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Reaction 7: “Why Monotheism” by Jean Soler  
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Summary:

In his essay Why Monotheism, Jean Soler presents a scholarly challenge to widely accepted assumptions regarding the origin and evolution of monotheistic belief, particularly within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Soler begins by contrasting the academic freedom enjoyed by scholars studying defunct polytheistic religions with the constraints imposed by the ongoing relevance of monotheism. Since belief in a single God remains central to billions of people worldwide, critical inquiry into its origins often meets resistance. Soler’s principal question is historical and anthropological: when, why, and under what conditions did belief in a single, exclusive deity emerge among the Jews? Soler contests the traditional theological claim that monotheism began with Abraham or Moses. Relying on archaeological findings and textual criticism, he emphasizes the lack of material evidence for the existence of either figure, or for the Hebrews’ purported sojourn in the Sinai desert. Yahveh, the god later equated with the universal monotheistic God, originally appears in the historical record as a local tribal deity. His elevation to the status of a singular and all-powerful deity, according to Soler, was not the result of divine revelation but rather the product of political and cultural necessity. This transformation gained momentum during and after the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, as the Jewish people, facing military defeat and societal disruption, began to consolidate their identity around a singular god.

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Soler explains that leaders such as Josiah and later Ezra and Nehemiah promoted religious reforms that excluded other deities and positioned Yahveh as the only true god. These reforms centralized worship in the temple of Jerusalem and prohibited the worship of foreign gods. Soler argues that this move toward monotheism was not the natural culmination of a long-standing theological principle but a reaction to repeated national crises. He situates this development within a broader pattern observed in other ancient cultures, such as Persia and Egypt, where dominant gods were elevated in response to shifts in political power. In doing so, Soler contends that the Jewish shift to monotheism was not unique, but part of a larger trend across ancient civilizations.

Analysis:

Soler’s argument is persuasive in its grounding in historical and archaeological evidence. One of the most effective components of the essay is its systematic deconstruction of the biblical narrative as a literal historical account. His critique of the presumed antiquity and consistency of monotheism challenges readers to reconsider foundational religious claims. The essay’s strength lies in its demonstration that monotheism did not arise suddenly or divinely, but gradually and strategically. By examining the context in which religious reforms occurred, Soler shows that monotheism was shaped by political, cultural, and existential pressures rather than divine mandate.

Nevertheless, Soler’s analysis may place too much emphasis on political causality at the expense of individual religious experience. While it is reasonable to assert that social conditions influenced the development of belief systems, the argument occasionally downplays the possibility that religious conviction and theological reflection also played significant roles. His comparison between Jewish monotheism and similar developments in Persia and Egypt is helpful in establishing historical parallels, but it also risks glossing over doctrinal differences and the internal diversity of religious traditions. Soler presents monotheism almost exclusively as a pragmatic response to crisis, which may underrepresent the spiritual dimensions of its evolution.

Despite these limitations, the essay succeeds in reframing monotheism not as an eternal truth, but as a historical innovation. Soler’s work contributes meaningfully to the study of religion by identifying the sociopolitical conditions under which belief in one god became dominant. His thesis invites readers to consider how theological ideas are embedded in human history and shaped by the contingencies of cultural survival. Even for those who do not fully accept his conclusions, Soler offers a model of critical scholarship that is both intellectually rigorous and thought-provoking.