Introduction: "One God, Two Jews, Three Opinions"

No Jews would dispute the fundamental importance of belief in God's oneness within their religion. To illustrate this point, your Jewish neighbor might cite for you the opening line of the Shema – the Jewish "confession of faith" comprising three biblical passages (Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41) – which begins with a clear affirmation of divine oneness: "Listen, Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one." Or another Jewish passerby might refer you to the Decalogue – the quintessence of Jewish Law – which includes the commandment to worship no other gods: "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exod 20:3). Yet, when you ask them of the *content* of this oneness, you will readily find that there is virtually no consensus. As the saying goes: "Ask two Jews, and you'll get three opinions."

The belief in God's oneness as the cornerstone of Judaism cannot be defined according to its essence, because it is a fluid concept that changes over the course of history. Even a cursory glance at classical literature reveals a vast spectrum of diverse and at times conflicting accounts of the divinity, including biblical and rabbinic descriptions of a personal God, Maimonides' discussion of the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover, and the Kabbalistic understanding of divine reality as a dynamic organism with varied aspects or *sefirot* – to name but a few of the approaches discussed later. These descriptions of divine reality share few commonalities, aside from the fact that they all purport to be the authentic reading of the Jewish Scriptures. What underlies this diversity is a simple fact: Different religious sensitivities give rise to different models for understanding and experiencing divine reality; and accordingly, what remains constant in the Jewish tradition is not a shared *understanding* of God's oneness but a shared *commitment* to the reality of that oneness – whatever its content may be.

I will revisit this conceptual diversity later in the Element and explore its existential and normative implications. However, before delving into that discussion, it is essential to delineate the diversity itself. I will begin by dividing Jewish history into four phases – biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern – and discuss some of the corresponding models for understanding the reality of divine oneness within each phase.

Above all, I urge you to keep in mind the following crucial point as you read this Element: Judaism, like many other world religions, can be understood in two different ways. One viewpoint sees it as a *unified system* comprising a coherent ideology with a set of practical norms. Within this framework, there is a notion of a more genuine version of Judaism, alongside deviant and erroneous variations. Alternatively, Judaism can be seen as an *ongoing conversation* among competing views about the teaching and practice set forth purportedly by its founder, Moses. Adopting this approach allows for an appreciation of the inherent plurality of

outlooks (cf. Hartman 1999; Sagi 2007). The choice between these alternatives not only shapes our approach to the varieties of religious experience and perspective discussed in this Element but also, as I will explain later, influences the extent to which we can have a genuine encounter with the other, human or divine.

Four remarks must be made before proceeding further: First, my primary aims are to tell a conceptual story of the Jewish belief in divine oneness, and thereby to outline the landscape of competing views of the subject as they have emerged in the course of history. In this regard, the nature of my analysis is typological rather than strictly chronological; at times, I depart from historical sequence for heuristic purposes.

Second, due to constraints of length, the Element cannot delve deeply into every significant issue. Each perspective discussed in this Element deserves a thorough examination in a full-length monograph, which is unfeasible in this shorter format. Some readers may also believe that it ought to have included one issue or another that went unmentioned. However, this Element does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the theme of divine oneness in Jewish tradition. Instead, its purpose is to foster informed discussions and reflections on the complexity, profundity, and internal diversity of the subject. I would consider my goal achieved – and say *dayenu* ("done enough!") – if I have made this intricate yet fascinating theme accessible to beginners while also inspiring interested readers to explore the topic further.

Third, some readers may perceive the scope of discussion as simultaneously too narrow and too broad. Too narrow – because its subject is not Jewish theology in its entirety but rather limited to one specific category, namely, divine oneness. Too broad – because I will discuss this category not in isolation but in relation to a network of related concepts and experiences. Expanding this horizon is essential, as the full significance and depth of the subject might otherwise not be appreciated.

The fourth and final preliminary remark is for the beginner: The word "Torah" (lit., instruction, guidance, or teaching) can bear multiple meanings. It can signify, in its most limited sense, the first section of the Hebrew Bible – also known as the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Alternatively, in a broader sense, it encompasses the entire corpus of sacred literature or the whole body of religious teachings and precepts in Judaism. The meaning of the term should be self-explanatory from the immediate context in which it appears.

Biblical Phase

The Hebrew Bible is a literary anthology of writings that were produced in ancient Israel, a canon that Jews and Christians traditionally believe contains

revealed teachings. As a record of God's eternal covenant with the people of Israel, it traces their formative period within a broader spectrum, from the creation of the world up to the restoration of Zion after the Babylonian exile. This anthology as a whole can thus be viewed as presenting a cosmic drama, whose protagonists are God and humans, and whose focus is the interpersonal relationship between the two. Within this spectrum, the biblical story of God's covenant with Israel unfolds.

Despite scholarly efforts, we do not know exactly how or when the biblical texts were selected and codified as Jewish scripture. However, we do know that by the fifth-century BCE, the first five books of the Bible were canonized as the Torah, while by the second-century CE, all other books were deemed sacred and canonical. In any case, the Hebrew Bible has always been foundational to Judaism, making it logical to start our inquiry into the Jewish understandings of divine oneness with this text.

Before proceeding, it is important to note three caveats. Firstly, when discussing the religion of ancient Israel, it is crucial to distinguish two types of religion: "biblical religion" and "ancient Israelite religions" (Dever 2001; Sommer 2009: 145–174). Biblical religion refers to the religion prescribed in the Hebrew Bible, with its internal diversity, while ancient Israelite religions encompass a broader range of religious beliefs and practices existing alongside biblical religion in antiquity. For example, archaeological findings suggest that some ancient Israelites believed their deity (YHWH) had a female consort, a fertility goddess called Asherah. In contrast, while some biblical texts hint at or preserve traces of this belief, none of their authors seem to have endorsed it (Weinfeld 1996; Sommer 2009: 44–49, 155–159). Be that as it may, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the exact relationship between these two kinds of religion – some arguing for their essential congruence, whereas others for a lack thereof (cf. Greenstein 1997; Geller 2000; Sperling 2020). I have therefore limited the scope of this section to biblical religion.

Secondly, biblical literature is a culmination of contributions from multiple authors spanning over a millennium. While all its books acknowledge the supremacy and incomparability of the biblical God, they also display varying theological outlooks. Again, there is no scholarly consensus here – some emphasize their essential consistency, while others highlight their polyphonic nature (cf. Goldingay 1987; Geller 1996; Schwartz 1996; Knohl 2003; Carasik 2014). Additionally, since some of the wisdom texts (e.g., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) place little emphasis on God's direct intervention in human life and history, several critics have attempted to identify naturalistic, impersonal concepts of God in those texts, which significantly diverge from the rest of the Hebrew Bible. However, given that the biblical wisdom tradition is also theistic,

I find such a hypothesis untenable. All in all, I have avoided the intricacies of these and other contested subjects, focusing instead on general issues.

Finally, various scholarly efforts have been made to explain the origins of biblical religion. I, for one, concur with the view that empirical inquiry cannot, and indeed need not, address this topic – or any inquiry concerning the veracity of revelatory claims – given its inability to penetrate into what lies behind the ultimate nexus of reality. In other words, empirical research is better suited to examining the history and phenomenology of biblical religion *subsequent to* its inception (Jindo 2012: 239–241; Sommer 2017: 216–218).

In what follows, I will first delineate some of the constitutive categories of biblical religion – namely, divinity, humanity, sin and evil, divine kingship, and the universe. Afterward, I will delve more specifically into the theme of divine oneness.

God's Name and Gender

The term "God" typically translates various Hebrew words such as *'el*, *'eloah*, or *'elohim*, likely stemming from the root *'yl* or *'wl*, meaning "to be powerful." Most frequently, the Hebrew Bible spells the proper name of the God of Israel with the Hebrew letters, *yod-heh-vav-heh*, commonly referred to as the Tetragrammaton, meaning "four letters" in Greek. This name is believed to originate from the verb *h-v-h*, meaning "to be," with the masculine subject prefix *y-*; however, its exact meaning remains unknown (one interpretation suggests understanding it causatively as "the one who brings into being"). Conventionally, the Tetragrammaton remains unpronounced – probably vocalized as Yahweh – and is often spelled as YHWH or Lord (Ben-Sasson 2019; Lobel 2021: 91–125).

Biblical Hebrew, like other Semitic languages, employs gendered nouns, categorizing them as either feminine or masculine, unlike Biblical Greek, which includes a "neuter" gender. Correspondingly, verbs in Biblical Hebrew are conjugated based on the gender they govern. YHWH, the God of the Hebrew Bible, is consistently portrayed in the masculine gender, often depicted with human male attributes, such as king, father, warrior, and husband, although there are exceptions (cf. Isa 42:14; 49:15; Gruber 1992: 1–15). However, the interpretation of this gendered language remains open to debate, as it is uncertain whether it signifies something about God's essence or merely reflects the roles attributed to God.

Some argue that since both male *and* female humans are created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27; 5:1–2), the biblical God embodies both sexes. Others contend that the biblical God transcends the category of sex and gender

altogether, suggesting that YHWH is sexless (cf. Frymer-Kensky 1992). As discussed later in the Element, both the bisexual and asexual perspectives on divinity are extensively elaborated upon in the medieval phase – the former in certain kabbalistic trends, while the latter in their philosophical counterparts.

Absolute Freedom and Personhood of the Biblical God

The Hebrew Bible opens with a creation account, which establishes the relationship between God and the universe. In this biblical narrative, creation is depicted as an act of bringing order to the cosmos, rather than production of matter out of nothing – a concept known as *creatio ex nihilo*, which emerged later. Through the triumph over chaotic forces, creation establishes a cosmic space where the divine and the human can cohabit. However, biblical authors do not view this victory as final, as they often attribute undeserved evil to the persistence and resurgence of such forces. Nevertheless, prophets envision that the ultimate triumph will one day prevail (Isa 25:6–8; 27:1; 51:9–11; Levenson 1994).

Equally significant, the opening creation story (Gen 1:1–2:4a) articulates fundamental postulates of biblical religion. It emphasizes that the world we inhabit is a purposeful creation of the one supreme deity, and that natural phenomena – such as heaven, earth, sea, sky, and luminaries – are not divinities themselves but rather components of the manifold works of the creator deity. This perspective secularizes nature, rejecting immanent concepts of divinity prevalent among neighboring cultures (Berger 1967: 105–126).

This clear distinction between YHWH and nature should not be mistaken – as is often the case – with the notion of ontological separation, which suggests that any interaction between YHWH and the world is logically impossible. Instead, the distinction should be understood in terms of absolute freedom: that this deity is not restricted by primordial nature or any other forces, metaphysical or otherwise. Thus, biblical religion can acknowledge the existence of other celestial entities to the extent that their existence does not compromise YHWH's absolute freedom (e.g., Exod 15:11; Deut 10:17; Mic 4:5; Ps 29:1–2). Overall, what characterizes biblical religion is the qualitative (rather than the numerical) oneness of this deity: the absolute supremacy of YHWH as the one and only (Kaufmann 2017a [1937]; Sommer 2017). This concept of a singular supreme deity who transcends fate and nature forms a basis for divine interpersonality, arguably the defining uniqueness of biblical religion: that a deity who controls nature – including the deity's own nature – alone can freely and continually engage in an interpersonal drama with humankind (Muffs 2005: esp. 55–60). As succinctly stated: "Judaism conquered nature and put in its place the

personality that revealed itself in an act of love. Everything that formerly had a natural quality to it took on, in Judaism, a personalistic cast. The cosmic sphere is now personal, moral, communicative, and loving" (Muffs 1992: 45).

The abstract conception of the biblical God as devoid of form and personality – often encountered in the contemporary discourse of biblical theology – is ultimately of Greek origin and therefore extrinsic to biblical religion (Kaufmann 2017a). The biblical God is consistently experienced and understood as a *relational subject*, always portrayed as the living God rather than an abstract principle or process. Consequently, philosophical categories of perfect being, such as "first cause" or "pure being," fail to adequately capture the reality of this deity. Indeed, these categories lack life and responsiveness, and insofar as relationships are concerned, they are deficient and imperfect. Similarly, the theological concept of "divine simplicity" is foreign to biblical religion, as the biblical deity exhibits a multifaceted personality expressed through the drama of interpersonal relationships (Heschel 1996: 267–285; cf. also Wyschogrod 1989: 82–124; Jaffee 2001). It is no surprise, then, that biblical authors use narrative – rather than propositional statements – as a main medium for portraying the divine relationship to human personalities. For no other mode of communication can better capture the complexity of such interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics than storytelling (Talmon 1988; Muffs 2005: esp. 97–102). It is also worth noting that making God's image is prohibited in the Bible not because God is invisible or incorporeal, but rather because any representation is unworthy of God and also inimical to substituting a symbol for what it represents (Halbertal and Margalit 1992: 45–48).

God's Antagonist: The Human Being

In the biblical worldview, where there are no celestial rivals and meta-divine forces that limit divine will, only one creature retains the ability to challenge the authority of God: humanity. Human beings stand before God not as a force that can constrain the divine reality, but rather as a personality that engage God in the complex normative and psychological relationships. Much of the biblical cosmic drama revolves around this tension between divine and human agency (Muffs 1992: 9–48; Muffs 2005; cf. also Halbertal and Margalit 1992: 68–73; Kaufmann 2017a [1937]: 310).

In this respect, the early history of humankind can be read as a story about normative development. Initially, the first humans possess the capacity to obey or disobey God's commands. However, akin to toddlers or children, they lack the ability to discern whether a particular action is inherently good or evil. By eating

from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve gain the capacity to make normative choices on their own – without relying solely on God as the exclusive arbiter in normative matters (Wyschogrod 1986). At stake is the acquisition of moral independence akin to puberty, an irreversible process. Biblical literature thus invites readers to reflect if and how humans, including readers themselves, can develop an optimal relationship with the sense of autonomy and normative agency they have acquired, thereby fulfilling their own telos.

Human freedom, in turn, is facilitated by two types of divine acts: self-adjustment and self-limitation. The first act acknowledges human fallibility and adjusts, when necessary, the standards of expectation. In simpler terms, God adapts to the knowledge gained about humans, who are God's own making. A clear example is found in the epilogue to the Flood narrative, where God acknowledges the inherent evil inclination in the human heart (Gen 8:21) and modifies the earlier command of a vegetarian (or frugivore) diet, permitting meat consumption as a partial concession (Gen 9:3–4; cf. 1:29–30). As for God's act of self-limitation, it is vital not only for humans to actualize their potential – because personality cannot function without freedom – but also for divine sovereignty to be authentic. Otherwise, coerced reverence and subsequent obedience would undermine God's authenticity as cosmic sovereign.

Sin and Evil

Biblical literature exhibits a tendency to conceive of sin and evil as a consequence of human freedom. If the world operates according to the absolute will of a moral and just deity, the problem of evil is inescapable. In this regard, the book of Genesis attributes all the basic evils – natural (e.g., death, pain, and toil), moral (e.g., murder and violence), and religious (e.g., impiety and idolatry) – to human responsibility, that is, to the primordial inclination of humans to aspire for autonomy and overcome their creaturely status (Kaufmann 1960: 292–295). What involves this aspiration is not merely a problem of *self-deification* (seeking to be *like* God) but, more fundamentally, the *eclipse of God* (seeking *independence from*, and perhaps *replacing*, God). As astutely stated: "The inner meaning of sin [in this primeval narrative] is not simply an act of disobedience against God but an attempt to overthrow God by making man into a God-like creature" (Wyschogrod 1986: 106).

In biblical thinking, sin and moral evil derive from a lack of true knowledge of God, often referred to as the "fear of God" (*yir'at 'elohim*) by biblical authors. This fear, or reverence, arises from a profound recognition that humans are objects of divine attention, and that the ultimate source of their norms and existence is not themselves, but the divine sovereign (Jindo 2011). This recognition sets

fundamental standards of behavior, even in situations where no legal sanction is enforceable. The presence of this fear deters individuals from committing interpersonal wrongs, including murder (Exod 1:17, 21), adultery (Gen 39:9), exploitation of the vulnerable (Deut 25:18), betrayal of trust, or abuse of authority (Gen 42:18). Conversely, its absence may embolden individuals to engage in such transgressions (Gen 20:11; Deut 25:18). Because this attribute involves a deep understanding and close relationship with divinity, its semantic equivalents include such terms as "knowledge of God" (Prov 2:5; 9:10) and "loving God" (Deut 10:12).

Humans are expected to know such basic standards of conduct on their own, just as Cain (Gen 4) and the generation of the Flood (Gen 6–9) are held responsible for their acts of misconduct, without prior warning from God. In biblical thinking, only in the eschatological time will non-Israelites fully grasp the vanity of idolatry and acknowledge the supremacy of YHWH. Until then, Israel alone is held guilty for idolatry, whereas other peoples are generally judged for violating basic standards of conduct rather than for idolatry itself (Kaufmann 1960, 74–76, 386–388, 424–425; Tigay 1996, 435–446).

Strikingly enough, biblical texts recognize the existence of celestial beings that can entice humans into sin (e.g., Gen 3:1–5; 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Job 1–2; cf. Deut 13:4 [v 3 in Heb]). If individuals succumb to such temptations, they are accountable for their actions. The underlying idea is that humans possess not only moral agency but also the capacity to cultivate personal traits whereby they can resist such enticements and inner impulses (Gen 4:7).

As biblical religion tends to attribute misfortunes to human responsibility, it can promote a belief that the suffering must be a consequence of sin. Accordingly, any conflict between the notion of a just order and the reality of individual suffering might readily be dismissed as illusory. However, the Book of Job – the biblical tale of innocent suffering – serves as a corrective to this tendency (along with many of the crisis psalms in the Psalter; cf. Westermann 1987: 259–280; Brueggemann 1995: 98–111). Not only does the Book of Job reject the practice of blaming the innocent sufferer to resolve the problem of evil, but it also exposes the injustice inherent in theodicy, which transfers responsibility from God to the human victim (Glatzer 1969; Greenstein 2009).

Divine Kingship

Biblical authors comprehend the operation and meaning of reality, more often than not, through a complex paradigm of divine kingship. YHWH is conceived of as king, the heavenly council as royal court, the universe as dominion, and humans as subjects.