CHAPTER 1

What Is the Old Testament?

The significance of the Old Testament for human history and culture is undeniable. Whatever our personal convictions regarding its content, the OT contains the origins of nearly everything we think about God. Variously labeled as the Hebrew Bible, the Tanak, the First Testament, and the Old Testament, among others, this library of texts from ancient Israel has been preserved for more than two thousand years.

Emerging from the polytheistic context of the ancient world, the enduring significance of the OT is to be found in the concept of monotheism. Indeed, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share in this unique religious legacy. We will discover in this chapter what lies behind the terminology we use when we speak of monotheism, and how the OT perceives and develops the understanding of a singular God. Known to ancient Israel as Yahweh, Israel's God came to be understood as Creator, source of all, and sovereign over all. Only in time would Israel come to believe that Yahweh was not only its God, and the God Israelites were called to worship, but the one and only God.

What you think about God – if you think about God at all – affects nearly everything else you believe to be true. Wars have been fought and nations divided based on what people think about God. On a more individual level, important personal and ethical decisions are often made based on what we think about God.

While you're thinking about God, consider this. Nearly everything we think about God has been expressed first in the Old Testament. A great many other assumptions about God, that God is vengeful

SIDEBAR 1.1. FRIEDRICH DELITZSCH'S REJECTION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1.1. The Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch. Delitzsch posed for this photograph in 1903, a few months after giving his first public lecture, "Babel und Bibel," in Berlin in January 1902. (Photo: Yale Babylonian Collection)

One of the leading professors of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922) created a sensation with his "Babel und Bibel" lectures. In a series of three lectures delivered in 1902, 1903, and 1904, Delitzsch championed Babylonian religion and culture as superior to that of the Israelites of the OT. He argued that the Israelites were an unfortunate regress in the history of religion; that the OT became increasingly law centered, resulting in the lamentable legalism of Judaism; and that first-century Samaria and Galilee were essentially Babylonian with Aryan racial stock, suggesting that Jesus was Aryan rather than Jewish. In the midst of international uproar, Delitzsch refused to recant. In his final publication, a two-volume work in 1920 and 1921 called *The Great Deception* (*Die Grosse Täuschung*), he sought to expose the OT as fraudulent, proposed that German Christians cut it from their Bibles, and warned that the Jewish people posed a threat to the future of Germany.

Delitzsch was preceded in his extreme views by the theologian and historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack had similarly argued that Christians in the nineteenth century should reject the OT in the name of progress. Such rank nationalism and anti-Semitism contributed to the historical and ideological foundations of the young German state and the rise of Nazism later in the 1930s.

or wrathful, for example, are *thought* to be in the Old Testament but are not, at least not as many assume. There are certainly exceptions to my assertion that everything we think about God comes from the Old Testament, such as the much later beliefs that Jesus is the incarnation of God or that God sent a final and definitive revelation to Muhammad. Yet even these have origins in the Old Testament. As a result, it's a pretty good idea to learn what the Old Testament has to say about God.

People have not always thought highly of the Old Testament. One famous intellectual in the 1920s argued that the Old Testament was no longer necessary for further human progress. In fact, Friedrich Delitzsch wanted to do away with the Old Testament altogether. He was not alone. Many have attacked the writings of the Old Testament in different ways and for a variety of reasons, and they have done so for many centuries. Yet the contributions of the Old Testament to human history and culture cannot be denied. Consider its impact on philosophy, for example, from the perspective of the "history of ideas" over the past three thousand years, and you will find that few ancient writings have had a greater influence. In addition, consider that millions of readers today still find in its pages a source of inspiration and faith. The purpose of this textbook is not to argue for the continuing value of the Old Testament, nor to convince you of either the truthfulness of

its religious claims or the untruthfulness of those claims. This volume seeks rather to introduce you to the Old Testament's content, structure, and central messages, and to do so by focusing on what it says about God. Its significance for you today will be left to you to decide.

This textbook is about a library. Like most libraries, this one houses different types of literature – history, songs, parables, prayers, and many others. As a collection of books and writings, this library tells of nations and empires, of tribes and families, of war heroes and crimes, of tragedies and triumphs, and above all, of the religious convictions of its authors.

But we're not talking about your average library here. This collection of writings, most often known as the "Old Testament," is the legacy of an ancient people from the Middle East – the Israelites. Many other groups of people just like the Israelites existed during that period of history. By contrast, for most of those other groups, we know little more than their names and for some, their approximate geographical homeland. Yet these writings of ancient Israel have been preserved for well over two thousand years, translated into all primary languages and many obscure secondary dialects, and have made a contribution to human history that is impossible to calculate. Everyday expressions you use instinctively, philosophical concepts you probably assume, and perhaps even faith you express have all been influenced to some degree by this ancient library.

Why? Why have Israel's writings left such an indelible mark on the world? The literature of most other peoples of the ancient world before Greece and Rome often vanished, leaving only traces here and there. Why did this singular collection of writings now contained in the Old Testament survive through the ages, and why has the Old Testament left such an impact on human history and civilization?

Many answers to these questions may occur to us when we think of sociology, history, or cultural studies. But I offer one particular answer here that commends itself through the heirs of the Old Testament itself. What I mean by this is that it is the distinctively *religious* contributions of the Old Testament that are continued in Judaism, and later in Christianity and Islam as well. These three so-called monotheistic religions have a common origin in the religious and theological writings of this library, specifically the Old Testament's conviction about the nature of God. Israel routinely refers to its national God as the sovereign Lord of the universe, and in a few contexts, even the *only* God of the universe. Indeed, the defining characteristic of the Old Testament is what I will call "Israel's gift to the world," the **monotheism** defined and propagated in its pages.

Not all will agree that monotheism is a "gift." In fact, monotheism itself is not even defined clearly in the Old Testament. Others contend that monotheism, whether defined clearly in the Old Testament or not, has a violent history and is certainly no "gift," whatever its origins. But this is getting ahead of our story. At this point, it is enough to know that ancient Israel's library – read and studied for centuries by countless believers as the "Old Testament," or the Hebrew Scriptures – is distinctive in the ancient world for its convictions about God and its profound expressions of God's nature, but especially of God's singularity or sole existence. For this and other reasons, Israel's library

has survived and has influenced the world dramatically. As the religious and literary foundation of the world's three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this library bequeathed by ancient Israel continues to be an important topic for us to explore.

Old Testament, Tanak, or Hebrew Bible?

We begin by asking in this chapter a question: What is the Old Testament? At first glance, we might assume that this would be a simple question to answer. But you may have noticed that the library of ancient Israel goes by many different names. Besides "Old Testament," it is also known as the Hebrew Bible, the First Testament, the Older Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, the **Tanak**, the Miqra, and others. In fact, the label we use for this body of literature reveals what we think of it, to some degree. But deciding what to call the Old Testament is not the only problem when trying to explain exactly what it is. We also have different collections of books and writings to be included in Israel's library, and differences in how they should be arranged. Some ancient traditions include more books, while others have fewer, and the order of the books varies as well. Here I will explain the various labels used for the Old Testament, and in the next chapter, I will turn to the question of the number and arrangement of its books.

The names we use for the Old Testament stem for the most part from the various faith traditions reading it. For Jewish readers, the writings of ancient Israel are known as the *Tanak*, an acronym based on the first letters of the three subdivisions according to their Hebrew names.[1]

T = *tôrâ* (anglicized as *Torah*), "law, instruction"
N = *nĕbî'îm* (*Neviim*), "prophets"
K = *kĕtûbîm* (*Ketuvim*), "writings"

Thus the T(a)n(a)k refers to the Old Testament simply as "the Bible." Jewish readers sometimes also call the Old Testament by another name, *Miqra*, meaning "reading" or "selection read out loud." This term is related to the Arabic word *Qur'an* (anglicized as Koran), which means "recitation."

The earliest Christians saw themselves as part of the Jewish community and assumed that the Scriptures of Israel were central to their own faith. Thus the New Testament often refers to the Old Testament partially using the subdivisions of the Jewish arrangement, "the Law and the Prophets," or simply as "the Scriptures," "the Holy Scriptures," or some variation. When Christianity emerged beyond its Jewish roots and became largely a gentile faith, its adherents began to struggle over the question of just how Christians were to relate to the Old Testament. Christianity slowly came to embrace a two-part Bible, of which the Scriptures of Israel were the first and largest part. The early Christian writer Tertullian (ca. 155–230 CE) applied the Latin labels *Vetus Testamentum*, "Old Testament," and *Novum Testamentum*, "New Testament," to the two separate portions of a new Christian Bible. Thus, "Old Testament" implies a distinctly Christian and theological interpretation

1 We will return to these subdivisions, and to other arrangements and sequences of the books of the Old Testament, in the next chapter.

of Israel's sacred writings. Yet the problem of how Christians read the Old Testament has never really gone away. Some Christians assume that the New Testament supersedes or replaces the Old. Others apply a rigid prophecy-fulfillment pattern between the testaments or otherwise a simplistic preparatory or so-called Christological reading. Because of these problems, some Christians prefer names such as *First Testament*, and *Older Testament*. But then readers are left with the awkward and misleading labels *Second Testament* (how many are there?), and *Newer Testament*. Most Christian readers continue to use "Old Testament" because of subtle uses of "new covenant" and "old covenant" in the New Testament itself (see Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:14).

For Muslim readers, the Old Testament, or at least its various parts, constitutes the first of a series of revealed sacred texts given to a sequence of God's legislative prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. These six were envoys or messengers who heard directly from God and bore a special burden of divine revelation over thousands of other prophets who did not hand down sacred texts. The Qur'an uses the term *kitāb* (pl. *kutub*) for "book" or, better, "scriptural text" to refer to divine revelations given to these six prophets. The Qur'an especially highlights and honors the revelations of the *Tawrāt* (Torah) given to Moses and the *Injīl* (Gospel) to Jesus. Yet each new and successive divine revelation or book surpassed the preceding one. In this way, the Qur'an, given to the world through Muhammad, is the final and definitive revelation of God to humanity.

So this problem of what we should call the Old Testament has not been resolved. In order to avoid privileging one faith tradition over others, scholars in interfaith or secular contexts often use "Hebrew Bible" for Israel's Scriptures. This designation has the advantage of avoiding non-English-sounding labels like *Tanak* or *Miqra*. More importantly, it avoids pejorative-sounding labels like *Old Testament*, which might imply that ancient Israel's library is outmoded and in need of replacing. Indeed, for most Christians, "Old Testament" is a theological assertion about the way Israel's Scriptures relate to Jesus, although there is disagreement about the details of that relationship. For this reason, "Hebrew Bible" is widely used today in many contexts. Nonetheless, this label also has its shortcomings. First, "Hebrew" is misleading because two books of Israel's library contain Aramaic, a closely related language to Hebrew.[2] Second, the adjective "Hebrew" may imply the existence of many other Bibles. Actually, we will see in Chapter 3 that there *is*, in fact, a Greek Bible, an Aramaic Bible, a Latin Bible, and so on, unfortunately suggesting an equal status to them all. People who use "Hebrew Bible" certainly understand the differences between all these, but the inadequacy of the label is clear.

The long-standing "Old Testament" is recognized the world over as a conventional designation for the books that make up Israel's ancient library. It is used in this textbook for convenience only in light of the inadequacy of the other designations and is abbreviated "OT." Whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or secularist, what you actually believe about the OT will be entirely up to you to decide.

2 Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26, and Daniel 2:4b–7:28, plus one verse at Jeremiah 10:11.

SIDEBAR 1.2. ISRAEL'S GOD, YAHWEH

The term "God" is from Old English, probably derived from the adjective "good," and is used in the OT for a number of different Hebrew terms for God, such as *El*, *Eloah*, and *Elohim*. These Hebrew terms for God are somewhat impersonal. Yet Israel did not perceive God as an impersonal, detached being. Like other peoples of the ancient world, Israelites had a distinctive personal name for God. Israel's God was known as "YHWH," usually pronounced "Yahweh." The origins, meaning, and even exact spelling of this name are uncertain. For now, it is enough to know that the OT originally used only the four letters of YHWH for the name, so that it is sometimes called the *tetragrammaton* (Greek, "four letters"). It occurs almost seven thousand times in the OT. The vowels used in "Yahweh" are something of a scholarly guess as to its original pronunciation.

Names in the ancient world were thought to reflect the nature and character of the name bearer, and so the name of Israel's God may reveal much about how Israelites perceived him. Unfortunately, we simply cannot trace its origins. Most scholars assume that it relates to the Hebrew verb "to be" and has a causative meaning such as "he causes to be," "he brings into being," or "he creates." If correct, the name is probably an abbreviation for something like "He who creates (the winds, or the universe, or Israel)," or more likely, "He who creates (the heavenly armies)." This last option would be the meaning of the OT's "LORD of Hosts," or YHWH Sabaoth.

> *Who is this King of glory?*
> *The LORD (YHWH) of hosts (Sabaoth),*
> *He is the King of glory. (Psalm 24:10)*

Yet the name may also be the Hebrew verb "to be" without the causative idea, meaning "He is" or "He reveals himself and is there (for you)." In this case, the original pronunciation would have been more like "Yihweh" than "Yahweh." Still others assume that the name identifies Israel's God as a storm god and think it means "He who drives the wind." Regardless of where the name came from originally, it came to mean for ancient Israelites the deeply personal God who lives in **covenant** relationship with them, as we shall see.

The Legacy of Monotheism

Having explored the various names for the OT, we return now to the question of why it has left such a lasting legacy in world history. You will recall that my answer is its religious contribution, especially the monotheism that found articulation in its heirs in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. No matter what we call it, the OT has clearly changed the world by inspiring its readers to believe in only one God. Just as what you believe about God affects everything else you believe, so the OT's views of God have changed the history of ideas in human civilization. Monotheism as defined in the OT is one of the most significant developments of history.

But it may surprise you to learn that the OT is not uniform in its views of God. It contains texts that assume polytheism (belief in many gods), in addition to passages that claim that ancient Israel's God, whose name is **Yahweh**, is the only deity. We *may* conclude that these are contradictory views, but Israel's authors and scribes appear to have worked from a developmental model. They assumed that God had progressively moved their ancestors away from polytheism through a concept of God's

universal sovereignty and eventually to an entirely new understanding of God as singular. In this way, they could retain the different views of God without fear of contradiction.

And here we have a danger. To avoid this danger I need to explain a difference between history and literature. I am not primarily exploring in this textbook what the ancient Israelites believed about God. That would be a *historical* question, relying on archaeology, socioanthropology, and so forth. I will eventually summarize what we can know about their religious beliefs based on a reconstruction of their history as best as we can know it (Chapters 10 and 11). But instead, we are primarily exploring what the OT claims about God, which is a *literary* and *ideological* question rather than a purely historical one. My task in this volume is to introduce you to the literature of the OT itself. So the more pertinent question is what these texts say individually about God, and what overarching concepts they claim when taken as a collective whole. As we walk through the OT together, you will see that the answer is not a simple one. Much of the OT assumes that Israel's God is sovereign over the nations or the universe, but it seldom articulates clearly that Yahweh is the only deity in existence. The expression of monotheism in the whole of the OT is greater than the sum of its parts.

Atheism

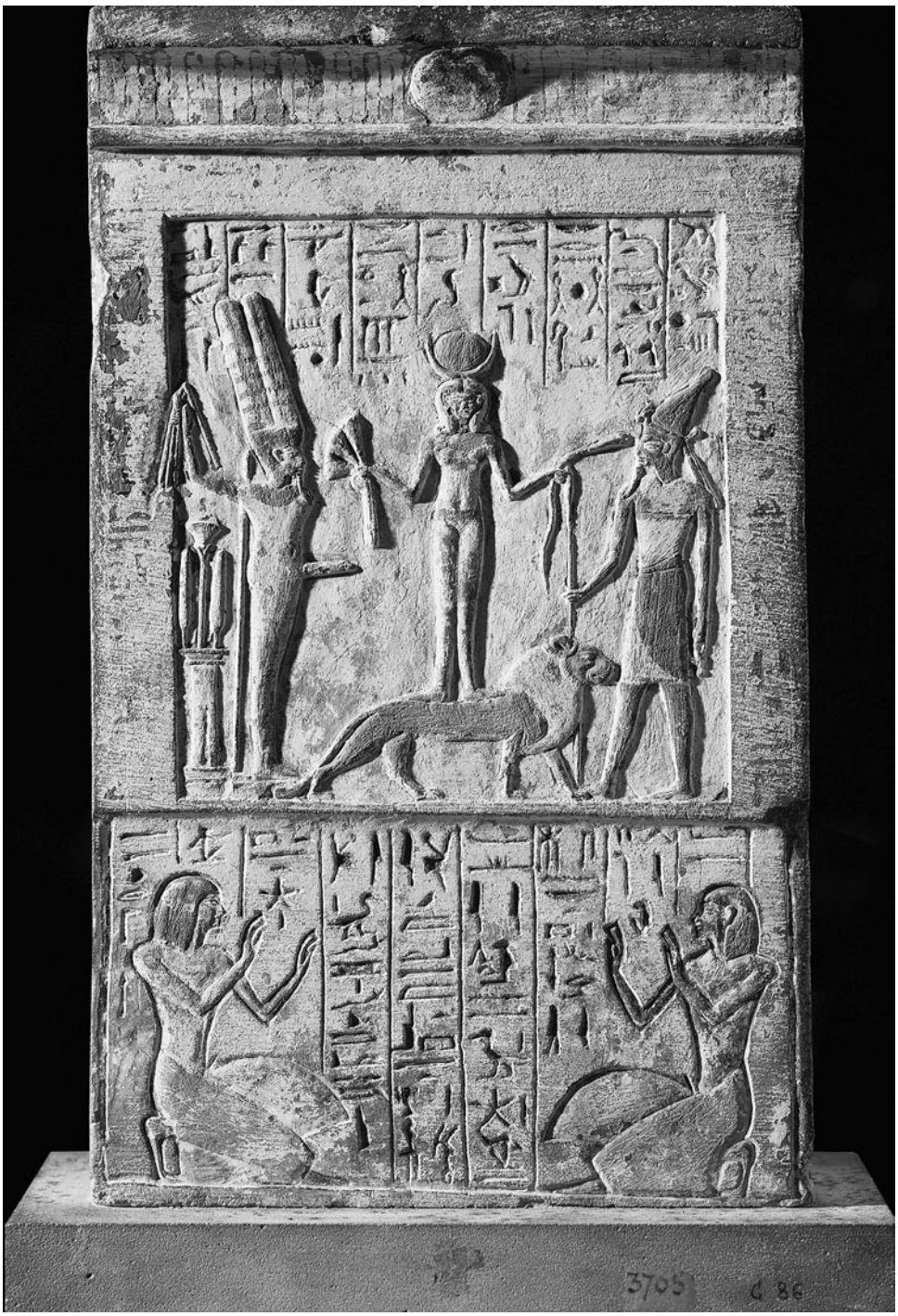
An idea gaining popularity in our day is that of atheism, the position that no deities exist. "Wide atheism" holds there is sufficient evidence to conclude that no gods exist, whereas "narrow atheism" may deny the existence of a particular deity or conception of deity. Generally today, however, most people use "atheism" for the position that no supernatural beings exist.

The OT never entertains this possibility. In fact, atheism is a relatively recent development, and it would be most unusual for anyone of the ancient world to consider it. All ancient peoples assumed the existence of divine forces in the cosmos; any other possibility was unthinkable. The assumption of the ancient Israelites may be summarized by the words of the Psalmist: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). The OT makes no attempt to prove God's existence. None was needed. Its authors perceived God at work in the universe and in the affairs of the nation Israel. To say otherwise was sheer folly. Accordingly, the opening words of the OT, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,"[3] sets aside the possibility of atheism.

Polytheism

The default position of all ancient peoples was the idea that many gods exist, all independently and coeternally. Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, and many others all believed in numerous deities. Most organized the various greater and lesser gods in a *pantheon,* in which highest rank was most often attributed to deities of cosmic dimensions, such as the sun or moon, or to powerful forces of nature, such as a storm god. Other important gods were associated with earthly governance, so that the chief deity of a particular city or region may rise to preeminence in the pantheon,

3 Or, according to some translations, "In the beginning God created."



1.2. Stele of Qadesh. Qadesh, a Syrian goddess of sacred ecstasy and sexual pleasure, came to be incorporated into the Egyptian pantheon in New Kingdom times. Here she stands on a lion, accompanied by her consort, another Asiatic god, Reshep (*to the right*), and by the Egyptian fertility god Min (*to the left*). Approximately 1295–1069 BCE. (Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, N.Y.)

such as Marduk of Babylon. The most important deities of a pantheon were often perceived as meeting in assemblies or divine councils for discussion of essential business and decision making.

The pages of the OT preserve relics of these beliefs for ancient Israel, although in most cases, later editors have suppressed the polytheistic bits. So, for example, Psalm 82 seems clear enough: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment" (v. 1). In this case, the author perceives God as taking his place among other gods in their divine assembly and condemning them for their failure to help the poor. Ultimately, God pronounces a death sentence on the other gods for their failure to provide justice (vv. 6–7), and the psalm ends with a call for God to reign supreme over all nations of the earth (v. 8). Some readers take these other gods as angels or spirits, but this text seems to preserve an ancient belief in a pantheon in which Israel's God was one member and rose to supremacy among the rest. Similarly, the "sons of gods" or "heavenly beings" of Psalm 29:1 must have originally referred to a divine assembly. But now those other deities are called on to praise Yahweh, Israel's God of glory and strength.

The OT has other passages that reflect an early belief in a divine assembly (consider Psalm 89:5–6, Job 1–2, or 1 Kings 22:19–22). One particularly important and interesting passage illustrates how the lesser gods have all been subsumed under the authority and supremacy of Yahweh. When Yahweh first came from Mount Sinai to become Israel's God, the "myriads of holy ones" became "a host of his own" and all the "holy ones" were given to his charge (Deuteronomy 33:2–3). Although the texts of these older poems are difficult to interpret, it appears that Deuteronomy 32:8–9 expresses the idea that each people group of the ancient world was allotted its own deity, just as Israel has been allotted Yahweh.

Be careful not to conclude that these few passages reveal widespread polytheism in early Israel. These texts are relatively few in number, are often open to various interpretations, and are certainly the exception rather than the rule. Polytheism was not the norm in the OT.

Henotheism and Monolatry

I want you to consider henotheism and monolatry together because they are so close in meaning. In fact, many assume that these two concepts mean the same thing. Generally speaking, they both refer to the belief in one god without denying the existence of others. Only one god really matters; the rest exist but are for someone else.

For our purposes, I want to suggest a subtle distinction between these two. We'll take henotheism as a philosophical belief, specifically an ontological belief. By this I mean henotheism is a cognitive *acceptance* of one god, while also admitting the existence of others. Everything else in the universe, including other deities, is thought to depend on one god. Monolatry holds the same belief but also makes the commitment to serve and be loyal to the one deity, especially as related to supporting the cult system of the one deity and sacrificing to that god. The deity is considered to be the one and only god at the time of worship. This is really only a matter of perspective and emphasis: henotheism relates to philosophical conviction, and monolatry

relates to worship. Both consider only one god as important.

The OT suggests that other deities – wherever they are thought to be real – are perceived as members of Yahweh's attendants or entourage. In this way, early Israel has been thought to hold to a "**monolatrous henotheism**," meaning Israelites are committed to worshipping the one God they believe is supreme over all others without denying the reality of the others.[4] Ancient Israel defines itself as loyal only to Yahweh as the incomparable God, although not the only god. It holds to Yahweh alone in belief and practice, without assuming the nonexistence of other deities. This is essentially the meaning of the **Ten Commandments**, when the text says famously, "I am Yahweh your God, . . . you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2–3). The command does not deny the existence of "other gods," only that Israel must not be devoted to them.

Monotheism

Simply stated, monotheism is the belief that there is only one God. Yet that is entirely too simply stated. The concepts expressed in the OT are much more complex, and so the term is often modified by adjectives. For example, *explicit* monotheism includes a specific denial of the existence of any other deity, whereas *implicit* monotheism functions as though there is only one God but does not specifically deny that others exist. Or, *emergent* monotheism refers to the gradual appearance of beliefs about the singularity of God; the concept is emerging in Israel's thinking but is rarely articulated fully. Another example is *affective* monotheism, assuming that Israel prefers a single deity, Yahweh, not as an expression of dogma or theology but as an expression of devotion.

The truth is, strict and philosophically expressed monotheism is a recent development and does not apply neatly to OT faith. Rather than a definition that expressly denies the existence of all other deities, something like the following is often given as a definition of biblical monotheism.

> *The mark of monotheism is . . . the idea of a god who is the source of all being, not subject to a cosmic order, and not emergent from a pre-existent realm; a god free of the limitations of magic and mythology.*[5]

This might be called *implicit* monotheism, in that it contains no precise denial of the existence of other deities. Yet it captures the OT's fixation on Yahweh, the God of Israel, as supreme over all beings, the source of all, and sovereign over all. The scholar who wrote that definition argues further that this type of monotheism is absent elsewhere in the ancient world except Israel. Maybe. But as we shall see, the Egyptian worship of Aten, and Mesopotamian hymns to the moon god and myths about the storm god Marduk came close.

Though we will be exploring the rise of monotheism in the pages of the OT, please remember that, as a philosophical assertion denying the existence of other deities, "monotheism" is far from adequate to describe OT faith. It is not

4 For "monolatrous henotheism," see the work of Baruch Halpern in "Where to Find More" at the end of this chapter."

5 For this definition, see Kaufmann (p. 29) in "Where to Find More" in this chapter.