Maimonides on Embodiment—An Anti-biblical Theology?
A Study in the Development of Doctrine
(Or, How Cardinal Newman Helped Me Understand That Maimonides Is a Jewish Thinker)

בנימין זומר

בית המדרש ללימודי יהדות (JTS)

The Tanakh consistently conceives of God as a physical being, nowhere more clearly than in the Book of Genesis. In the book's opening chapter, God addresses unnamed heavenly creatures as follows: "נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו" and in the next verse, the narrator tells us, "ויברא אלהים את־האדם בצלם אלהים ברא אתו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם" (Genesis 1.26–27). The combination the Hebrew terms used here, דמות and צלם, pertain to the physical contours of God.[1] These verses begin from the assumption that God and the heavenly creatures to whom He speaks have a particular shape— that is to say, they are bounded in space. The Hebrew phrase בצלמנו כדמותנו as used by Priestly authors in Genesis 1.27 and 9.6 first of all conveys information about physical shape, not abstract qualities.[2] This becomes clear from another P verse, Genesis 5.3: "ויחי אדם שלשים ומאת שנה ויולד בדמותו כצלמו ויקרא את־שמו שת." There the phrase must retain its physical meaning; after all, humans have no ability to bestow abstract attributes or ethical qualities at birth to their offspring. At least in Genesis 5.3, then, the Priestly author unambiguously uses

[1]For a defense of this claim, see Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68–70 and further references there.

[2]To be sure, later Jewish and Christian interpreters attributed moral or spiritual meanings to the terms דמות and צלם in these verses as well as in Genesis 9.6. and some of those meanings may even fit the context of these verses. But those interpretations supplement the terms' basic, physical meaning without superseding it.

the terms צלם and דמות in the sense they typically have in biblical Hebrew, to refer to physical shape and form.[3] It strains credulity to argue that P uses these terms differently in 5.1, 9.6, and 1.26-27.

As one moves forward in Genesis, one quickly arrives at additional verses that assume that God has a body. In Genesis 2.7 God blows life-giving breath into the first human—an action that suggests that God has a mouth or some organ with which to exhale. In Genesis 3.8, Adam hears the sound of God going for a stroll in the Garden of Eden at the breezy time of the day. A being who takes a walk is a being who has a body—more specifically, a body with something closely resembling legs. Shortly thereafter, God comes down from heaven to earth to take a close look at the tower the humans are building (Genesis 11.5), and God walks to Abraham's tent, where He engages in conversation (Genesis 18). Again, these are actions of a being with or in a body; a non-embodied being would not need to descend to look at the tower or walk towards Abraham to chat with him. They point towards a crucial similarity between the divine body and any other body (human or non-human, animate or inert): The divine body portrayed in these texts was located at a particular place at a particular time. It was possible to say that God's body was here (near Abraham's tent, for example, in Gen 19.9–10) and not there (inside the tent itself), even if God's knowledge and influence went far beyond that

[3]From among the many discussions of the term in biblical scholarship, see especially the helpful discussions in משה וויינפלד, "האל הבורא בבראשית א' ובנבואת ישעיהו השני," תרביץ ל"ז תשל"ד עמ' 112 עד 116, and W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 5–6 and 117–76. The fundamental studies that brought biblical scholarship to this conclusion are Theodor Nöldeke, "צלם und צלמות," *ZAW* 17 (1897): 183–87 (see especially his forceful argument on 186) and Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark Biddle, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 113–14. For review sof biblical scholarship on the issue, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 147–55, Phyllis Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities. Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 123–26, and Garr, *passim*. For a rare case of a modern Jewish theologian who defends this reading and explores its implications, see Michael Wyschogrod, "Incarnation and God's Dwelling in Israel," in *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 165–78.

particular place. This is what I mean by "a body": *something located in a particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance*.[4]

A decade and a half ago, I wrote a book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, that described these and other biblical conceptions of divine embodiment. I argued that in some biblical texts (for example, the nonpriestly texts of the Pentateuch, starting with their very first narrative in Genesis 2–3) God differs from humanity not because humans have bodies while God does not, but because a human being has one body, while God has many at a given moment.[5] For other biblical texts (such as the Priestly source) God has only one body, which had the same basic shape as a human body. But the divine body differed from human and animal bodies because it was made not of flesh but of an intense fiery or luminous substance.[6] Like P, Deuteronony assumes that God has only one body, but for the authors of ספר דברים והספרות המשני־תורתית, we cannot know anything about this body, since it is located in heaven and never comes down to the earth where it might be observed.[7] Biblical authors, I maintain, have multiple and conflicting ideas about God's body or bodies; they debate each other about the nature of divine embodiment; but no biblical text denies that God is an embodied being.

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[4]My definition follows René Descartes' distinction between *res extensa* and *res cognitans* in his *Meditations*, II.8.

[5]See Sommer, *Bodies*, 38–57.

[6]See Sommer, *Bodies*, 68–78.

[7]See the classic treatments of transcendence in ספר דברים והספרות המשנה־תורתית: Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David Stalker (London: SCM Press, 1953), 37–44, esp. 38–39; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 191–209; Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1982); Stephen Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 1996), 30–61. For a defense of the line of reasoning in the work of these scholars on on transcendence in D against the alternate positions of scholars such as Bernd Janowski, "'Ich will in eurer Mitte wohnen': Struktur und Genese der exilischen Scheckina-Theologie," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 2 (1987): 175, and Helga Weippert, "'Der Ort, den Yhwh erwählen wird, um dort seinen Namen wohnen zu lassen.' Die Geschichte eine alttestamentliche Formel," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 24 (1980) 77–8, see my remarks in Sommer, *Bodies*, 62–68, esp. 216 n. 24.

A brief review of my book by הרב ניל גילמן began with the words, "Maimonides and Maimonideans beware!"[8] Perhaps I should have begun my book with prescisely this warning! After all, the book repudiates Maimonides' reading of biblical and rabbinic texts pertaining to the nature of God. Indeed, while working on the book and during the years that followed its publication, I often found myself wondering why, exactly, Maimonides came to be regarded as the central figure of Jewish philosophy. Following a line of reasoning openly argued by Michael Wyschogrod and put forward more subtly by Abraham Joshua Heschel, I implicitly questioned Maimonides' place in Judaism's postbiblical canon.[9] In what follows, I would like explain how my thinking on this issue has evolved since then and, more particularly, why I have come to realize that Maimonides' attack on anthropomorphism remains loyal to a thoroughly anthropomorphic scripture.

Moses vs. Moses: Maimonides' Anti-Biblical Theology

[8]Neil Gillman, "The Bookshelf," *Qolot—CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism* (2009 Winter): 11.

[9]For a harsh critique of Maimonides' view on corporeality as fundamentally non-Jewish, see Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith. Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), xiv-xv Wyschogrod, *Body*. A respectful but insistent anti-Maimonidean theme is a *Leitmotiv* throughout Heschel's long career. Because Heschel was (as Harold Stern, "A.J. Heschel, Irenic Polemicist," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* 45 [1983]: 169–77, puts it) an irenic polemicist, he rarely mentions Maimonides' name while pointing out the un-Maimondean nature of biblical, rabbinic, and much medieval Jewish thought, but the object of his polemic is clear, especially in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) (originally published in 1962), אברהם יהושע השל, תורה מן השמים (לונדון וניו יורק: שונצינו ובית המדרש לרבנים באמריקה, תשכ"ב ותש"ן) {please find information on newer edition edited by Dror Bondi}, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1955). At times, Heschel discusses a debate between two thinkers, one of whom is a stand-in for Maimonides; in *Torah min Hashayim*, Rabbi Yishmael plays this role. In Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, A Jewish Lights Classic Reprint (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), the Kotzker rebbe plays this role. In Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Toward an Understanding of Halacha," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 127–45, the Maimonides figure whom Heschel subjects to gentle yet thoroughgoing criticism is his own youthful self during his years he spent as a doctoral student in philosophy and rabbinical student at the Reform seminary in Berlin.

First, however, let me sketch out the way in which Maimonides' theology is fundamentally anti-biblical (and also anti-rabbinic). Maimonides devotes a substantial section of his masterwork, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to the question of why the Bible speaks so often in corporeal terms of a deity who is (Maimonides believes) incorporeal. Maimonides devotes the first seventy chapters of the *Guide* to presenting a detailed argument that the Bible never means what it says in its frequent references to the divine body, and he occasionally returns to this theme in the 108 chapters that follow. For Maimonides, the denial of God's corporeality was an essential element of monotheism.[10] A God with a body would be a God who could be divided, and for Maimonides the belief in a divisible God constituted a type of polytheism that was even more objectionable than the belief in many gods.[11] Thus Maimonides writes,

> What, then, of one whose misbelief regards God Himself, whose belief is contrary to the truth about Him—who does not believe that He exists, or who believes Him dual, corporeal, passive, or lacking in any way? Such a person is surely worse than a pagan who takes idols for mediators or who deems them beneficent or maleficent. Be advised, then, that if you be such and believe God corporeal, or subject to any physical state, you "rouse His jealousy and anger, kindle His wrath," and become a worse "enemy and foe," far more "hateful to God" than an idolater.[12]

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[10] In rejecting of God's physicality, Maimonides was preceded by both Saadia (who influenced him directly) and Philo (who did not). But Maimonides presents the classic and lengthiest defense of God's incorporeality in Judaism, and it was Maimonides' influence that made the idea standard in Jewish thought going forward.

[11] See זאב הרוי, "שאלת אי־גשמיות האל אצל הרמב"ם, הראב"ד ושפינוזה," מחקרים בהגות יהודית, ערכו שרה א' הלר וילנסקי ומשה אידל (ירושלים: מאגנס, תשמ"ט), עמ, 63 עד 79 ובמיוחד 63 עד 69.

[12] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed: A New Translation*, Translated and with Commentary by Lenn Goodman and Phillip Lieberman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024), I:36, p. 65 {Please find corresponding passage in the translation by Michael Schwartz's Hebrew translation. In case you're looking up the source in the English transaltion by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) , it's page 84).}

He makes a similar claim in the Thirteen Principles (in his commentary to Mishnah Sanhedrin, ch. 10), where, as Zev Harvey has noted, he regards God's unity and God's non-corporeality as closely related or even identical.[13] In laying out the first principle, on God's unity, Maimonides focuses heavily on God's non-corporeality, avering that God is "not as one human being who is a compound divisible into many unities; not a unity like the ordinary material body which is one in number but takes on endless divisions and parts. But he, the exalted one, is a unity in the sense that there is no unity like his in any way."[14] Conversely, in laying out the third principle, which denies God's physicality, Maimonides focuses on God's unity, explaining that God's "unity is not a body nor the power of a body, nor can the accidents of bodies overtake him, as e.g. motion and rest, whether in the essential or accidental sense."[15] This emphasis is not confined to Maimonides' philosophical work. In his law code, Maimonides rules that a person who believes that God has a body is a heretic (מין).[16]

This point is central to Maimonides' thought, as Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit explain:

> According to Maimonides the great error is anthropomorphism, which is manifested in two ways: perceiving God as a body and attributing to God emotions and psychic life. One who makes such errors concerning God is worse than an idol worshiper who worships idols as intermediaries . . . For Maimonides the belief in the oneness of God meant not merely denial of polytheism, which is obvious, but, more important, denial of the perception of God himself as a complex being . . .

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[13] הרוי, "שאלת אי־גשמיות," עמ 63.

[14] This translation from the Arabic original comes from J. Abelson, "Maimonides on the Jewish Creed," *JQR* 19 (1906): 48. {Please use the translation of The Commentary on the Mishnah by Rav Yosef Kafaḥ.}

[15] Abelson, "Maimonides," 48.

[16] M. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Hamadda‡, Hilkhot Teshuvah, 3.7.

> 'Multiplicity' is . . . not only the belief in many gods, it is also an error that concerns God himself, which may be called 'internal polytheism.' The strict demand on unity implies a rejection of corporeality, which assumes that God is divisible like any body and which excludes more subtle violations of unity such as linguistic predication in general . . . Corporeality is a gross error in being the vulgar notion of the common people. The idea of matter is associated with decay, and it is also conceptually connected with finitude. Both decay and finitude are most unfitting notions to combine with the idea of a perfect God. Moreover, corporeality entails divisibility, and hence the notion of a corporeal God undermines God's unity. This leads us to the second error, that of multiplicity.[17]

Yet references to an embodied God appear again and again in the authoritative texts on which these philosophers based themselves—not only in the Bible but also in the classical rabbinic literature of the Talmuds and midrashic collections.[18] It follows, as

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[17]Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 110–12.

[18]On the anthropomorphic conception of God in rabbinic literature, see especially Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature," *HTR* 87 [1994]: 171–95, and יאיר לורברבוים, צלם אלוהים – הלכה ואגדה (תל אביב: שוקן, 2004) עמ' 14 עד 22 ו־292 עד 335. David Aaron criticizes several aspects of Goshen's presentation in David H. Aaron, "Shedding Light on God's Body in Rabbinic Midrashim: Reflections on the Theory of a Luminous Adam," *HTR* 90 [1997]: 299–314. He takes issue especially with Goshen's attempt to relate apparently contradictory discussions of the divine body to each other. Goshen's fundamental insights, however, remain valid: the rabbis never articulated a concept of a spiritual or non-corporeal God; and God's body seems to have consisted of or emanated an extraordinary light. To be sure, some passages in rabbinic literature have been read as objecting to anthropomorphic depictions of God, but a closer examination shows that these passages are concerned not with the metaphysical problem of attributing a form to God but with the practical or ethical appropriateness of the humble forms sometime attributed to Him; and rather than objecting to such attributions, they set out to justify them. See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 62–66.

Various rabbis debate whether exceptional human beings can see God. The view that humans can do so is associated with Rabbi Akiva and his school, while the opposite view is associated with Rabbi Ishmael and his school; see the collection of sources and discussion in אברהם יהושע השל, תורה מן השמים באספקלריה של הדורות (לונדון: שונצינו תשכ"ב): כרך א' עמ' 262 עד 297 {***please get page #s in new edition edited by Dror Bondi**}. Even the view that humans never see God, one should note, does not deny that God has a body; rather, those who hold this view insists that its extraordinary luminosity renders it impossible for humans to see it. See, *e.g.Sifre* 255, which assumes the existence of a divine body that is as real as (and much brighter than) the sun.

Maimonides' critic and older contemporary, Abraham of Posquières (the Ra'avad), already observed, that from Maimonides' point of view, many great rabbinic authorities were heretics.[19] Indeed, it appears that Maimonides would have regarded the authors of the Bible as guilty of this sin, were he not convinced that he had understood them correctly when he argued that they didn't mean what they appeared to have said.

Moses and Monotheism

If my book, *The Bodies of God*, portrays biblical theologies, then Maimonides *oeuvre* must lay out an anti-biblical theology. Indeed, articulating and defending this anti-biblical theology was a central goal of Maimonides' entire intellectual-religious project. Or so it seemed to me when I was writing the book. In more recent years, however, I have come to realize that Maimonides' approach to anthropomorphism can be seen not as anti-biblical but as hyper-biblical. Maimonides disagrees with the Bible's anthropomorphism precisely because of his deep commitment to what we may call "biblical monotheism." (The term "monotheism" is anachronistic in relation to the Bible but nonetheless legitimate—that is to say, it is a useful tool that helps identify something distinctive about biblical theology in its ancient Near Eastern context.) I would like to argue that Maimonides understood biblical monotheism more fully than the biblical authors themselves. This fuller understanding enabled him to realize that the Bible's anthropomorphism is in conflict with the Bible's monotheism.

On anthropomorphic conceptions of God in rabbinic and related literature, see further Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 34–35, who notes that the speculations about God's body in the *shi'ur qomah* literature "were at the very center of rabbinic Judaism in tannaitic and talmudic times" and their gnosis "is a strictly orthodox Jewish one." On early Christian claims that Jews of late antiquity regarded God as embodied, see Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *HTR* 76 (1983): 270–72, who regards these claims as accurate.

[19]See his gloss (השגה) on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Hamadda*ʿ*, Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3.7.On this passage, see further הרוי, "שאלת גשמיות," עמ, 69 עד 74.

Let me begin this argument by sketching out what I mean by "biblical monotheism." The Bible does not deny the existence of other gods and goddesses. The Hebrew Bible often refers to heavenly creatures other than Yhwh, calling them בני אלים, בני האלהים (see, for example, Genesis 6.2, Psalms 29.1, 89.7, Job 1.6), אלהים (Psalm 82.6, 86.8), מלאכים (Numbers 20.16, 2 Samuel 24.16, 1 Kings 13.18, Zechariah 1.11-12, Psalm 78.49, Job 33.23), קהל קדשים and סוד קדושים (Psalm 89.6,8), and צבא השמים (Deuteronomy 4.19). Even the Decalogue does not deny the existence of אלהים אחרים (Exodus 20.3, Deuteronomy 5.7); it merely directs Israelites to have no relationship with them. The fact that the Bible knows a personal name for God, דהיינו שם הויה, points in the same direction. The use of a name to refer to this deity suggests that there may be other deities out there; names are necessary when we talk about a particular member of a larger class.[20] To be sure, the Bible portrays these other deities as subject to Yhwh. It is Yhwh who assigned these other gods their roles over other nations according to Deuteronomy 4.19–20 and Deuteronomy 32.8.[21] Psalm 82 which raises the possibility that one day Yhwh may fire these deities from those roles so that He will rule over the nations directly; a similar conception underlies Isaiah 19. But the subjection of the other gods to Yhwh on its own does not demonstrate that the Bible is monotheistic; after all, other gods were more or less subject to Zeus and Marduk in Greek and Babylonian mythology, and we tend to agree that those mythologies are polytheistic.

Now, if we were to define monotheism to mean the belief that no heavenly beings exist other than the one God, then it is clear that the Hebrew Bible is not a monotheistic

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[20] Hillel Ben-Sasson***—get Hebrew page #s from copy at home.

[21] The idea is comes across even more clearly in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint versions of this verse and of Deuteronomy 32.43. But it is still clear in the MT, as Ramban's commentary to Leviticus 19.1 makes clear, on which see אלון גושן־גוטשטיין, "אלהים אחרים בתורת הרמב"ם: עיבודים רעיוניים והשלכותיהם על יחס אפשרי לדתות אחרות," על פי הבאר: מחקרים בהגות יהודית ובמחשבת ההלכה מוגשים ליעקב בלידשטיין, ערכו אורי ארליך, חיים קרייסל, דניאל י' לסקר (באר שבע: אוניברסיטת בן גוריון בנגב, 2008), עמ' 28 עד 62.

work. But that would be a simplistic definition.[22] After all, rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all exhibit a belief in angels, beings who reside in heaven and who do not normally die. In the case of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, we can also note a belief in saints residing in heaven, i.e., humans whose death had no long-term impact on their on their continued existence and activity; death for them constituted nothing more than a change of venue from earth to heaven. Similar beliefs are attested, albeit in a less formalized way, in Judaism and Islam (especially in its Shiite and Sufi forms).[23] The simplistic definition of monotheism would require us to classify not only the Hebrew Bible but most forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as polytheism. Such a definition fails to capture something essential that distinguishes these religions from classical Greek religion, from most forms of Hinduism,[24] and from Shintoism. A category of polytheism

[22]On the definition of monotheism, see Sommer, *Bodies*, 145–74, and Benjamin D. Sommer, "Yehezkel Kaufmann and Recent Scholarship: Toward a Richer Discourse of Monotheism," in *Yehezkel Kaufmann and the Reinvention of Jewish Biblical Scholarship*, vol. 283, ed. Job Jindo, Benjamin D. Sommer, and Thomas Staubli, OBO (Fribourg and Göttingen: Academic Press and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 204–39.

[23]Many Jews, Christians and Muslims even believe that one can direct prayer to these beings with realistic hope of the prayer's efficacy. While halakhah prohibits such prayer to Jews, in principle such prayer is compatible with what E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 204, terms "diffuse monotheism," which is "a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him." These other divine beings (gods of wisdom, justice, iron tools, wrath, cultivation, etc.) form the *orìṣà*, the Yoruba pantheon. The high God Olódùmarè, Idowu explains (62), "is *not* one among them. He is 'wholly other' than they. But they are under His constant vigilance and control, and to Him they owe absolute fealty." Multiple rabbinic authorities (e.g., Tosafot to b. Sanhedrin 63b; Moses Isserles' gloss to *Shulḥan ʿArukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 156) recognizes the permissibility—for non-Jews—what Idowu calls diffuse monotheism, which it terms שיתוף. For a defense of the relevance of Idowu's concept in spite of critiques of his work by some anthropologists, see Sommer, "Yehezkel Kaufmann," 234–38.

[24]Though it must be stressed that the Advaita Vedanta school is an important exception to this generalization—indeed, an inscreasingly important one, since a majority of Hindus outside of South Asia define themselves as monotheists. On Hindu monotheism, see, e.g., Wendy Doniger, "Are Hindus Monotheists or Polytheists?" in *On Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10–20; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other God: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry*, Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), esp. 147-172. On the problems involved in applying the Western category of "polytheism" to Hinduism, see Alan Brill, *Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish-Hindu Encounter* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 161–63. Brill lays out specific reasons that Jews should be wary of the entire category; his reasons apply fairly well to Catholic and Orthodox Christians as well. ***Sperber

that includes both Shintoism and Judaism, both the worship of the Greek pantheon and the worship of the biblical God, is so large as to be meaningless.

The neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) and הוגה הדעות וחוקר המקרא Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963) proposed a definition of monotheism that is more helpful. For Cohen, God's uniqueness rather than God's oneness is the essential content of monotheism. He writes:

> It is God's uniqueness, rather than his oneness, that we posit as the essential content of monotheism . . . For in polytheism the point in question is not only the gods and their plurality but also their relation to the cosmos and its vast natural powers in all of which a god first appeared. Therefore, if monotheism opposed polytheism, it also had to change God's relation to the universe in accordance with its new idea of God. From the point of view of the new notion of God, therefore, one cannot rest satisfied with the distinction between one God and many gods; rather, the oneness of God has also to be extended over nature, which manifests itself in many forces and phenomena. Thus, from the very outset the concept of God's oneness involves a relation to nature. This oneness immediately acquires a significance that takes it beyond the opposition to plurality and elevates it even beyond mere opposition to the notion of *composition*. The notion of composition contains a relation to nature; therefore, with regard to nature also, the meaning of the oneness of God must ward off the notion of composition.[25] {Note for when you're looking for this in the Hebrew translation: this is from the beginning of the first chapter}

[25]Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, translated by Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 35, and see all of the first chapter (35–49) for Cohen's detailed discussion of biblical monotheism.

What distinguishes the Bible from other religious texts known from the ancient world is not that the Bible denies the existence of Nabu and Chemosh or Apollo—it doesn't—but that it insists that Yhwh is qualitatively different from all other beings in the universe, including other deities: Yhwh is not vulnerable to actions taken by other deities, nor is he subject to any power in nature. Kaufmann emphasizes especially this last point:

> מהות האמונה הישראלית היא האידיאה, שאין הויה על־אלהית, ואין חוק וגורל על־אלהיים. האלהות עליונה על הכל, רצונה שולט בכל שלטון ללא גבול וצמצום. בינה ובין ההויה אין קשר טבעי (או טבעי־מגי). אין האלהות תלויה בחוקים נצחיים וכחות על אלהיים הקובעים את גורלה במערכת היש. אין בשלטונו ובפעולת רצונו של האל כל צמצום מיתולוגי־מגי.
>
> . . .
>
> האידיאה הדתית המקראית . . . היא איפוא אידיאה של אל עליון על כל חוק וסבל־גורל וקורות־חיים, אל לא נולד, שאין בהויתו פריה וחמדת מין, בלתי תלוי בחומר וכחותיו, אל, שאינו נלחם מלחמת־שלטון עם כחות אלהיים אחרים, שאינו נפתל עם כחות הטומאה, אל שאינו לא מנחש ולא מתנבא ולא מכשף, לא מקריב קרבנות, לא חוטא ולא מתחטא ולא חוגג חגי גורלו. רצון אלהי עליון על כל ההויה—שהו חותמה של הדת המקראית, ובזה שונה היא מכל הדתות על פני האדמה.[26]

Monotheism, then, is the belief that one supreme being exists, whose will is sovereign over all other beings and—significantly for my concern here—over all other powers in the cosmos. In the mythologies of Israel's neighbors in Mesopotamia, Canaan, Egypt, Hatti, and Greece, deities are subject to powers stronger than they are.[27] This is true even of the king of the gods, whether Zeus or Marduk, El or Baal. These gods' powers were great, but they derived largely from the gods' ability to manipulate matter through special

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[26]Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelit*, [in Hebrew] 4 vols. (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Bialik and Devir, 1937–56), 2:418, 588.

[27]Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:245, 447–48.

techniques, especially the use of language and ritual. Thus Ea and Belet-ili use incantations to create humanity in *Atraḫasis*.[28] These same techniques, usually termed "magic," are available to humanity as well. Of course human beings' mastery of these techniques pales in comparison to that of the gods, but this difference is one of quantity rather than quality. In ancient Greek and ancient Near Eastern religions, there exists a realm of power independent of, and greater than, the realm of divinity.[29] Classical Greek sources such as Herodotus, Plato, and Aeschylus articulate this idea explicitly: even a god cannot escape his destined lot or necessity (μοῖραν or ἀνάγκην).[30] Evidence of the subjection of deities to supradivine forces appears with great frequency in the literatures of ancient Greece and the ancient Near East. But nowhere in all of biblical literature do we see God subject to any other power. It is in this qualitative sense that the Bible is a monotheistic anthology.[31] As Yochanan Muffs puts it, the God of the Bible is "utterly

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[28]See the Atraḫasis Epic, Assyrian recension I iii (Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993], 1:190; Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* [Oxford: World's Classics, 1991], 16).

[29]Thus the role of the gods when they are mentioned in certain Mesopotamian rituals is merely to aid the humans in accessing those powers, which transcend even the gods' realms but were better understood by the gods than by humans. See H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 131–33.

[30]See Herodotus, *History* 1.91.1; Plato, *Laws* 5.741; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 515-20. See further Otto, *Homeric Gods*, 263–64, and Albert Henrichs, "Moira," in *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2000), 8:340–43.

[31]What I have constructed in this section is an argument from silence: the absence of crucial elements found in the polytheistic religions of Israel's neighbors leads me to conclude that the Hebrew Bible exemplifies monotheism and not merely monolatry. In regard to any one text, such an argument lacks validity. We cannot say definitively that Exodus 15.11, or Exodus 20.2-3, or Psalm 82 or 96, on its own, must be a monotheistic text. But when we examine a wide variety of biblical texts from several genres (narrative, law, prophecy, prayer), the consistent omission of unambiguous polytheistic themes is revealing, and in such a case, an argument from silence is legitimate. To be sure, some texts within the Hebrew Bible on their own can be understood in a polytheistic fashion if one so chooses. But the fact that the Hebrew Bible as a whole fails to attest any examples that *must* be read in a polytheistic fashion justifies the conclusion that this anthology as a whole is a monotheistic one, and that all these texts in their canonical context are monotheistic.

other than the stuff of the world or its laws...Neither magic nor fate controls Him."[32]

Independently of Cohen and Kaufmann, the Swiss scholar Adrian Schenker expressed essentially the same concept of a non-numerical monotheism. He writes,

> Monotheism must not be defined exclusively in terms of being and non-being. It suffices that a god should be of a nature or a degree so different from all other gods that this deity transcends them in a manner analogous to the transcendence of the gods in relation to human beings.[33]

Schenker refers to this sort of monotheism as "a monotheism of transcendence which encompasses polytheism":[34] it is a monotheism of transcendence in the sense that the one God is qualitatively different from all other beings, whether heavenly or mundane, and it encompasses polytheism because it acknowledges the existence of other heavenly beings.

We may sum up the Bible's qualitative monotheism (or, using Schenker's term, its monotheism of transcendence) this way: biblical monotheism posits not the non-existence of other deities but rather a fundamental contrast between Yhwh and other deities of the ancient world:

- Ÿ Yhwh was never born.
- Ÿ Yhwh never has sex.

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[32]Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 55. All this is in utter contrast to the pagan deities, who, Muffs explains (12), "are subject to internal, physical needs, but also to external, magical forces. There is a mysterious power in substances, in forms, in numbers, and in colors. No god ever put it there; it is a given. Just as water is wet and fire is hot, so certain substances are intrinsically powerful and dangerous. The power of magic is natural and autonomous. It is not dependent on the will of the gods. On the contrary, it is the gods who are dependent on it."

[33]Adrian Schenker, "Le monothéisme israélite: un dieu qui transcende le monde et les dieux," *Bib* 78 (1997): 437–38.

[34]Schenker, "Monothéisme," 448.

- Yhwh never gives birth and never biologically fathers a child.
- Yhwh never dies.

All the deities depicted in Greek, Canaanite, Hittite, Egyptian, Sumerian, and Assyro-babylonian myths did at least one of these things, and most do several of them. Rather than denying that the gods and goddesses of these myths exist, the Bible implies that they are more like human beings than they are like Yhwh, and also more like horses and sheep and worms, for gods and goddesses, humans, and animals are biological entities who can be born, have sex, give birth or sire, and die. In the case of humans and animals, death is an inevitability (rare exceptions notwithstanding—e.g., Enoch and Elijah), whereas for the gods death is a possibility. But Yhwh is a different sort of being. Yhwh is not a creature. Unlike Marduk and Dumuzi, unlike mosquitos and dodo birds, unlike me and my dog, Yhwh never experiences any of these bullet points.[35]

The Limits of the Bible's Theological Imagination

The core idea of biblical monotheism, then, is that Yhwh is never subject to biology, chemistry, or physics. If that is the case, then it should follow that God cannot exist in any material form. Indeed, God should transcend not only matter but also space and time; God cannot be located at a particular spot at any particular instant. That is to say (recalling my definition of "body" at the end of the second paragraph of this article): God cannot have a body. This corollary of the Bible's monotheism of transcendence, however, posed an insurmountable problem to the biblical authors. Given habits of mind ubiquitous in their time and place, they could not conceive of something that existed, but

[35]These four bullet points, incidentally, explain the logic behind טמאה in Leviticus 12–15 and related texts: all the causes of טמאה פולחנית relate to one of the four bullet points. As a result, טמאה פולחנית is simply a mark of creatureliness, and before entering Yhwh's house, Israelites are required temporarily to divest themselves of this mark from their bodies.

that had no physical form and did not in some way take up space. Recall, for example, that for the Priestly authors, even עון and טמאה were *things*, not abstract entities or cognitions present only in the mind.[36] For the ancients, existence and corporeality were identical; to be is to have some sort of substance or materiality that takes up space. Of course, some substances were lighter than others; some were so light as to be almost imperceptible. The entity variously called נפש, נבש, רוח, נשמה, קטר in Northwest Semitic sources, *eṭemmu* in Akkadian, ψυχή in Greek, *anima* in Latin was as physically real as air or wind. It was ethereal, rarefied, made of stuff that was exceedingly fine. But it had substance, and thus it differs from the Western idea of an entirely non-physical soul that does not take up space.[37] After all, even souls get hungry and thirsty.[38] The נפש or נבש has to be fed, as the eighth-century Aramaic inscriptions of Panamuwa and Katumuwa insist. The former directs Panamuwa's successors to bring a meat sacrifice (ויזבח) to the stele that houses his soul and then to say to the gods, "יאמר [תאכל נב]ש פנמו עמך ותש[תי נ]בש פנמו עמך." {Will we need a Hebrew translation? If so, let's do something like this: שיאמר:

[36]It was for this reason that a ritual detergent (to use Jacob Milgrom's term) was needed to remove them from the altar at the Temple. See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 253–92. For the term "ritual detergent," see 254, 256, 274, etc. As Milgrom puts it (257), "For both Israel and her neighbors impurity was a physical substance, an aerial miasma that possessed magnetic attraction for the realm of the sacred." Adding greater precision to Milgrom's thesis, B. Schwartz demonstrates that עון and טמאה are two different substances that act in distinctive ways. See "The Bearing of Sin in Priestly Literature," *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (eds. D. N. Freedman, D. Wright and A. Hurvitz; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 3–21. Schwartz notes (5) that "though invisible, defilement is believed to be quite real; though amorphous, it is substantive."

[37]As Matthew J. Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5, put it, "The Hebrew Bible's concept of soul (נפש) is inconsistent with the Platonic/Cartesian mapping of a mind-body dichotomy..." The same is true of Northwest Smitic, Mesopotamian, and Greek concepts of soul.

[38]On the physicality of the נפש or נבש, see esp. Seth Sanders, "The Appetites of the Dead: West Semitic Linguistic and Ritual Aspects of the Katumuwa Stele," *BASOR* 369 (2013): 35–55, and Richard Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The Nefesh in Israel and Kindred Spirits in the Ancient Near East, with an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription*, Ancient Near East Monographs (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015). ..

'הלוואי שהנפש של פנמו תאכל עמך ושהנפש של פנמו תשתה עמך'}.[39] In the latter, "twice Katumuwa refers to his *nbš* (lines 5 and 11), [and] in both instances it requires food..."[40]

Similarly, in an Akkadian prayer of the late second millennium, a person performing the *kispu* ritual for dead ancestors provides food and drink for them and proclaims,

> You, the ghosts[41] of my family, progenitors in the grave,
> (The ghosts of) my father, my grandfather, my mother, my grandmother, my brother, my sister,
> (The ghosts of) my family, my kin, (and) my clan,
> As many as are sleeping in the netherworld, I make a funerary offering to you.
> I pour out water to you; I lavish care upon you.
> I glorify you; I honor you.[42]

The Akkadian rendered as "I honor you," *ukabbitkunūši*, uses the verb *kubbutu*, which is cognate to Hebrew כָּבֵד. Let me suggest that this verb may carry the connotation of making someone heavier: by providing the ancestors with food and drink, the person performing the ritual gives them substance. The dead ancestor's *eṭemmu* doesn't weigh much, but it weighs something. By feeding it, the pious descendant makes it a little heavier and a little healthier. This is precisely what the Decalogue requires children to do

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[39]Text and translation taken from John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume II: Aramaic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 64–67. {I am not sure what editions of this Aramaic inscription and the one cited immediately hereafter exist in Hebrew. Please contact me if you have trouble finding them, as I can ask colleagues.}

[40]Suriano, *History*, 167.

[41]Akkadian, *eṭem*, the construct form of *eṭemmu*.

[42]Alan Lenzi, ed., *Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: An Introduction*, SBL Ancient Near East Monographs (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 143 (translation), 136–41 (Akkadian text). {Please let me know if you'd like me to inquire with my colleagues in Israel to find out if there is a translation of this prayer published in Hebrew.}

for their deceased parents when it commands, כַּבֵּד (usually rendered, "Honor," but literally, "Make heavy"). Adult children are to perform some action that makes the parents' soul more substantial and thus provide them with ongoing existence after death.[43] In short: the theory of existence assumed by the ancients can be summed up this way: *If it exists, it takes up space and can be weighed on a scale. But for some things, the scale has to be really, really sensitive*.

The idea that something might exist yet not have any physical reality and form was simply unknown in the ancient Near East, and uncommon even in the Hellenistic world. As Christoph Marksschies explains, Plato and Aristotle posited the existence of a supreme God who was entirely incorporeal, but most thinkers of Greek- and Latin-speaking Late Antiquity, pagan or Christian, assumed otherwise; even most Platonists believed that gods had an ethereal form.[44] So did the human soul, Markschies demonstrates.[45] To be sure, in the *Phaedo* Plato speaks of a soul that is immaterial. (Precisely for that reason, Plato reasons, it must be immortal: it contains nothing material that decays.) But this view was exceptional in his world.[46] For the ancients, the soul was lighter than the human body, but, however rarefied, it was still a material substance. Thus Richard Steiner demonstrates that biblical authors speak of the נפש as located in space,

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[43]In its ancient Near Eastern context, it is clear that the commandment to honor one's parents in Exod. 20.12/Deut. 5.16 requires, above all, that one care for them when they are elderly and that one perform rites for them after their death. These rites are similar to the rites performed in the Akkadian text quoted just above. See the convincing treatment of the verse (and its verb כבד) in the context of Akkadian-language adoption contracts (with their explicit accounts of the verb *kubbutu*) in Rainer Albertz, "Hintergrund und Bedeutung des Elterngebots im Dekalog," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 348–74, esp. 356–64.

[44]Christoph Markschies, *God's Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God*, trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 1–18, 31–53, 74–93.

[45]See the detailed argument in Markschies, *God's Body*, 99–126.

[46]Plato's view thus involves a dualism that is a forerunner of Cartesian dualism, though not identical to it; see Martin Dale, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3–37, esp. 153–37, esp. 15.

even when it is disembodied. When it leaves the body, it goes somewhere else.[47] Our modern idea of an entirely non-physical God and an entirely non-physical soul becomes common only after Late Antiquity.

Biblical authors may have been uncomfortable with the idea of God having a body similar to a human or animal body, but their response was not to deny divine embodiment, which was simply a possibility outside what they could conceive. Rather, they posited significant differences between divine and human forms of embodiment. For P, God's body (which P terms the כבוד) is made not of flesh but of an intensely bright substance akin to fire. To picture this, one should imagine not a piece of wood that is on fire, but a self-sustaining fire by itself.[48] Though P's *kabod* has the same basic shape as a human body,[49] its size is variable. It can be big enough to cover the whole top of Mount Sinai and to be visible to the people some distance away at the foot of the mountain in Exodus 24.16–17, yet it can be small enough to fit into the holy of holies in the tabernacle, a space that measures ten cubits by ten cubits (roughly five meters by five meters). P probably imagines the *kabod* sitting atop the Ark, which was just two and a

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[47]Steiner, *Disembodied Souls*, 68–80, and see his summary on 125: "a נפש is different from a חיים (Ps 103:2–4; Job 10:1);...unlike a חיים, it has a spatial location (Jer 38:16; Ps 116:7)... the נפש, although a part of the person (Gen 37:21; Deut 19:6, 11; etc.; cf. Gen 3:15; Ps 3:8; etc.), is not a part of the body...As a result, it has considerable freedom of movement." Steiner shows in convincing detail on pp. 23–54 that some Israelites believed that it possible, with the right sort sort of net, to catch a disembodied soul, which is what Ezekiel 13:18 discusses; while the prophet condemns the women attempting to do so, he does not regard their undertaking as pointless, impossible, or deluded.

[48]E has a similar conception of at least one of God's bodies when, in Exodus 3.2, it describes a bush that burns but is not consumed. A small, fiery body of God has located itself inside the bush, but the flame is self-sustaining. The bush is not providing fuel for the fire-like substance that is God's presence; it is merely sharing space with that presence, so that Moses perceives something like a flame inside the bush even as he can see that the bush itself was not on fire.

[49]Of course, from P's point of view as expressed in Gen. 1.26–27, one should phrase the point differently: human bodies share the shape of God's body. As a number of scholars have noted, from the biblical point of view, the term "anthropomorphism" renders this conception precisely backwards. For the author of Genesis 1.26-27, it is appropriate instead to say that God has rendered humanity theomorphic. See Franz Rosenzweig, "Zur Encyclopaedia Judaica, zum zweiten Band, mit einer Anmerkung über Anthropomorphismus," in *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), 528; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962–65), 1:145; and לורברבוים, צלם אלהים, עמ' 18, ו־101 עד 104.

half cubits long and one and a half cubits deep. Thus the *kabod* consists of something like a flame that could grow to enormous proportions or become more concentrated at God's will. In short: for P, God's body was radically different from a human body because of the stuff of which it was made and its elastic size. For other biblical authors, divine embodiment differs from human and animal embodiment in an even more uncanny way: God has many bodies, one (or more?) in heaven and many on earth.[50] Some of the bodies in which God manifested Himself were so humanoid in form that, in Genesis 18, Abraham does not initially realize that one (or all?) of the three men with whom he was speaking was Yhwh. Other bodies of God, however, were not anthropomorphic, such as the fire in the bush in Exodus 3. Further, multiple cultic objects—כגון מצבה, ביתאל, או אשרה (דהיינו עץ קדוש או שיח קדוש)—could simultaneoulsy host God's real presence.

Maimonides' Biblical Theology

When biblical authors, in their various ways, depicted divine embodiment as radically different from human and animal embodiment, they may have been feeling their way towards the idea of God's unique transendence over matter: yes, God has a form, but the stuff that fills that form is different, or elastic, or multiple, in ways that no human or animal body can be. (ספר דברים והספרות המשנה־תורתית address this issue in a different way, by insisting that God's body is transcendent in the sense that it is in heaven and never comes to earth, so that no human can ever come near it.) But the neo-Aristotelian tradition of the Arabic-speaking world provided Saadia Gaon and Maimonides a different way to conceive of God's infinite transcendence: God existed, *but not in space and time*. God has neither material substance nor form, and yet God is real. This insight led Maimonides to deny a basic assumption of all biblical theology, namely, the idea that God is embodied. But the impetus behind this denial did not come solely from the

[50]See Sommer, *Bodies*, 38–57.

medieval Aristotelian tradition. This denial built on the Bible's monotheism of transcendence. A being who is infinitely transcendent, who is beyond biology, chemistry, and physics, must exist not in a corporeal form different from ours but in an entirely non-corporeal form. Maimonides disagreed with one tenet of biblical theology precisely because he understood another, more fundamental, tenet more consistently than any of the biblical authors was capable of understanding it.

Earlier in this essay—and earlier in my career—I characterized Maimonides' theology as an anti-biblical theology. In light what I have presented here, it becomes clear that this is a misleading claim. It's not quite accurate to say that Maimonides disagrees with biblical theology. Rather, it is biblical theology that disagrees with biblical theology: the Bible's idea of God's unique transcendence is incompatible with the Bible's varied ideas of God's embodiment. Note well: I speak here not of a disagreement between two biblical authors, but of a contradiction within the work of each biblical corpus. It is not merely the case that, say, P differs from D, or Jeremiah from Isaiah. Rather, P's anthropomorphism contradicts P's monotheism; J's rather different type of anthropomorphism contradicted J's monotheism.

Innovation as Deep Continuity

It may seem odd to argue that precisely in his rejection of the Bible's pervasive anthropomorphism Maimonides is more loyal to biblical theology than the biblical authors themselves. On reflection, however, we should realize that there is noting odd in this claim. It is not uncommon that a thinker may fail to articulate or even realize crucial implications of his own ideas. This phenomenon is well-known to any teacher who attempts to convey material of a certain complexity. On occasion, I have known a student to make a comment that shows she understood what I said better than I did. At other times, students have asked questions I was able to answer immediately—but my answer

entailed ideas I did not know I knew until the student asked the question. The existence of unrealized implications is an inevitable feature in the history of ideas, for changing circumstances create new vantage points from which to observe and extend earlier observations.[51] One thinker may have an insight that cannot be easily expressed or even fully understood in the conceptual language of his own day, but a later author, equipped with habits of thought unavailable earlier, can take up that insight, grasp it more thoroughly, and articulate it in ways the original thinker could not have imagined.[52] To use Aristotelian terminology: the new formulation actualizes a potential that was present in the original insight. The inability of the earlier thinker, using the tools of his own day, to imagine all the consequences of the insight hardly vitiates the link between that insight and the later author's proposals. (Here it is useful to recall the distinction that the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith draws between continuity and unchangingness.[53] The former, I think, is essential to the authenticity of a religious tradition; the latter is inimical to its endurance.) As the Catholic theologian Yves Cardinal Congar teaches: within a tradition, a doctrine may contain the solution to a problem not yet encountered when the doctrine emerged.[54] We may add that the solution might surprise the sages who first propounded the doctrine no less than the problem itself would startle them; this does not mean, however, that the solution is any less organic to the tradition in question.

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[51]Cf. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 374; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Promise to the Patriarchs in Rabbinic Literature," in *Divine Promises to the Fathers in the Three Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Alviero Niccacci (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1995), 97.

[52]Similarly, it is possible that later readers understand an earlier text better than that text's first readers understood it. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 43. This is especially the case in poetry and in scripture, as noted by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 230.

[53]Smith, *What is Scripture*, 148.

[54]Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, translated from the French by A.N. Woodrow, with a foreword by Avery Cardinal Dulles (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 14.

This phenomenon of unstated or unrealized implications that emerge only as a tradition evolves is especially important in religious discourse—and one does not have to be associated with progressive movements to recognize this. One theologian not reputed to harbor an overenthusiastic love of radical change has explained this phenomenon especially well. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) writes that "it is necessary to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time." This is especially the case when we speak of a scripture, Ratzinger explains, because in scripture

> older texts are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts. They become Scripture by being read anew, evolving in continuity with their original sense, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning. This is a process in which the word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences and new sufferings, in order to open up...The author is not simply speaking for himself on his own authority. He is speaking from the perspective of a common history that sustains him and that already implicitly contains the possibilities of its future, of the further stages of its journey...The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power that is at work.[55]

Thus a religious thinker may begin to perceive, and to express, some aspect of a divine

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[55]Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xviii-xx. On the communal nature of biblical authorship in Catholic thought, see further Harrington's remarks in Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87.

reality whose significance cannot be fully understand in her own day, and this tentative perception may bear fruit many generations later. Equipped with the conceptual tools provided by a philosophical tradition available to him but not to the biblical authors, Maimonides recognized a necessary aspect of biblical monotheism that biblical authors could not envisage.

In short, what I have presented in this essay is a reflection on the development of doctrine {after giving this phrase in Hebrew, please put it in parenthesis in English: (the development of doctrine) }. More than a century and a half ago, in a book to whose title I just alluded, John Henry Cardinal Newman became one of the first religious thinkers to grapple faithfully with the realization that even within theology, ideas change over time. Some changes, Newman maintains, constitute a rejection of the tradition while others are appropriate developments of something that was latent in the tradition. Newman suggests seven tests or notes that help distinguish between counterfeit and authentic developments. The sixth of these he calls "Conservative Action upon its Past," concerning which he writes:

> A true development ... may be described as one which is conservative of the course of antecedent developments being really those antecedents and something besides them: it is an addition which illustrates, not obscures, corroborates, not corrects, the body of thought from which it proceeds; and this is its characterstic as contrasted with a corruption.[56]

It is precisely such a development that Maimonides produced when he rejected the Bible's anthropomorphism. He added an Aristotelian *cum* Platonic perspective that

[56]John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2d. ed. (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1878), 200. https://archive.org/details/a599872600newmuoft/mode/1up.

illustrates and corroborates. If it obscures, it obscures an aspect of biblical theology that clashed with the Bible's own monotheism.

Another thinker who addresses this question of development is שניאור זלמן שכטר. Speaking at once as a theologian and a historian, a practicioner and a scholar, Schechter avowed:

> It is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jew, but the Bible as it repeats itself in history, in other words, as it is interpreted by Tradition . . . Since then the interpretation of Scripture or the Secondary Meaning is mainly a product of changing historical influences, it follows that the centre of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body, which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of the Secondary Meaning. This living body, however, is not represented by any section of the nation, or any corporate priesthood, or Rabbihood, but by the collective conscience of Catholic Israel as embodied in the Universal Synagogue . . . Liberty was always given to the great teachers of every generation to make modifications and innovations in harmony with the spirit of existing institutions . . . The norm as well as the sanction of Judaism is the practice actually in vogue. Its consecration is the consecration of general use,—or, in other words, of Catholic Israel.[57]

Maimonides' approach to divine embodiment constitutes precisely such "a modification and innovaton in harmony with the spirit" of what came before. Indeed, Maimonides' teaching is in greater harmony with biblical theology than the writings of the biblical

[57] Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism, First Series* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1896), xvii-xix.

authors themselves. His innovation can be regarded, on the deepest level, as a form of continuity.[58]

Both Newman and Schechter were committed to traditions that began with scripture but often came to overshadow it. I suspect it is no coincidence that Schechter, writing in England only a few years after Newman's death, echoes Newman's concern with development within a tradition. Indeed, Schechter's decision to name the locus of authority in Judaism "Catholic Israel" may evince Newman's influence.[59] If Maimonides could understand Jewish scripture more deeply by immersing himself in Arabic-language Aristotelianism, then surely Schechter could more fully fathom Jewish tradition by studying the book that led an Anglican to became a Catholic[60]—just as I may confess with gratitude that I have come to understand Jewish scripture more completely, and indeed more religiously, by studying the work of the convert to Catholicism whom this volume honors.

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[58]Divine embodiment is not the only issue concerning which we may say that later authors were more loyal to biblical monotheism than the biblical authors themselves. Another example of this phenomenon is the question of creation ex nihilo in the P document, on which see Gary A. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 41–58. In fact, all the chapters of that book, at least potentially, address later authors who may have remained loyal to scripture even as they go beyond it—though Jews and Christians may debate each other (and sometimes among themselbes) which chapters describe authentic developments and which, potential counterfeits. On creation ex nihilo in P, in the Tanakh, in Christian scripture, and in later theology as a potential example of the authentic developement of doctrine from scripture and within scripture, see also the article by Walter Moberly in this volume.

[59]On Schechter's regard for Newman as a model (along with John Wesley and the Anglo-Catholic clergyman H.D. Liddon) for emulation, see David Benjamin Starr, *Catholic Israel: Solomon Schechter, A Study of Unity and Fragmentation in Modern Jewish History*, Doctoral dissertation submitted to Columbia University (2003), 228. On the parallels between the two thinkers, see further p. 233. On the specifically English background of the term "Catholic Israel," see 68 (where Starr connects the term not to Anglo-Catholicism or Newman but to the liberalizing Broad Church movement).

[60]Upon completing the first edition of *The Development of Doctrince* in 1845, Newman began the process to be received into the Catholic Church; as the final lines of the book made clear, this is the rare case where the phrase *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* applies.