

# EARLY ISRAELITE MONOTHEISM

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A Term Paper

Presented to Dr. Dale Manor

Harding University

Searcy, AR

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As a Requirement in

Course BOLD 409

Old Testament Seminar

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by

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April 2004

## “We Have Yet One Question to Answer”

When William F. Albright said those words, his one question was this: “Was Moses a true monotheist?”<sup>1</sup> That question speaks volumes for this study, which is concerned with the question, “Was early Israel monotheistic?” Answering that question requires that both the ideas of “early Israel” and “monotheism,” as they are understood in the scholarly debate surrounding our question, be clarified and accurately defined. Decades of research and thought running a wide gamut of positions and presuppositions has generated a discussion wherein many of the participants seem to talk past one another. To a great extent this is the case simply because of a lack of agreement on terminology. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the *concepts* behind the words as various authors discuss them, but that requires a basis of intelligible terminology. We begin our study attempting to find solid ground on which to stand.

## Monotheism Defined

There are indeed various views of the term monotheism and, concomitantly, of henotheism and monolatry. Thrown into the mix are such ideas as “practical monotheism” and “ethical monotheism.” Thus, we are at times forced to speak also of “pure monotheism” or, with Albright, “true monotheism.”

A glossary introducing a compendium of articles on the subject in the late 1960’s offers these definitions:

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<sup>1</sup>William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 207.

*Henotheism*: The worship and emphasis of one god by the *absorption* of other gods. This term is often used by many scholars...as synonymous with monolatry.

*Monolatry*: The worship and emphasis of one god by the *exclusion* of others, without denying their existence.

*Practical Monotheism*: A phrase often used as a synonym for monolatry, in the sense that monolatry is monotheism in practice. It is contrasted to theoretical or pure monotheism, which denies explicitly the existence of other gods.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Gnuse also begins his survey of recent scholarship on the issue with a discourse on the terminology.<sup>3</sup> He asserts that henotheism is the “elevation of one deity radically over the other gods,” monolatry is the “worship of one god which ignores other deities,” and that “when one uses the term ‘practical monotheism’ with henotheism or monolatry, it implies that only one deity is worshipped and that others are ignored.” Again, it seems that monolatry and practical monotheism are synonymous. Gnuse also adds that ‘ethical monotheism’ implies, “a stress on human rights and dignity in some egalitarian world view.” In contrast, Stanley Ned Rosenbaum defines ethical monotheism as, “the idea that the universe is created and directed by a single Being who wants us to behave in certain ways.”<sup>4</sup>

Baruch Halpern describes henotheism as, “devotion to one god conceding the potency of others,” but goes on to introduce the idea that, “two elements distinguish [monotheism] from polytheism: a conviction that one [deity] controls the pantheon, and the idea of false gods.”<sup>5</sup>

Halpern’s conception leaves no place for “true” monotheism, which seems preposterous

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<sup>2</sup>Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton, eds., *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), xiv-xv.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Gnuse, “The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Recent Scholarship,” *Religion* 29, no. 4 (O 1979): 315.

<sup>4</sup>Stanley Ned Rosenbaum, *Understanding Biblical Israel: A Reexamination of the Origins of Monotheism* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2002), 177.

<sup>5</sup>Baruch Halpern, “Monotheism,” in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 525.

considering its conceptual reality and the fact that other terms describe precisely the phenomenon that he attributes to monotheism. R. Youngblood posits these definitions:

*henotheism* - belief in one supreme god, though not necessarily to the exclusion of belief in other lesser gods; *monolatry* - worship of only one god, though not necessarily denying that other gods exist.<sup>6</sup> As a final addition, *The New Dictionary of Theology* offers this definition of both *henotheism* and *monolatry* - recognizing that many gods exist, but accepting a personal commitment to only one.<sup>7</sup>

We could go on almost indefinitely comparing the usage of these words and noting the inconsistencies. However, the ensuing discussion will reveal much of the various authors' usages, and it will serve better to set for ourselves a standard by which to evaluate their intended meaning. Therefore, rather than speaking of true or pure monotheism, let us state simply that *monotheism is the belief in the existence of and worship of one God*. *Polytheism* will be defined as *the belief in the existence of and worship of many gods*. Furthermore, since practical monotheism is understood to be synonymous with monolatry, we will opt for the term monolatry.

One difference that has been proposed between henotheism and monolatry is that of simple belief in (henotheism) over against worship of (monolatry) a single god as supreme. The question then becomes, should henotheism be thought of as *only* the belief in a god supreme over others, without considering matters of devotion or worship? This seems too general, and it remains far more consistent with our definition of monotheism to speak about the belief in the existence of *and* the worship of a god supreme over others. Further difficulty comes in that the

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<sup>6</sup>R. Youngblood, "Monotheism," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 731.

<sup>7</sup>J.G., "Monotheism," in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 443.

definitions listed above highlight two separate and significant phenomena, those being elevation and absorption. Therefore, we shall refer to *henotheism* as *the belief in and the worship of one god as supreme over others, either by virtue of elevated status above (e.g., as king of the gods) or absorption of (i.e., other gods are manifested aspects of the one god) those gods*. Finally, *monolatry* will be defined as *the belief in and exclusive worship of one god as supreme over others*. Thus, we are essentially dealing with classes, where henotheism is a particular type of polytheism, and monolatry is a particular type of henotheism.

#### Earliest Israel

The second issue that very much sets the stage for understanding the scholarly debate is that of “early Israel’s” identity. There are a couple questions wrapped up in this issue. One, at what point in the history of the Hebrew people are they referred to as Israel? Two, who were the people(s) that settled in the land of Canaan during the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age? The answers to these two questions are somewhat tied together.

Stewart Lasine states, “Ironically, Israel is first called a people by the pharaoh who is oppressing them.”<sup>8</sup> However, modern scholarship is rarely willing to accept the biblical account of Israelite origins at face value, religious or otherwise. Having cast doubt on Israelite occupation of and exodus from Egypt, scholars refer to the people group thought to comprise the later inhabitants of Palestine as “proto-Israel” at best. Yet, Johannes C. De Moor, while using this terminology, begins his work by giving pause to the oft-presupposed “radical criticism of Israel’s traditions about the origins of its own religion.” This is highly warranted, and such a presupposition is not maintained in this paper. In the discussion of monotheistic origins,

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<sup>8</sup>Stewart Lasine, “Israel,” in *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 655.

however, there is yet another, more widespread presupposition that has shaped (or perhaps been shaped by) many students' conclusions, whether credence is lent to the biblical account of the exodus or not.

The Bible portrays Abraham, the father of the children of Israel, as having been called out by Yahweh and having entered into covenant with him. Youngblood writes:

Although all three biblically derived monotheistic religions claim Abraham as their founder, Abraham's monotheism was perhaps more practical than theoretical. God monopolized his allegiance to the extent that Abraham had neither room nor time for competing deities, but nowhere in Genesis does he clearly deny their existence.<sup>9</sup>

While the same has been said for Moses,<sup>10</sup> it is fairly well assumed by *most* scholars that Abraham was a monolatrous product of his culture, if a factor in the discussion at all. Indeed, David Klinghoffer observes that for many, Abraham is nothing more than fiction.<sup>11</sup> On the other end of the spectrum even Albright, typifying the conservative camp, understands Abraham to be choosing for himself a clan or household deity, as would any Mesopotamian.<sup>12</sup> Harry M. Orlinsky puts it this way:

It would be going too far to attribute to the patriarchal Hebrews a belief in the existence of one and only one God. In a sense they may be said to have practiced – but without defining – monotheism. While they probably did not think of denying the existence of other gods . . . the patriarchs attached themselves to one God, and Him alone they worshipped.

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<sup>9</sup>Youngblood, 731.

<sup>10</sup>Theophile James Meek, "Moses as Monotheist," in *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses*, ed. Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), 68-77.

<sup>11</sup>David Klinghoffer, *The Discovery of God* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), xii.

<sup>12</sup>Albright, *Stone Age*, 189.

It is not possible to understand the career of Israel without understanding these two inseparable concepts which arose in patriarchal times: practical monotheism and the personal covenant between the patriarchal families and their God.<sup>13</sup>

One might argue, however, that neither does the biblical account deny the monotheism of Abraham. Therefore it is no less valid an assumption that he and his sons were indeed believers in and worshippers of one God. As we continue on, the question of earliest Israel's monotheism will remain open.

### Proto-Israel and Her Formation

It would be incredibly difficult to do justice in a few short pages to such a massive arena of data as that which comprises the ongoing discussion of Israel's settlement of Canaan. Nonetheless, this is essentially the larger issue at stake when one begins considering the identity of proto-Israel and how exactly the Canaanite elements of culture and religion figure into the emergence of Israel proper. For this reason, we will claim to do little more than brush the proverbial surface.

Albright said in 1940, "There is no clear trace of any West-Semitic influence of characteristically Canaanite type on the earliest religion of Israel. After the occupation of Palestine, however, this influence became more and more significant . . . ."<sup>14</sup> This statement appears to be based singularly on the lack of a particular Canaanite mythological element in the tradition of Israel. Albright surely had other reasons for making his assertions, but regardless, the times have in fact changed. As De Moor notes, "both archaeological and linguistic data are

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<sup>13</sup>Harry M. Orlinsky, "Abraham and Moses," In *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses*, ed. Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), 59-60.

<sup>14</sup>Albright, *Stone Age*, 207.

nowadays converging to the conclusion that, broadly speaking, the ancient Israelites may be regarded as Canaanites in every respect, including their religion.”<sup>15</sup> That last clause is the true crux of the matter. *The question is how Canaanite their religion was over against how Canaanite it became.* One’s conclusions on the matter depend strongly on presuppositions mentioned previously about the reliability of the text, especially with regard to the Exodus and the Conquest. Space does not permit a detailed reasoning, but this study will proceed under the assumption that the Bible is innocent until proven guilty. Thus, we turn now to consider the impact of Egyptian religion, and Akhenaten’s “monotheism” in particular, on Israel.

### Egyptian Monotheism and Its Implications

Addressing the religion of Akhenaten, John A. Wilson framed the discussion in this way, “Two important questions face us. Was this monotheism? If so, was it the world’s first ancestral monotheism and did it come down to us through the Hebrews?”<sup>16</sup> Wilson answers the first in the negative and so necessitates a like answer for the second. But that is only because of the phraseology of his question. Even if Akhenaten was not a monotheist in the accurate sense of the word, although many have contended that he was,<sup>17</sup> the question of his highly monolatrous religion’s influence on the Hebrew slaves would still stand.

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<sup>15</sup>De Moor, 111.

<sup>16</sup>John A. Wilson, “Was Akhnaton a Monotheist?” in *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses*, ed. Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), 35.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. James Henry Breasted, “Akhnaton, The First Monotheist,” in *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses*, ed. Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), 22-33; W. F. Albright, “The Ancient Near East and the Religion of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 2 (1940): 109.

Donald B. Redford, at the end of his very thorough survey of Atenism, concludes that the problem with drawing parallels between Egyptian and Hebrew monotheism is not so much in the kind of religion, as the quality. “The essential characteristics of the two monotheisms are so diverse as to exclude the possibility of influence, one upon the other.”<sup>18</sup> A total lack of influence remains to be determined, but Rosenbaum legitimately observes that, “it is hard to see that a revolution which was ultimately rejected by the Egyptians managed to hang on for so long among their Semitic slaves unless, of course, the seeds of it had been planted much earlier.”<sup>19</sup>

So the question of Abrahamic monotheism is raised again. It is easier to imagine that the reforms of Akhenaten would have resonated with the traditions of the Hebrews. As to what extent they influenced one another, that is as of yet indiscernible. Even assuming the influence was great, there is still a cultural milieu present that greatly complicates the situation. Here we will consider De Moor’s most intriguing thesis:

In Egypt the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten triggered a counter-movement promulgating the doctrine that all gods were in reality nothing but manifestations of one god, Amun-Re. This reduction of the polytheistic principle had far-reaching theological implications. It is justified to speak of a crisis of polytheism which reverberated all over the ancient world.<sup>20</sup>

De Moor thoroughly demonstrates through Egyptian texts the primacy of Amun in the sense that we have defined as henotheism.<sup>21</sup> He rather convincingly postulates that this crisis of polytheism takes the form of henotheistic exaltation of Marduk in the Mesopotamian pantheon, and “in Ugarit the crisis took the form of a relentless struggle for power between opposing

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<sup>18</sup>Donald B. Redford, “The monotheism of the heretic Pharaoh: precursor of Mosaic monotheism or Egyptian anomaly,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13, no. 3 (May-June 1987): 32.

<sup>19</sup>Rosenbaum, 175.

<sup>20</sup>De Moor, 99.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 46ff.

parties within the pantheon.”<sup>22</sup> It is here that we must digress to the previous discussion of terminology.

Albright places equal emphasis on the religious environment “into which Israel was born and in which it took up its inheritance,”<sup>23</sup> but disagrees as to the nature of that environment. Seemingly in reaction to the evolutionary school of Wellhausen,<sup>24</sup> Albright maintains that the Assyro-Babylonian literature and the religion of Canaan are devoid of henotheism<sup>25</sup> (his definition is compatible with ours). At the same time he says of the Mesopotamian religion, “The recognition that many deities were simply manifestations of a single divinity and that the domain of a god with cosmic functions was universal, inevitably led to some form of practical monotheism or pantheism.”<sup>26</sup> It is clear that what he describes would be called henotheism by our definition, and it is precisely that phenomenon to which De Moor is referring. Meek, in his rather scathing review of Albright’s thoughts on the subject, often chides Albright for his inconsistencies in word usage.<sup>27</sup> That notwithstanding, if we understand what is meant, the implications remain.

Therefore, the implications are these. As Israel emerged from Egypt, the ancient world was in a time of religion transition. In Canaan, where Israel would take up residence in a

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>23</sup>Albright, “Ancient Near East,” 110.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “Wellhausen and the History of Israel’s Religion,” *Semeia* no. 25 (1982): 89-110.

<sup>25</sup>Albright, “Ancient Near East,” 103, 106.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 104; Cf. also, *Stone Age*, 164-165. Again, Albright describes henotheism, while seeming to referring to monolatry.

<sup>27</sup>Theophile James Meek, “Monotheism and the Religion of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 61, no. 1 (March 1942): 21-43.

relatively short amount of time, this transition was marked by a conflict between deities for supremacy in a henotheistic sense. The two main contenders were El and Baal, with whom Israel became intricately intertwined so that in retrospect, the origins of Israelite religion are difficult to differentiate from the religion of Canaan.

De Moor hypothesizes, then, that Yahweh was included in this conflict for supremacy. Because he sees the proto-Israelites as culturally Canaanite, a parallel is drawn between the Canaanite god El and the Hebrew god El, “whom they call Yawe and Yahu-El(ohim).”<sup>28</sup> Thus he concludes that,

YHWH-El acquired the characteristics of Baal because here it was he who became King of the Gods. Therefore the circumstance that YHWH exhibits certain characteristics of Baal should not be interpreted as an indication that Baal stood at the cradle of the Yahwistic religion, but quite the contrary that YHWH-El has usurped Baal’s functions just as Baal did this with El’s functions in the North.<sup>29</sup>

Joseph Blenkinsoff describes the situation with a slightly different perspective:

By and large, the disparate groups which came to be known as Israel did not consider themselves to have originated in Canaan but to have come in the course of time to settle there. Since the settlement involved the introduction of a new deity into the territorial jurisdiction of other deities, whose writ had run there for centuries, the problem of competing religious claims was bound to arise.<sup>30</sup>

So, even if one does not support all of the same assumptions about proto-Israel as De Moor, his reconstruction makes some critical points. Foremost is that the religious environment of Canaan would have been extremely conducive to the temptation of syncretism to which the

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<sup>28</sup>De Moor, 206.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Blenkinsoff, “Yahweh and Other Deities,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 4 (October 1986): 355.

Bible so clearly attests. It is highly understandable that even given proto-Israelite monotheism, the Israelites would have easily become enmeshed in Canaanite religious practices.

### Final Thoughts

Another question arises though, if one prefers henotheism for early Israel. H. H. Rowley states it clearly, “Even if Moab and Ammon,” (or any other nations, for our purposes) “were henotheistic . . . we should still have to ask how it was that Israel became monotheistic and they did not.”<sup>31</sup> Many scholars today do not believe that monotheistic Yahwism did emerge until after the exile to Babylonia.<sup>32</sup> Herbert Cohn simply states, “No nation put into doubt the existence of the gods of its neighbors, ancient Israel included.”<sup>33</sup> Frank E. Eakin, Jr. sees no conflict between Yahweh and Baal until the Omrid Dynasty, contemporary to Elijah. Thus, there was always a syncretism between the two religions, and the distinguishing work begun by Elijah was only completed by post-exilic deuteronomic historians.<sup>34</sup> On a slightly more biblical note, Ephraim Stern says of the archaeological evidence:

We are led to the inevitable conclusion that between the foreign pagan practices and the pure monotheism of Yahwism there existed a cult that may be called pagan Yahwism or perhaps more accurately, Yahwistic paganism. Of course in

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<sup>31</sup>H. H. Rowley, “Moses as the Source of Monotheism,” in *Problems in European Civilization: Monotheism and Moses*, ed. Robert J. Christen and Harold E. Hazelton (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969), 79-87.

<sup>32</sup>Gnuse, 316-325.

<sup>33</sup>Herbert Cohn, “From Monolatry to Monotheism,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26 (April-June 1998): 124.

<sup>34</sup>Frank E. Eakin, Jr., “Yahwism and Baalism Before the Exile,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 4 (Dec 1965): 407-414.

the background was the central monotheistic cult practiced in the Jerusalem Temple by its priests and preached by the Biblical prophets.<sup>35</sup>

In truth, Stern's contribution only serves to highlight the questions: was Israel ever monotheistic, and if so, why, when the nations around them were monolatrous at best? We propose that early Israel was indeed monotheistic for two reasons. First, the patriarchal tradition predisposed them, even if they had not remained monotheistic during their bondage in Egypt. It is true, as Rosenbaum points out,<sup>36</sup> that Joshua's challenge (Josh 24:14-15) indicates that they were still worshipping those gods. This does not impugn patriarchal monotheism, but rather speaks of polytheism marrying into the family (Gen 31:19ff.) and a constant need to reaffirm covenant with Yahweh (Gen 35:2ff.).

Secondly, and most importantly, Moses taught monotheism. This brings us right back where we started. "Was Moses a true monotheist?" Whether or not early Israel was monotheistic, in the end, depends upon whether or not Moses believed in and worshiped one God. Meek felt that, objectively, nothing in the biblical tradition supported the view that Moses was monotheistic.<sup>37</sup> Looking at Israel's track record, there is good reason to doubt whether Israel ever thought of itself as monotheistic. Yet, to quote De Moor, "It would seem one thing to render it likely that Moses was a lawgiver with an Egyptian education at the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age, and another to describe the affects of his laws."<sup>38</sup>

Albright answered the question thusly, again adopting his own definition of monotheism:

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<sup>35</sup>Ephraim Stern, "Pagan Yahwism: The Folk Religion of Ancient Israel," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27, no. 3 (May-June 2001): 28.

<sup>36</sup>Rosenbaum, 183.

<sup>37</sup>Meek, "Monotheism and Israel," 24.

<sup>38</sup> De Moor, 266.

If . . . the term monotheist means one who teaches the existence of only one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in Egypt, in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye and cannot be represented in any form--then the founder of Yahwism was certainly monotheistic.<sup>39</sup>

Meek quotes Albright expanding that definition in a personal correspondence, where he adds, “Nor does monotheism exclude the coexistence of other spiritual or superhuman powers in the world, as long as these entities are in no way comparable with God in his essential qualities, such as goodness and power.”<sup>40</sup> Meek, of course, objects to this definition, as well as the idea that Moses might speak *ad hominem* to henotheists without implying henotheism for himself. But somewhere between those two ideas lies a great clue to the question of early Israelite monotheism.

Rowley offers this insightful thought:

Israelite monotheism developed less out of the “onliness” of Yahweh as the legitimate object of worship than out of His character. The outstanding work of Moses in this connection is not so much the teaching that Yahweh was to be the only God for Israel as the proclamation that Yahweh was unique.<sup>41</sup>

This reminds us of the distinction made between Yahwism and Atenism, one of quality rather than kind.<sup>42</sup> While the Lord is one, and he will tolerate no gods before him, Moses seems to have spoken even those words so that Israel might know what Pharaoh had learned. There is no one like the Lord our God (Ex 8:10).

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<sup>39</sup>Albright, *Stone Age*, 207.

<sup>40</sup>Meek, “Monotheism and Israel,” 23.

<sup>41</sup>Rowley, 82.

<sup>42</sup>For further discussion of the nature of God, cf. Peter Hayman, “Monotheism – A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (Spr 1991): 1-15; M. W. Chavalas, “Moses,” in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 576.

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