Introduction

"God is one" has been called Judaism's "primary testimony of faith." In this book, I examine what these specific words, taken as a kind of religious slogan, mean in this Jewish context. Readers will likely already understand, of course, that these words do not have a single meaning and probably never did. The history that this book will narrate is about the surprisingly many meanings they can bear and how they come to take on some of these meanings at various periods. I will concentrate on important turning points in the history of Judaism and its intellectual progenitors and interlocutors – ancient Near Eastern religiosity and its Egyptian, Israelite, and Judahite varieties; Hellenistic and rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity; medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy and early Kabbalah; and modern Jewish thought – to bring a long historical perspective to this question. The structure and tone of this book is therefore as a narrative history from antiquity to modernity.

This broad of a temporal scope is rather more ambitious than is typically undertaken in a work of scholarship. Many scholars have dedicated entire lives to studying each one of the topics to be considered in every section of every chapter that follows; and I rely on these studies and their conclusions throughout the book. My work is often synthesis, to which I add my own expertise and research conclusions: at times I aim that the whole be greater than the sum of its parts through the perspective that an effective synthesis of existing scholarship combined with a broader consideration offers; and at times I engage with and critique the existing scholarship so as to explore innovative aspects of specific historical junctures. And by concentrating on the actual words "God is one" as expressed by religious adherents, apologists, and their critics in their own

languages, I both narrow down the topic of consideration and avoid excessive reliance on categorical concepts that are themselves the subject of significant disagreement, most importantly the notion of "monotheism" itself as I will discuss presently. In this way this book aims to make a significant scholarly contribution to the history of Judaism broadly even while addressing only as much of that history as can be reasonably managed in book of standard monograph length.

The difficulties with the term "monotheism" in premodern studies are well known.[1] Although the words "atheist" and "polytheist" existed in the ancient world, albeit with meanings somewhat different from the modern words,[2] the word "monotheist" did not. The word "monotheism" is first attested in the 17th century. At that time, the English philosopher Henry More, in a defense of his form of Anglican Christianity, attacked those who "make the World God," something like what we would now call pantheism: "This kinde of Monotheisme of the Heathen is as rank Atheisme as their Polytheisme was proved before."[3] The word remains uncommon into the early nineteenth century, by which time it can be used to express the idea that Judaism is monotheistic: the English physician Thomas Cogan writes, "[The Jews] have continued firm in the abhorrence of idolatry, and in their adherence to pure Monotheism, under every persecution."[4] By the fourth decade of that century, the German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher is able to use the word as referring to something common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, thus approaching typical contemporary usage.[5]

What is interesting is that these three modern writers were all polemicists writing to extol their own forms of Christianity as superior to other religions. This endeavor, it seems, led to the need to characterize beliefs

[1] Fredriksen, "Mandatory Retirement"; and see Hayman, "Monotheism"; Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism"; Hurtado, "Ancient Jewish Monotheism."

[2] "Atheist" in particular had a broader meaning in antiquity, so a person that we would call a "monotheist" could be accused of being an "atheist" for rejecting the Greco-Roman pantheon; see Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14, but cf. Philo, *On the Creation*, 170–172, cited in Chapter 3 at n. 126 (and see there the Greek phrase *tēs polytheou doxēs*, translated as "propounders of polytheism," a pejorative usage first attested here). And see Grossberg, "God is One," for texts in which the idea that "God is one" is treated as a kind of atheism because it rejects the Greco-Roman gods.

[3] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. monotheism (also see there s.v. monotheist). Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 19, writes that More was attacking Unitarian theology here.

[4] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. monotheism; Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 211 n. 7.

[5] See Markschies, "Price of Monotheism," 109.

that were like and yet unlike their notions of Christianity so that specific strategies of attack and defense could be devised. But Schleiermacher's idea, still common today, that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all "monotheistic" religions is an innovative one. Historically, many adherents to these religions would not have recognized their theologies as being the same at all. The problem is that these thinkers were less trying to define the term monotheism than they were deploying it to create categories that supported their own polemical aims.

Actually trying to define monotheism, however, seems inevitably to lead to taking sides in one or more historical controversies that are the very subject matter under concern. Definitive controversies throughout Jewish history regarding the existence and nature of deities or divine manifestations or expressions – the biblical "heavenly host" or the "Angel of the LORD," Philo's Word, the rabbis' Divine Presence, the Kabbalists' Sefirot, among others – and their relationship to God suggest that any definition that is useful for our broad history must be inclusive but also sufficiently narrow in scope. Monotheism, from its etymological components, *monos* signifying "one" and *theos* meaning "God," combined with a suffix suggesting a doctrine or theory,[6] literally means most succinctly, "the doctrine that God is one."[7] This is, no doubt, a rigorous scholarly definition of monotheism. But, as we shall see, although ancient languages did not use that word, many people did start by the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods to insist frequently that "God is one." So our definition provides no more information than these words did two thousand years ago. It just defers the question of what "God is one" means.

And so I will have no need for the term monotheism in this book, nor closely related terms such as atheism, polytheism, henotheism, and monolatry (except, conventionally, for the book's title, necessitated by the history of scholarship). But I will, of course, need some kind of terminology. And, arguably, no theological term can be entirely free of conjecture and controversy. Even the common distinction of "God" in upper

[6] I will discuss the semantic range of the Greek *theos* in antiquity the coming chapters. See Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism," on the range of meanings of "-ism" in modern and ancient languages. The relevant usage here is "a system, principle, or ideological movement" (ibid., 461). The *Oxford English Dictionary* has for "-ism" (as a standalone expression): "A form of doctrine, theory, or practice having, or claiming to have, a distinctive character or relation."

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. monotheism, "The doctrine or belief that there is only one God."

case versus "god" in lower case, which I adopt in this book, is freighted with such difficulties. So I will here, by way of summarizing the coming chapters, discuss some of the terms and concepts that I will use in each as our story unfolds and the ideas that "God is one" expands to include develop. My use of these from chapter to chapter will be progressive, aiming to show how developments in intellectual history reconceptualized earlier notions for their own purposes. But the following outline will serve to illuminate our overall analytical structure.

The first part of the book studies the early history of the expression "God is one" by examining texts that predicate the numeral "one" (e.g., *w'*, *heis*, *'eḥad*) of nouns signifying divinity (e.g., *nṯr*, *theos*, *'eloah*),[8] so we will require these three terms: deity/divinity (which I will use synonymously in both the nominal and adjectival forms), god, and God. I aim to use these in their current contemporary senses, understood broadly and generally to encompass the wide range of ideas that we will be considering. Chapter 1 first considers an important pre-biblical religious tradition, the ancient Egyptian. In Egyptian texts, referring to a divinity as "one" was generally meant to praise its subject not to express ideas about its relationship to other divine beings, though we will examine a possible exception around the middle of the second millennium BCE. We will then consider the earliest evidence for YHWH in Israelite religiosity because YHWH will eventually be praised by declaring, "YHWH is one" (in Deuteronomy 6:4; biblical translations often substitute "the LORD" in small caps for the *tetragrammaton*, the four letter sacred name that I will typically render YHWH; but I will also use "the LORD" when the specific name is not at issue, especially in the second half of the book).

Deity will be used in this and subsequent chapters to refer to what might best be called a rank in an imagined order of being. At an unspecified level of rank above humanity such a being can be called a deity or described as *divine*. In its most general sense, then, the lower case *god* can be used synonymously with these terms, a deity or divine being. During most of the ancient period any number of beings could be so described, as we will discuss as we proceed. And this continued to be so even while the innovative idea developed in the late biblical and Hellenistic periods that this ranking formed a hierarchy leading up to something conceived of as in some significant sense beyond this ranking, which for this reason we

[8] I will examine these three expressions, *nṯr w'*, *heis theos*, and *'eloah 'eḥad*, from ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew, respectively, in detail in the coming chapters, along with similar expressions in other ancient languages.

can signify with the capital, *God*.[9] Subsequently, by late antiquity, a new idea came about of a broad gap of separation between this and all other beings, and so referring to any other being as divine at all becomes potentially ambiguous and even impious. In other words, in some contexts there would be no contradiction in believing simultaneously in one "God" and in many "gods"; but in others, "god" implies a pejorative denigration even to the extent of non-existence.

These last few sentences highlight the ambiguity and evaluative judgments inherent in such terms. But my aim here is not to define them absolutely so much as to delineate a general usage that will accommodate the full range of ideas that we will encounter throughout this book. Conventionally and for consistency, however, exceptions will be necessary in our usage of these terms for our subject expression, "God is one," always capitalized, and for biblical verses, where I will typically follow the RSV, but context will make this clear and we will discuss in detail the Hebrew Bible's contested and evolving theological notions (I use the term *theology* broadly and inclusively, here and throughout, only as a convenient general term for ideas about divinity, as is common in the scholarship).

In Chapter 2, I will examine the expression "God is one" in the Hebrew Bible. Most scholars agree that some form of belief in the existence of one God did form in the later biblical texts, so that the deities of the traditional pantheons of the ancient Near East came to be thought of only as functionaries in God's divine council or as even lesser beings or as entirely imaginary. But the biblical text does not express this notion using the expression "God is one" (i.e., biblical phrases such as *'el 'eḥad*, lit. "one God").[10] The expression "YHWH is one" (*yhwh 'eḥad*) from

[9] Thus not merely "most high," which could also be applied to the head of a traditional pantheon as a human king is called "highness" (as in Psalm 89:27 referring to King David; and see n. 64 in Chapter 1 on scholarship suggesting that the biblical appellation "Most High" might originally have represented a distinct divinity and the discussion of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and Psalm 82 in Section 2.2, e.g., at n. 17 on the Ugaritic pantheon), but some more fundamentally categorical distinction. This kind of linguistic distinction might already be adumbrated in the Bible itself, for example, in Deutero-Isaiah, which most scholars argue already reflects a belief in the existence of only one God: Saul Olyan argues that the author is redefining the word *'elohim* to no longer apply to the "gods" of the traditional pantheons (though he argues against characterizing this as "monotheism"; see n. 70 in Chapter 2). More definitely, Philo makes a distinction between "*a* god" and "*the* God," as I will mention presently.

[10] As I will explain in detail in Chapter 2, and see n. 1 in Chapter 1 on variant ways of predicating "one" of generic nouns signifying divinity. This phrase is from Malachi 2:10 (see Section 2.5).

Deuteronomy 6:4 is eventually deployed for this purpose, but this was a reconceptualization that occurred over the Hellenistic period, as we well examine as we proceed. I must emphasize here that for more precise analysis I will need to observe a consistent distinction in the first four chapters of this book, which are concerned with the ancient period, between predicating "one" of a generic noun signifying divinity (e.g., *'eloah*, *theos*, rendered as "God is one") and predicating "one" of a named deity (e.g., *yhwh*, *dionysos*, rendered as "YHWH is one" or "Dionysus is one"). By the medieval period, "YHWH is one" is firmly established in this broader meaning so this distinction becomes less significant, but it will be important to keep it in mind for the four chapters on antiquity.

Chapter 2, then, will survey the phraseology the Hebrew Bible uses to express its notions of the relationship between YHWH and other divinities. Although the Hebrew Bible hardly uses the expression "God is one" at all, the idea that YHWH is the only God that exists emerges most conspicuously in deuteronomistic editorial layers associated with the innovations of the seventh century BCE Josianic reforms. To simplify this very difficult task, we will consider broadly three textual layers spread throughout the biblical books: an earliest stratum that exists mostly in a few compelling hints that preserves evidence of a very early theology according to which YHWH was just one deity in a larger pantheon; the dominant theology of most of the Bible according to which YHWH was the greatest among the gods; the theology that post-dates this deuteronomistic editorial hand, according to which only YHWH is God; and, finally, the idea expressed only rarely that YHWH is "one." For the sake of a basic stylistic organization, I will refer to these four biblical notions as theological *exclusivity*, *incomparability*, *solitude*, and *unity*, respectively. As I will discuss, these concepts can, depending on literary context, shade into one another in complex ways so that it can be difficult to make distinctions with certainty. The line in particular between incomparability and solitude – between the notion that one divine being is the greatest among its peers and that one such being is distinct in a more fundamentally categorical if not always clearly explicated fashion – is an especially difficult one to draw, and it is likely for this reason that the entire notion of a multitude of divine beings becomes so problematic. For brevity, I will often refer to the Hebrew Bible as just "the Bible," or, because it is uncertain by what date in antiquity the Jewish canon was fixed, more narrowly as "scripture"; in later chapters, I will also use the word "Torah," which takes on an expansive sense in the rabbinic period.

Chapter 3 will be concerned with the Hellenistic period, during which time the expression "God is one," *heis theos* in Greek, starts to be definitely attested in something near its current sense. Around this time also, especially in the work of Philo of Alexandria, the distinction between "God" and "god" more explicitly becomes a matter of concern, for example, in Philo's distinction between the use of *theos* for the highest Word, meaning something like "*a* god" or "*a* divine being," and *ho theos* for "*the* God." Yet even so, Philo's phraseology is not always so precise. In one well-known instance, he even refers to the Word as a *deuteros theos*, as I will discuss.[11] In this chapter, I introduce the tension between *transcendence* and *immanence* as a theological problem inherent in notions of God as beyond the world, who created numerous divine agents in a ranked hierarchy: how can God be both beyond the world and present in it in order to interact with it? And, regarding the relationship between such beings, the concept of *subordination* to characterize an explicitly non-equal and lesser being will become a significant analytical term.

Chapter 4 begins Part II of this book. Having narrated the emergence of the slogan "God is one" in something approaching its modern sense in Part I, we will examine the remarkable variety of ideas that this slogan can signify. We will start this chapter with a brief consideration of early Christianity and its historically consequential doctrinal controversies about the relationship of the historical Jesus of Nazareth to the God of the Jewish Bible. Here the term "God" will be supplemented in some cases with *Godhead*, a term used when drawing a distinction between divine expressions or manifestations imagined to be somehow "internal" to the divine structure itself and those "external" to it.[12] In either case, as these complex relationships between divine beings or expressions become more controversial into the fourth century, I will use the terms *subordinationism* and *modalism*, not as normative heresiological judgments but rather to represent two points along a range of possibilities in this regard, indicative of "lesser" or "the same," respectively; the crux being, as we shall see, that neither was acceptable to some Christians and this influenced one articulation of the Christian Trinity as "three persons in one substance."

[11] See Chapter 3 at nn. 152–161, where I explain the sense of the term there as "secondary to God" rather than a more literal "second God."
[12] See n. 3 in Chapter 4 for a definition.

But our main concern in Chapter 4 will be the rabbinic literature. Because this literature is so important for all subsequent history of Judaism, yet common English equivalents of its key texts and concerns were never established in the scholarship, my approach will resort to the extent practicable to the rabbis' own idiosyncratic terminology and textual practice: *minim*, "two powers," and the ritualized recitation or citation of Deuteronomy 6:4, "YHWH is one," in place of direct discourse on what "God is one" means. However, it will be notable that the rabbis and the articulation of Christian trinitarianism just alluded to seem to agree in essence that the earlier widely accepted theology of a hierarchy of divinities needed to give way to a wide gap of separation between the highest and all subordinate beings. This, I will suggest, is the theology the rabbis proclaim in reciting "Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is one." The rabbis' "two powers" opponents might thus be considered as similar to subordinationists, who believed in the existence of divine beings near to God such as the Jewish Word, the Memra of the Aramaic Targums.

By the medieval period, on which we will concentrate in Chapters 5 and 6, Jews finally start explicitly to discuss, in depth and in detail, what "God is one" means. The specifically Jewish version of this concern arises in direct conversation with similar trends in Islam and in polemical response to Christian doctrine. Most significant in Jewish philosophy of the ninth to the twelfth centuries is the concern with what is referred to as *negative theology*, the subject of Chapter 5. This general term refers to a set of concepts based on the foundational idea that God, being transcendent and ontologically one, cannot or ought not be described using ordinary predicates at all. Concurrent with this theological approach, the problem of *knowledge of God*, how God can be known if not through ordinary predicates, becomes a major concern. This latter question, of what "God is one" means in light of negative theology and what its implications are in regard to knowledge of God will remain the primary theme for the last three chapters.

The medieval response to negative theology and its challenging notions of the unknowability of God in the thirteenth and fourteenth century Kabbalah is the subject of Chapter 6. The rabbis' and the philosophers' God becomes for some a complex Kabbalistic Godhead, comprised of Ein Sof and the Sefirot, both immanent and transcendent, knowable and unknowable. The Sefirot themselves and the tension between the one and the ten, in polemics, in counter-polemics, and in the self-formation of the Kabbalists will be our concern.

In the final chapter of the book (Chapter 7), we will concentrate on the modern period. Terminology becomes less of an issue here with the modern usage of terms such as pantheism and atheism becoming more directly applicable to the thought of even early figures such as Baruch Spinoza. Obviously what "God is one" has meant to Jewish thinkers throughout this period is too large of a subject to consider in exhaustive detail in a single chapter. But two important perspectives, both set in the context of a surprisingly traditional, practical, and personal religious faith, which, even so, offer diametrically opposed answers to what "God is one" means and to whether knowledge of God is possible, one at the start of modernity and one contemporary, will provide an interesting and unexpected temporal and ideological contrast. This will help to illuminate the range of answers to the question of negative theology and knowledge of God that is the theme of these final chapters.

I should reiterate that this book's concern is with the actual words "God is one" rather than with "monotheism" as an abstract category or the many other ways of expressing ideas about the existence or nonexistence of divinities of various sorts and the complex relationships between the many ways that such divinities have been seen as being manifest. An exhaustive study of "monotheism" might need to take account of more such variants and to make more definitive evaluative judgments about them than will be required in our history. The slogan "God is one" has a complex and fascinating evolution in antiquity, and eventually becomes ubiquitous, finding its way into doctrinal formulas and influencing polemics between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This specific formulation, with its evocative implications regarding God's nature, was directly implicated in these controversies. Our more concentrated focus will thus be of value in itself but also adds a fresh and illuminating perspective to these perennial concerns.

And finally, regarding style, I will present all texts in translation, indicating the source either in the main text or in the notes. Translations from the Bible will be from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated (I will always cite chapter and verse according to the RSV, even when alluding to Hebrew phrases from the Masoretic Text that may differ in this regard). Other translations from the Hebrew or Aramaic are mine unless otherwise indicated, though I have consulted in all cases with available translations. When non-English phrases are required to clarify an argument or matter of discussion, I will transliterate non-Roman alphabets. Such transliterations will appear in italics using slightly modified versions, depending on the language in each case, of the Society

for Biblical Literature's "general purpose style." For non-English words or names used in the scholarship, I employ this same transliteration system non-italicized, omitting apostrophes and diacritical marks (thus Shema, Arbaah Turim, etc.), but with exceptions for common practice or stylistic reasons (e.g., Akiva rather than Aqiva, etc.). I follow a similar style or standard scholarly practice on titles of all primary sources, but preferring unabbreviated English forms when practicable (thus y. Berakhot, but Genesis Rabbah, for rabbinic literature; but e.g., *Allegorical Interpretation*, etc., for Philo).