



4-1-2021

Trinity and Monotheism: A Historical and Theological Review of the Origins and Substance of the Doctrine

Jason Robert Combs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Combs, Jason Robert (2021) "Trinity and Monotheism: A Historical and Theological Review of the Origins and Substance of the Doctrine," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 60 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss2/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

*Trinity and Monotheism: A Historical and Theological Review
of the Origins and Substance of the Doctrine*

By A. Keith Thompson

Redland Bay, Qld.: Modotti Press, 2019

Reviewed by Jason Robert Combs

The history of Christian beliefs about the nature of God is complex. It would be helpful for Latter-day Saints and other Christians to have a simple, straightforward introduction to this topic. A. Keith Thompson, professor of law and the associate dean at the Sydney School of Law of the University of Notre Dame Australia, who previously worked as international legal counsel for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, set out to write such a book. Motivated in part by his interfaith work and by his own religious beliefs as a Latter-day Saint, Thompson wrote *Trinity and Monotheism* to “build bridges of understanding” among all who believe in Jesus Christ (9). This is a noble pursuit. I wholeheartedly support Thompson’s notion “that better understanding can enable deeper and more respectful inter-Christian dialogue” (171). Unfortunately, Thompson’s efforts in *Trinity and Monotheism* are marred by the misrepresentation and omission of important historical facts as well as by the poor use of sources.

The narrative Thompson promotes throughout the book could be described as dispensationalism. Thompson suggests that ancient Israelites believed in an anthropomorphic God and a divine council of gods but fell away from this idea under the influence of political “superpowers in the late first millennium B.C.” (13–42, quote on 33). Christians then restored the idea of an anthropomorphic God and a plurality of gods with their doctrine of Jesus Christ’s divinity and his embodiment as a resurrected being (43–82). Once again, however, those ideas fell away, Thompson argues, as Christians were attacked by Jews who insisted on monotheism (83–133)—see more on this below. Finally, Thompson claims that, following the Nicene Council, Christians came to fully embrace monotheism and a disembodied God, until Nicene orthodoxy was questioned by Michael Servetus (145–52), who in modern times

was followed by Unitarians (155–59) and then by the theological innovations of Latter-day Saints (159–63) and Jehovah’s Witnesses (163–67). Although this sort of dispensationalist master narrative may appeal to some Latter-day Saints, it fails to accurately describe the history of Jewish and Christian theology because it omits and misrepresents evidence that does not fit the narrative. For instance, here I will summarize just a few of the problematic omissions and misrepresentations in the first ten pages of Thompson’s third chapter, “Christians as Jewish Heretics—The Origins of the Idea of Trinity” (43–82).

Thompson begins his third chapter with a description of an early conflict between Christians and Jews (45–50)—a description seemingly influenced by a latent anti-Judaism that persisted in much of biblical scholarship up to the early twentieth century.¹ For Thompson, Jesus preached about “brotherly kindness and secret charity,” but Jewish rabbis focused on “ritual punishment for technical violations of the Oral Law” and engaged in “self-serving public religious observance to be seen of men” (46). This may summarize Jesus’s critique of some scribes and Pharisees, who “love . . . to have people call them rabbi,” in Matthew 23:2–7 (NRSV), but it certainly does not describe all rabbis in that time or any time. In fact, Jesus was not the only person to teach about “brotherly kindness and secret charity.” Rabbi Hillel, who taught around the time of Jesus’s birth, preached the importance of loving all people (*m. Avot* 1.12), and Rabbi Akiva, who taught a century later, named love of one’s neighbor as the greatest principle in the law of Moses (*y. Nedarim* 9.4; see Lev. 19:18 and *Sifra* on Lev. 19:18).² Thompson next describes the rabbis’ “secret religious police” who “were engaged to expose Christians worshipping behind closed doors.” He continues, “The political

1. On the history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in biblical scholarship, see William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8–19; and Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). For a discussion on how this scholarship influenced some Latter-day Saint authors, see Matthew J. Grey, “Latter-day Saint Perceptions of Jewish Apostasy in the Time of Jesus,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147–73.

2. For a summary of the ways Christians today commonly misrepresent Judaism in the time of Jesus, see Amy-Jill Levine, “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 759–63.

and legal authorities were engaged as allies in the witch-hunts, or they turned blind eyes towards the excesses of the religious police when they breached the Roman secular law” (46). This sounds like an exaggeration of Acts 8:1–3 and 9:1–2, but Thompson does not cite Acts or any other sources to support his claim about Jewish secret police.

The first ancient source that Thompson cites in this chapter is the mid-second-century Christian Justin Martyr. Thompson intends to use Justin Martyr to show how Christians were attacked as polytheists by Jewish monotheists. One of Thompson’s prime examples of disagreement between Jews and Christians is Justin’s interpretation of Genesis 18:1–2 (NRSV)—Abraham’s vision of the Lord by the oaks of Mamre: “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. . . . [Abraham] looked up and saw three men standing near him.” Thompson argues that Justin reads Genesis 18 as describing that “though Jesus Christ is a god, he is not the same as the Lord God and is subject to Him” (50), whereas “for the Jews, there was only one God” (51). Thompson seems unaware that Jews in antiquity, from Philo of Alexandria to the author of *3 Enoch*, did in fact theologize about other heavenly powers—and did so in a way quite similar to Christians.³ For instance, when explaining the meaning of the passage “for in his own image God made humankind” (Gen. 9:6; compare Gen. 1:26–27), Philo writes, “For nothing mortal can be made in the likeness of the most high One and Father of the universe but (only) in that of the second God, who is His Word.”⁴ Thompson is correct that monotheism is patent in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, but he incorrectly assumes that the views contained in these works from the fourth through sixth century AD represent all Jewish thought from 500 BC to AD 500 (see 37–41).

There are also some significant problems with the sources Thompson cites and how he uses those sources. For instance, Thompson claims, “Justin Martyr’s teaching that God and Christ were distinct is the reason

3. For a discussion of the problems with imagining an early and definitive “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

4. Philo of Alexandria, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 2.62, trans. adapted from Ralph Marcus, *Philo, Supplement I: Questions and Answers on Genesis*, Loeb Classical Library 380 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 150. See Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020), 62–64.

why he is identified as a ‘pagan’ in the *New Advent Encyclopedia*” (51). What Thompson cites as the *New Advent Encyclopedia* is actually a digital version of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* on the New Advent website. Moreover, it is not accurate that this Catholic source calls Justin Martyr a “pagan” because he taught that God the Father and Jesus Christ are distinct persons. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* correctly notes that Justin Martyr was a pagan—meaning a worshipper of various Greek and Roman gods—before his conversion to Christianity.⁵

I have focused on only the major problems in the first ten pages of Thompson’s third chapter, but these are indicative of issues throughout the book. I do not enjoy criticizing anyone’s published work. I recognize that any published work reflects intensive efforts in time and labor, and that some minor errors are often unavoidable—I have intentionally ignored such things as typographic errors in this review. Furthermore, I do not intend to imply that Thompson labored under anything but the best intentions. His concern for fairness and interest in interfaith dialogue shines through when he makes statements such as, “While some critics of the Nicene creed may take delight in this evidence of Constantine’s personal involvement in the formulation of the creed at Nicaea, with respect it does not prove or disprove the creed’s value or its divine provenance” (98). And I truly appreciate Thompson’s stated purpose in describing such events as the Council of Nicaea: “All that is intended here is to provide context to enable and facilitate contemporary debate with humility and respect” (86). This is a noble purpose, but it is hampered by the misrepresentation, however unintentional, of ancient Jewish and Christian beliefs and history.

If one desires to understand better the history of beliefs about God within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through an academic lens, I recommend Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Givens touches upon ancient Christian writings, but he is at his best when treating the history of Latter-day Saint theological developments. For a history of ancient Christian theology and its developments through the councils and creeds, I can recommend two books. If one is interested in a brief and accessible summary of the most important councils and creeds in Christian history, I recommend

5. Jules Lebreton, “St. Justin Martyr,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1910), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/o8580c.htm>. Compare Thompson, *Trinity and Monotheism*, 51 n. 219.

Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2014). For those interested in an academic monograph written for specialists, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), is excellent. Finally, for a history of ancient Jewish theology and its relationship to Christianity, I recommend Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Jason Robert Combs is an assistant professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in religious studies with a specialization in the New Testament and early Christianity from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; an MA in classics from Columbia University; and an MAR in biblical studies from Yale Divinity School. He is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on the New Testament and early Christianity and is one of the editors of the forthcoming book *Ancient Christians: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints*.