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978-1-108-98480-5 — Monotheism, Biblical Traditions, and Race Relations
Yung Suk Kim
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1 Introduction

Race relations are an increasingly important topic – more now than ever before. Racism is not merely a lack of love or a deficiency of intellect, but it is a cancerous evil. On the one hand, there are myths about race or "others," and on the other, there are prejudices and animosity against different races and cultures. People often categorize others, based on race or ethnicity, and rank them by their intellect or culture. Racism begins with a notion that human races are discernibly distinct or differentiated and that some races are superior to others. But this notion is an illusion because dividing lines between races are ambiguous or unscientific.[1] Excellence in human capacity or virtue is widespread among different races or cultures. What constitutes excellence in humans or culture is a matter of debate. No single standard or factor can determine a person or culture's excellence.

Humans have existed for a long time and maintained diverse cultures, living in many regions of the world. So, naturally, their looks and culture have been differentiated, but these differences should not overthrow the singularity of humans who share more similarities than differences. Given the common humanity of *homo sapiens*, while we look different and think differently, we can seek the common causes of justice, peace, and prosperity. In the story of Genesis, God blesses humans and invites them to be fruitful and to multiply so that they may live fully in wider, different places.[2] God's design for humanity is diversity, not homogeneity. Against God's wish, as the episode of the Tower of Babel shows (Gen 11:1–9), people did not scatter but gathered to make a big city, speaking one language. This episode sheds new light on how people must think about race or ethnicity. That is, race, ethnicity, or culture should not be a hiding place or a haven where people stay together among themselves only without engaging others. Race or culture matters not because it is the source of identity or pride but because it is an expression of diversity in God's creation. Like a flowing stream or river, race or ethnicity must be the concept of flexibility that engages otherness and other people. In doing so, people in any culture or ethnicity may learn from others. Since no humans are perfect, they need to help one another, learning from others, while maintaining both the singularity of human character and the diversity of culture.

To address and improve race relations, we will examine monotheism in biblical traditions, which includes both robust insights for race relations and deleterious effects on them. While the former comes from ethical monotheism that helps foster race relations, the latter comes from exclusive monotheism that

[1] Sussman, *The Myth of Race.*
[2] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," pp. 29–58.

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harms others. What is worse, many interpreters have read some biblical texts, such as John's Gospel or Matthew's Gospel, from the perspective of a triumphant gospel that conquers other cultures. Nevertheless, ethical monotheism with inclusive faith helps improve race relations.

1.1 Why This Element

The Bible does not present a single view of God or theology and includes divergent aspects of monotheism. On the one hand, there is exclusive monotheism that harms other people, as in the story of Joshua's conquest of the Canaanites. This exclusive monotheism, coupled with the notion of "chosenness," leads to the suppression of other people and cultures. Could God be pleased if the Canaanites were annihilated? Should Israelites be happy with seeing the demise of the Canaanites? Here, we see the limitation of monotheism that hinders other people from encountering the truth of God. On the other hand, ethical monotheism is conducive to good race relations. God is inclusive of all, calling for mercy, love, and justice for all. The divine mandate is simple. As God is holy, his people must seek holiness and love others as themselves (Lev 19:18; Matt 5:43–48; Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14). But even with ethical monotheism, if people do not follow the ethical teachings of God, there would be no racial equality or diversity.

While race relations seemed to improve for some time, we have not yet seen radical improvement. Racism abounds in society as well as in the minds of people. It is not limited to the so-called developed world such as the USA or European countries. Racism is also prevalent in other developing countries to which cheap labor is brought from the poorest countries. Worse, the fast-growing global economy and forced migrations due to war or natural disasters make race relations complex. Still worse, the global virtual environment has presented Janus-faced aspects of race relations. It provides a free hospitable online space through which people may better understand each other. But at the same time, it may serve as a vehicle of disinformation, becoming a hotbed of prejudice or hatred against others. Given these realities, the topic of race relations is more important than ever before, and we need to improve them not only by reinterpreting monotheism in biblical traditions but also by exploring the way we engage with others and reimagine our relationship with God and our neighbors.

1.2 Key Terms

This Element employs a few important technical terms and concepts that need to be explained and clarified from the outset.

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1.2.1 Polytheism

Polytheism is a belief that there are many gods and that people worship them freely. It is believed that ancient Israelites, like other ancient people, had such a view.[3] The Hebrew Bible acknowledges "many heavenly creatures, calling them 'gods' (Gen 6:2; Ps 29:1; 82:6; 86:8; 89:7; Job 1:6), 'angels' (Num 20:16; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Kgs 13:18; Zech 1:11–12; Ps 78:49; Job 33:23), and 'the assembly of holy ones' (Ps 89:5)."[4] Glimpses of this polytheistic view are also in different biblical traditions: Yahwistic, Elohist, Deuteronomistic, and Priestly. While Yahwistic and Elohist traditions derive from different names of God, Deuteronomistic and Priestly writers reinterpreted the preexisting biblical traditions and had their peculiar views of God.

1.2.2 Henotheism

Henotheism means devoted worship of one god among other gods. When David unified different tribes in Palestine into a single state, he banned people from worshipping other gods, allowing Yahweh alone to be worshipped. He also made Jerusalem the center of Yahwistic cultic activities. In this way, David solidified his power and dynasty. Centuries later, Josiah perfected the removal of other gods through his religious reforms (2 Kgs 22–23). The Ten Commandments also preserve relics of henotheism since what is required is Yahweh-alone worship among other gods. Psalm 95:3 also hints at the existence of other gods: "For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods." Similarly, Psalm 82:1 also says: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment."

1.2.3 Monotheism

Monotheism is a belief that there is only one God. This view of God is observed in the Priestly creation story (Gen 1:1–2:3) and postexilic writings such as Ezra and Nehemiah, which reflect Jewish exiles' experience after the Babylonian captivity. Out of their painful experience in exile, Priestly writers interpreted the exilic experience as God's punishment and ensured their absolute loyalty to one God.[5] This punishment was due to sin and going after other gods of Canaan, which had been forbidden. The Shema (Deut 6:4) also expresses monotheistic faith.

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[3] Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, pp. 38–57.

[4] Sommer, "Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible." See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, pp. 27–82.

[5] Gnuse, *No Other Gods*, pp. 16, 141–142. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, pp. 135–194. See also Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal*, pp. 23–122.

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1.2.4 Ethical Monotheism

Ethical monotheism includes moral exhortations that humans are one and that God cares for them. For example, in the Psalms, there is an idea that God is sovereign, cares for the marginalized, and rules people on earth with righteousness (cf, Ps 8; 13; 33; 98). In the covenant code (Exod 20–23), there are humanitarian laws that protect the marginalized although the same laws do not thoroughly satisfy them since, for example, the conditions of slaves remain the same.

1.2.5 Exclusive Monotheism

Biblical narratives also include harsh aspects of monotheism that treat others as enemies. The typical example of this exclusive monotheism is found in the conquest narrative in Joshua. The narrative of liberation in Exodus shifts to a narrative of invasion and killing of Canaanites just because they are non-Israelites or non-covenanted people.

1.2.6 Race, Ethnicity, and Race Relations

In contemporary discussion, generally, while race refers to the physical characteristics of a group, ethnicity focuses on the broad cultural differences of a group. In this Element, these two terms are not distinguished and are used interchangeably since the Element's concern is to explore how (mono)theism affects other people in various historical, social contexts. In this effort, what is required is not race or ethnicity-specific ramifications of monotheism but a broad understanding of how one relates to others, neighbors, aliens, and enemies regardless of race. Race relations apply to this endeavor and depend on multiple conditions besides monotheism. Therefore, this Element deals not only with monotheism but also with related human behavior, ideology, and sociopolitical conditions.

1.3 Outline

We will examine monotheism in the Hebrew Bible and explore its ramifications on race relations. Monotheism is an advanced human thought that seeks universal value for all people. It counters the polytheism of the ancient world, envisions the rule of one God, and promotes the morality of universal value. But the question is: "Do we see this good monotheism in the Hebrew Bible?" The answer is mixed.

In Jewish tradition, monotheism is understood as a historical, theological development over time. The most rigid form of monotheism appears during

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postexilic times (sixth to fourth centuries BCE). Because of exclusive monotheism, as in Joshua's conquest narrative, Israelites subjugate "others" in the name of one God who gives the land and orders them to kill the Canaanites. This aspect of exclusive monotheism is intensified during postexilic times when Ezra and Nehemiah ask Jews to expel foreign wives and their children. But the Book of Ruth offers a counternarrative to that postexilic, exclusive perspective and legitimizes Ruth, a Moabite woman, who becomes the exemplary "other" to Jews when usually "others" are excluded.

However, in the Hebrew Bible, there is also ethical monotheism that fosters race relations in ways that God rules the world with justice and peace, creates humanity in the image of God, and blesses them to be fruitful and multiply. As in the Tower of Babel narrative in Gen 11:1–9, God wants not univocity among people in one place but the diversity of culture, language, and people in dispersion. Also, in biblical law codes and prophetic traditions, God protects the rights of the marginalized, including resident aliens.

We will also examine monotheism in the New Testament and its ramification on race relations. In the New Testament, Jesus embraces monotheism and promotes ethical monotheism (Matt 5:43–48). Unlike his fellow Jews, he argues that people should love even their enemy. God is impartial to all, the good and the evil. He also overcomes the Jewish definition of neighbor as he tells the parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He changes his mind toward a Canaanite woman who seeks the healing of her daughter because of her persistent, challenging faith that gentiles also deserve blessings from God.

The canonical Gospels also embrace monotheism and argue that Jesus is the Son of God, who was obedient to the will of God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus came to fulfill the scriptures and the righteousness of God. The Matthean Jesus, reflecting Matthew's community, struggles to include gentiles in his work but opens the door to everyone (Matt 28:16–20). In John's Gospel, Jesus also believes in one God and confesses that God sent him. He never says that he is God. Rather, he says that God is greater than he (John 14:28). The Johannine Jesus never presents exclusive monotheism, as opposed to a common understanding of John 14:6 ("I am the way, and the truth, . . . no one comes to the Father except through me"). This verse is usually treated as an exclusive theological statement. But it leaves room for engaging others through love and truth. Namely, Jesus's point is that he shows the way of God and testifies to the truth of God. Understood this way, John's Gospel is not the triumphant gospel that conquers other cultures and people.

There are conflicting views about Paul. Some argue that Paul's monotheism is not helpful to race relations because his view of community is rigid and hierarchical. They argue that Paul embraces the Hellenistic ideal of unity

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(concord) that does not allow for true diversity. But an alternative reading places him as an egalitarian, transformative monotheist. His monotheism is ethical, transformative, and universal and helps foster positive race relations. His mission strategy is to embrace "others" as they are and incorporate them into the household of God. He does not require that gentiles become Jewish (Gal 2:1–11). Paul affirms that God is the God of all, Jews and gentiles (Rom 3:30).

But we should not forget that New Testament texts also have been read narrowly with a focus on exclusive monotheism or Christocentric monotheism in that Jesus is the Lord and God. The claim is he is the only way and the truth, and no other people are saved other than through Jesus who provided salvific knowledge. Otherwise, Jesus's work of God and his faithfulness are rarely discussed. Some people even read some texts from a theology of predestination (or even double predestination) that God destined some for salvation (Eph 1:3–14) and others for damnation.

In the end, the interpreter's job is not to simply take what is stated in the text but to consider how to interpret the text, being aware of what is silenced or ignored in it. On the one hand, as in the case of Joshua's conquest narrative, we can point out the problem of exclusive monotheism and the human ideology of chosenness. But on the other hand, the issue is not the text itself but the exclusivist interpretation that people read into it. Such a case is found in the previously mentioned verse, John 14:6. Is John's Gospel a triumphant gospel or inclusive of others?

2 Theism and Race Relations in the Hebrew Bible

2.1 Polytheism

Polytheism is a belief that there are many gods and that people worship them freely, and it underlies some biblical narratives in the Hebrew Bible at least until the Davidic kingdom was established. Back then in Palestine, there were different tribes that believed in different deities. Ancient Israelites, like other ancient people in the East and West, had many gods and worshipped them. Before David, tribal leaders wished their people to have allegiance to a particular deity, but it was not mandatory. At that time, the focus was to forge strong internal bonds within the tribe or state. Otherwise, there was no room to think of race relations or other people.

2.2 Henotheism

Henotheism emerged during the Davidic kingdom that prohibited its people from worshipping other gods at other places. The only deity that must be worshipped is Yahweh, and the only cultic center is Jerusalem. Henotheism is

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an expression of both stalwart royal ideology that warrants the Davidic dynasty and the superiority of Yahwism (2 Sam 7), which includes moral teachings about others. As such, David is idealized and spiritualized through subsequent stories about him. David was a musician and poet in his early career, and all the Psalms were associated with him. In many Psalms, there are ideas about God's care for the universe.

2.3 The Historical Development of Monotheism

Monotheistic thinking or philosophy believes that the ultimate or reason governs all people and the world. Historically speaking, it is an advanced human thought that seeks universal value for all. This monotheistic thinking emerged approximately in the sixth century BCE in both the East and the West: Judaism; Greek philosophy with Socrates and Plato; Stoicism in the Hellenistic world; and Eastern religions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism.[6] With this advanced thought, people can look beyond themselves and be united with others. They may seek the morality of well-being, overcoming blind loyalty to a particular group or state. At the same time, the idealism of oneness may become the ideology for controlling others and other countries.

The idea of monotheism goes back to the time of the pharaoh Akhenaten (1352–1336 BCE), who worshipped the one god, Aten (sun god), prohibiting the worship of other gods. But after him, polytheism flourished again and became the normative worldview.[7] Ancient Israelites also accepted polytheism, as is observed in the Hebrew Bible. The prohibition of other gods in the Ten Commandments supports this view that ancient Israelites were polytheistic. Before David unified the tribes in Palestine and prohibited the worship of gods other than Yahweh, people had worshipped different gods and erected shrines in diverse places. After the unification of the tribes, David became the king of Israel and prohibited the worship of other gods. With the monotheism of Yahweh, David solidified his monarchy and legitimated his kingship by connecting God's covenant with Abraham although he came from a polytheistic environment. However, the most rigid form of monotheism comes after the Babylonian captivity. The Jews who returned from the painful experience of the Babylonian exile reflected on their tragic past and intensified their monotheism, rebuilding the temple, stressing the observance of the law, and cleansing the land by expelling foreign elements. This was also the beginning of rabbinic Judaism, which promoted the monotheistic ideal.

[6] Barnes, *In the Presence of Mystery*, pp. 45–66.
[7] Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, p. 25.

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2.4 Inclusive Monotheism and Race Relations

Ethical, inclusive monotheism in the Hebrew Bible is the view that there is only one good God who is almighty and loving for all. This view of God is conducive to harmonious human relationships. In the following, we will note positive aspects of ethical monotheism from creation stories, the episode of the Tower of Babel, God's call of Abraham, biblical law codes, and the character of God.

2.4.1 Creation Stories

The creation account in Genesis 1 declares that God Almighty is responsible for the creation of the heavens and the earth. After each day of creation, God said it was good. It is good not because the world is permanent without decay or illness but because it is a viable place to live if people follow the rule of God, who created humankind in his image (Gen 1:28). This implies God's power, freedom, and love, as seen in the creation account and throughout the Hebrew Bible. God wants his creation to exist and prosper abundantly and in good order. In this creation, humans are a special creation because they are created in the image of God and given the right and responsibility to care for the world. They also have the power to decide and communicate with him.[8]

The lofty image of human creation is the view of the priestly class, which is the final redactor of the Torah. According to the Documentary Hypothesis, the creation account in Gen 1:1–2:4a belongs to the Priestly document (P) that views humanity as precious in the image of God.[9] But in Gen 2:4b-24, there is another creation story, which belongs to the Yahwistic document (J) that the Lord God formed the human "from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen 2:7). But even here in J's account, humans are more than other creations because God gives "the breath of life" to Adam.

From the creation accounts, we learn that it is one almighty, good God who made all this creation and did so for a purpose, that is, the coexistence of humans with other creatures and nature. Humans must take care of God's creation; they do not have a right to control or exploit it. Nature, animals, plants, all things on the earth are under the care of humans, who are the image of God. After creating all things and humans in his image, God rests on the seventh day, the day that humanity needs to remember his creation and his purpose.

From the creation accounts, we also learn that there are a few important implications for race relations. There is a declaration that once upon a time, God

[8] Stanley, *The Hebrew Bible*, pp. 171–179.
[9] For a summary of the Documentary Hypothesis, see Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 44–48.

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created the heavens and the earth and reordered the chaotic, dark world.[10] God spoke and (re)created or reordered the existent chaos, creating humans in his image to have communication with them.[11] This important beginning is the beginning of a new humanity that recognizes the notion of one God and one human family. One noble God created humans in his image and gave them the task of caring for his creation. As a family of God, they must love one another. Race relations need this notion that once upon a time, there was one start, one God, one love, and one human race.

2.4.2 The Tower of Babel

God's will to humans is clear that they must be fruitful and multiply. God wants them to live in wider regions on earth, with prosperity and diversity. The episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) is a violation of God's design for the world and humanity. People wanted to stay in a city and to build a tower, a symbol of human pride and civilization. The problem is not that they erect the high-rise tower but that they do not want to scatter on earth, fearing their uncertain future. The divine command was to fill the earth (Gen 1:28; 9:1), but the problem was people did not keep that command and tried to live by and for themselves, being "isolated from the rest of the world."[12] When people gather in one place, build their lives within that bound, and speak only one language, new problems arise and abound. First, there will be new elites or leaders who will emerge, controlling ordinary people with the ideology of unity. The consequences will be inequalities and injustices in society. Second, people are either brainwashed by the leaders or forced to follow the norm of a hierarchical unity. Then there will be no diversity in the community or society. Third, this rigidly unitary society confronts others and treats them as enemies. There will be no good, mutual relationship between them, let alone learning from each other. There might be a culture of hatred and competition against others in different cultures.

But God calls for a diversity of thoughts and cultures and the fruitfulness of humans. Humanity's prosperity is possible when they are in tension with other people and other cultures. If a stream does not flow, it will dry and decay. Even one strong flourishing culture needs new exposure to different cultures. Both

[10] In Gen 1:1, the Hebrew word *bereshit* is a combined noun with the preposition "in" and does not include the definite article in it. So the meaning of this word is "in a beginning," that is, "in the beginning of God's creation." Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 28. This beginning is not the beginning of history. So the New Revised Standard Version translates Gen 1:1 as "In the beginning when God created . . . ." This translation means that once upon a time God created the heavens and earth.

[11] Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 43.

[12] Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 58.

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leaders and ordinary people need to see what other states and people are doing and learn lessons from them so that they may continue to prosper.

2.4.3 God's Call of Abraham

There is also inclusive, ethical monotheism in the story of Abraham, especially in Gen 12:1–3. He is called out of nowhere and blessed to be the source of blessings for all people on earth (Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–21).[13] He is from the ancient city called Ur of the Chaldeans, and the text does not say that he did something great to deserve God's call. But by the grace of God, he got a chance to start a new journey of faith and hope, becoming the father of many nations including Israel. The sovereign God says to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Abraham obeys this call of God and becomes a pioneer to the new world of possibilities.[14] He takes a drastic, radical departure from his comfort zone and moves to the unknown, bleak future with hope. His departure is contrasted with the story of the Tower of Babel where people want to build a great city. He becomes the beacon of hope for all who are nobodies, those who are hopeless and lost such as wandering migrants, refugees, and the poor. God's grace does not fall short of calling and blessing people like Abraham. His name means the father of many nations (Gen 17:5), not merely the beginning of Jews or Israel, though the Yahwist epic puts Israel at the center of the world.

Although Jews claim Abraham as their sole founding father and his call as the beginning of their state, the call story of Abraham is open to interpretation in that the point is not to establish Israel but to start new humanity through Abraham and his faith. He is a paragon of faith for all people coming after him. Paul also considers Abraham the archetype of faith, and God promised the good news to all people who are coming through faith (Gal 3:8).

In sum, God is gracious and sovereign, calling his people to depart from a comfort zone or the place of hopelessness. Not any humans or any institution can be a sole power that overwrites God's grace or power. All need God's grace and directions, seeking a life of diversity. While monoculture or the sense of unity may be necessary for group identity or formation, it may become an obstacle to diversity and dialogue with other cultures. Encountering different people and cultures may be a challenge on one's journey, but it is a space for growth and transformation. It may take place at the borderlands where people find common ground amid differences or disputes. That common ground may be the realization that they are all weak and that they need God's grace. With this realization, they may seek mutual solidarity rather than mutual competition.

[13] Von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 159–160. [14] Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations," pp. 387–398.

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