the presumed uniqueness of the biblical prophet, preferring to link this figure to historical periods characterized by social and political tumultuousness (p. 27). It is the context that makes a prophet trustworthy. This simple statement has important consequences in the history of religions, because it denies the opinion (still possible fifty years ago) that biblical or Israelite prophecy had no historical counterpart. But in the history of Israel there are not only the prophets. As the a. shows in the third chapter ("Yahweh, the god of monarchy"), the prophetic judgment goes hand in hand with the political action of the kings. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the a. focuses his attention on the biblical books of Kings and Joshua, that is two texts where prophecy appears in a predominantly royal setting. The destruction of the Northern

Kingdom implies both a material and an ideological war, with which the reign of Israel tried to replace the many existing gods with Yahweh. In this sense, narrative accounts are supporting Yahweh as a symbol of political centralization (p. 53).

Following the chronology, in the fourth chapter ("The emergence of monotheism"), we move on to the moment in which the Jewish monotheism finally takes shape. The chapter starts with a theoretical clarification about the word "monotheism": the a. wants to avoid any western (and imperialist) interpretation of ancient monotheism and an evolutionary approach (p. 68). The reason for the success of Jewish monotheism is instead to be found in the need for community and territorial unity, as well evidenced by Ezra's prayer, where, the god and the king are the protagonists (pp. 77-78). The fifth ("The Maccabean revolt") and the sixth chapter ("Sectarianism and political strife in response to imperial rule") add documentary material to the thesis of the centrality of the community via monotheism. The several battles fought by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his successors against the Jewish rebels (the Maccabees or Hasmonaeans) until the Roman took control in 63 BCE, with the multi-layered identity of the Jewish community, would prove the necessity to establish and defend the borders of a too much liquid identity. According to the a., more than the temple and the restoration of a unified territory, the main pillar around which Jews could gather was the religious law and its interpretation: "this is not to say that the Jerusalem temple was not important. […] the temple symbolized something else, something that had a greater possible longevity" (p. 125). Conflicts, both material and ideological, are for the establishment of the "socio-political body collective". This body is represented by the messiah.

This brings us to the seventh chapter ("The punishment of Palestine"), where Christianity appears, or more precisely where the figure of Jesus as the messiah is investigated. The first part contains a brief history of the term "messiah" because of its central role in monotheism (p. 130): the messiah as the anointed one is the figure who insures the stability of the socio-political world and, to be more precise, the only one able to support the autonomy and authority of an Israelite (Judean) kingdom governed by a seed of David (p. 137). When Jesus claimed (or when it was claimed of him) that he was the king of the Judeans, "he was making a political statement rather than a religious one" (p. 150).

This cursory mention of Jesus inaugurates the second part of the book on early Christianity. In chapter 8 ("Heresy, Trinity, and political strife in three parts") Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian and Athanasius of Alexandria are the main sources on which the a.'s argument is based. They have the merit of having transformed the anti-imperial movement of Jesus into "a distinct religion governed by a dominant set of doctrines and theologies" (p. 162). Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies*, for

instance, shows clearly how the first Christian theologians were able to adopt the conceptual possibility of the divine being as a universal deity created by imperial policy. In this coral activity, Tertullian played a peculiar role, having adopted a strategy that brought different Christian communities together under a common identity. But, as the a. repeats incessantly, theology is meaningless without connection to socio-political context (p. 178), and Athanasius's works would prove how an immaterial concept such as the trinity acquires enormous importance precisely because it presents itself as the most effective tool at defining "a hierarchy of authority along with a creed" (p. 183). Alongside internal conflicts, however, should not be forgotten (as in the case of Judaism described in the first part) the violent confrontation with the Roman empire. The result of this conflict was the martyrs, to whom the ninth chapter ("Persecution or the end of it?") is dedicated. Once again, the reconstruction of the phenomenon follows a chronological order, but the most innovative element concerns the way in which the myth of persecution is deconstructed: persecutions against Christians are actions against a part of a "pluriform minority" perceived as an easy target for suspicion or blame (p. 192). The last chapter (10: "Chalcedon and orthodoxy"), even if very short (only 8 pages), offers the description of the council held in 451 CE at Chalcedon, where, as usual, the elaborated discussions about the nature of Christ could only be superficially read as "immaterial theological exercises". By contrast, according to the a., they were about the nature of the Church intended as the "symbolic body of Christ" (p. 224).

Given the enormity of the subject, the a. has tackled a tremendous task. It would be naturally impossible to touch on everything. Nevertheless, the a. has not completely succeeded in providing a useful resource. In general terms, the weak points of the book are mainly two: the use of primary sources and the confrontation with the existing literature on the subject. Chapter 8 on trinity and political strife is, in this respect, quite emblematic. Just because "without connection to socio-political context, theology is meaningless" (p. 178), the definition of the dogma of Trinity has an enormous importance from a political point of view. It might have been redundant to mention the controversy between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson over the Trinitarian dogma, but it was precisely an essay written by the latter in 1935 (*Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*) which opened a never-ending discussion about the concept of political theology, which was also at the centre of the controversy with Arian theology, where a crucial point was exactly the divine government of the world.

It is not an easy task to make an accurate and comprehensive bibliographical selection, but when a scholar decides consciously – we cannot think otherwise – to ignore the huge literature existing on the problem of monotheism in the history of religions,

and particularly in the historiography of Judaism and Christianity, the reader would expect a brief explanation justifying this choice. To name but a few, he never mentions Jan Assmann, Sigmud Freud, Andrew Lang, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Wilhelm Schmidt. This is not necessarily a negative aspect, but it certainly floors the reader who is minimally informed about the subject and makes the neophyte believe that, from a social-political point of view, monotheism has never been studied. But that is not true.

In this regard, we can cite the case of Constantine. The a. mentions a crucial passage of the *Life of Constantine* (I,39; at p. 207, however, the references to the book and chapter are missing), where Eusebius inserted a direct comparison between Constantine and Moses; to be more precise, we should say that Eusebius, for the first time, is introducing here the theme of Moses as a type for Constantine, and just as Moses was granted the sign of the burning bush, so Constantine receives his vision. Moreover, although the a. is right in saying that Cyrus is presented by Eusebius as the Lord's anointed (p. 208), it is nonetheless strange to find him silent on Moses, notably considering that he has stressed his central role in the Jewish process of nation-building (pp. 50-52). In general, the works of Eusebius seemed to have been too underestimated and it is interesting that a discussion about the relationship between Church and State was found "notably" in the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius of Alexandria (p. 178). It is surely true that this biography deals with the problem of the heavenly citizenship, but the protagonist is not a king or a prophet or a churchman. Antony is a monk (or an ascetic) and Athanasius's narrative established him as the model Christian holy man. But can every inhabitant of the world be considered a holy man?

In conclusion, this book will surely spark future research in this important area and all said is a welcome addition to the scholarship on Jewish and Christian monotheism, but the reader must be aware that he/she will not be faced with an exhaustive summary. As a final note, and in case the book should go to a second printing, there are a few typographical errors.[1]

1. Frederik Nietzsche *lege* Friedrich Nietzsche (p. 3); Eusibius *lege* Eusebius (p. 100); Boulluec *lege* Le Boulluec (p. 171); Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus *lege* Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (p. 171; 187); *Apologeticus lege Apologeticum* (p. 172); Septimus Severus *lege* Septimius Severus (p. 172); *De Adversus Iudaeos lege Adversus Iudaeos* (p. 175); *Prima Clementia lege Prima Clementis* (p. 198; 214). The reference note to Bausani's article is incomplete: the name of the journal, *Numen*, is missing (p. 186; 228).