

CHAPTER XII

THE ESSENCE OF GOD

1. An exquisite Oriental fable tells of a sage who had been meditating vainly for days and weeks on the question, What is God? One day, walking along the seashore, he saw some children busying themselves by digging holes in the sand and pouring into them water from the sea. "What are you doing there?" he asked them, to which they replied, "We want to empty the sea of its water." "Oh, you little fools," he exclaimed with a smile, but suddenly his smile vanished in serious thought. "Am I not as foolish as these children?" he said to himself. "How can I with my small brain hope to grasp the infinite nature of God?"

All efforts of philosophy to define the essence of God are futile. "Canst thou by searching find out God?" Zophar asks of his friend Job.¹ Both Philo and Maimonides maintain that we can know of God only that He *is*; we can never fathom His innermost being or know what He is. Both find this unknowability of God expressed in the words spoken to Moses: "If I withdraw My hand, thou shalt see My back — that is, the effects of God's power and wisdom — but My face — the real essence of God — thou shalt not see."²

2. Still, a divinity void of all essential qualities fails to satisfy the religious soul. Man demands to know what God is — at least, what God is to him. In the first word of the

¹ Job XI, 7.

² Ex. XXXIII, 23; Maim.; *Yesode ha Torah*, I, 8, 10; *Moreh*, I, 21 a; Kaufmann, l. c., 431; Philo: *Mutatio Nom.*, 2; *Vita Mosis*, I, 28; *Leg. All.*, I, 29, and elsewhere. See J. Drummond: *Philo Judæus*, II, 18-24.

Decalogue God speaks through His people Israel to the religious consciousness of all men at all times, beginning, "I am the Lord, *thy* God." This word *I* lifts God at once above all beings and powers of the cosmos, in fact, above all other existence, for it expresses His unique self-consciousness. This attribute above all is possessed by no being in the world of nature, and only by man, who is the image of his Maker. According to the Midrash, all creation was hushed when the Lord spoke on Sinai, "*I* am the Lord."¹ God is not merely the supreme Being, but also the supreme Self-consciousness. As man, in spite of all his limitations and helplessness, still towers high above all his fellow creatures by virtue of his free will and self-conscious action, so God, who knows no bounds to His wisdom and power, surpasses all beings and forces of the universe, for He rules over all as the one completely self-conscious Mind and Will. In both the visible and invisible realms He manifests Himself as the absolutely free Personality, moral and spiritual, who allots to every thing its existence, form, and purpose. For this reason Scripture calls Him "the living God and everlasting King."²

3. Judaism, accordingly, teaches us to recognize God, above all, as revealing Himself in self-conscious activity, as determining all that happens by His absolutely free will, and thus as showing man how to walk as a free moral agent. In relation to the world, His work or workshop, He is the self-conscious Master, saying "I am that which I am"; in relation to man, who is akin to Him as a self-conscious rational and moral being, He is the living Fountain of all that knowledge and spirituality for which men long, and in which alone they may find contentment and bliss.

Thus the God of Judaism, the world's great *I Am*, forms a complete contrast, not only to the lifeless powers of nature and destiny, which were worshiped by the ancient pagans,

¹ Ex. R. XXIX, at the close.

² Jer. X, 10.

but also to the God of modern paganism, a God divested of all personality and self-consciousness, such as He is conceived of by the new school of Christian theology, with its pantheistic tendency. I refer to the school of Ritschl, which strives to render the myth of the man-god philosophically intelligible by teaching that God reaches self-consciousness only in the perfect type of man, that is, Christ, while otherwise He is entirely immanent, one with the world. All the more forcibly does Jewish monotheism insist upon its doctrine that God, in His continual self-revelation, is the supermundane and self-conscious Ruler of both nature and history. "I am the Lord, that is My name, and My glory will I not give to another," — so says the God of Judaism.¹

4. The Jewish God-idea, of course, had to go through many stages of development before it reached the concept of a transcendental and spiritual god. It was necessary first that the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant prohibit most stringently polytheism and every form of idolatry, and second that a strictly imageless worship impress the people with the idea that Israel's God was both invisible and incorporeal.² Yet a wide step still intervened from that stage to the complete recognition of God as a purely spiritual Being, lacking all qualities perceptible to the senses, and not resembling man in either his inner or his outer nature. Centuries of gradual ripening of thought were still necessary for the growth of this conception. This was rendered still more difficult by the Scriptural references to God in His actions and His revelations, and even in His motives, after a human pattern. Israel's sages required centuries of effort to remove all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic notions of God, and thus to elevate Him to the highest realm of spirituality.³

¹ Isaiah XLIV, 6.

² Comp. Dillmann, l. c., 226-235; D. F. Strauss, l. c., I, 525-553.

³ See J. E., art. Anthropomorphism and Anthropopathism. Comp. Schmiedl, l. c., 1-30.

5. In this process of development two points of view demand consideration. We must not overlook the fact that the perfectly clear distinction which we make between the sensory and the spiritual does not appeal to the child-like mind, which sees it rather as external. What we call transcendent, owing to our comprehension of the immeasurable universe, was formerly conceived only as far remote in space or time. Thus God is spoken of in Scripture as dwelling in heaven and looking down upon the inhabitants of the earth to judge them and to guide them.¹ According to Deuteronomy, God spoke from heaven to the people about Mt. Sinai, while Exodus represents Him as coming down to the mountain from His heavenly heights to proclaim the law amid thunder and lightning.² The Babylonian conception of heaven prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and influenced both the mystic lore about the heavenly throne and the philosophic cosmology of the Aristotelians, such as Maimonides. Yet Scripture offers also another view, the concept of God as the One enthroned on high, whom "the heavens and the heaven's heavens cannot encompass."³

The fact is that language still lacked an expression for pure spirit, and the intellect freed itself only gradually from the restrictions of primitive language to attain a purer conception of the divine. Thus we attain deeper insight into the spiritual nature of God when we read the inimitable words of the Psalmist describing His omnipresence,⁴ or that other passage: "He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see? He that chastiseth the nations, shall He not correct, even He that teaches man knowledge?"⁵

The translators and interpreters of the Bible felt the need of eliminating everything of a sensory nature from God and

¹ Ps. XXXIII, 13-14.

² Deut. IV, 36; Ex. XIX, 20. Comp. Gen. XI, 5.

⁴ Ps. CXXXIX, 7-10.

³ Isa. XLVI, 1.

⁵ Ps. XCIV, 9.

of avoiding anthropomorphism, through the influence of Greek philosophy. This spiritualization of the God idea was taken up again by the philosophers of the Spanish-Arabic period, who combated the prevailing mysticism. Through them Jewish monotheism emphasized its opposition to every human representation of God, especially the God-Man of the Christian Church.

6. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that we naturally ascribe to God a human personality, whether we speak of Him as the Master-worker of the universe, as the all-seeing and all-hearing Judge, or the compassionate and merciful Father. We cannot help attributing human qualities and emotions to Him the moment we invest Him with a moral and spiritual nature. When we speak of His punitive justice, His unfailing mercy, or His all-wise providence, we transfer to Him, imperceptibly, our own righteous indignation at the sight of a wicked deed, or our own compassion with the sufferer, or even our own mode of deliberation and decision. Moreover, the prophets and the Torah, in order to make God plain to the people, described Him in vivid images of human life, with anger and jealousy as well as compassion and repentance, and also with the organs and functions of the senses, — seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking, and walking.

7. The rabbis are all the more emphatic in their assertions that the Torah merely intends to assist the simple-minded, and that unseemly expressions concerning Deity are due to the inadequacy of language, and must not be taken literally.¹ "It is an act of boldness allowed only to the prophets to measure the Creator by the standard of the creature," says the Haggadist, and again, "God appeared to Israel, now as a heroic warrior, now as a venerable sage imparting knowledge, and again as a kind dispenser of bounties, but always in a

¹ See Ab. d. R. Nathan II; Bacher: *D. Exegetische Terminologie*, I, 8; Schechter, l. c., 35.

manner befitting the time and circumstance, so as to satisfy the need of the human heart."¹ This is strikingly illustrated in the following dialogue: "A heretic came to Rabbi Meir asking, 'How can you reconcile the passage which reads, "Do I not fill heaven and earth, says the Lord," with the one which relates that the Lord appeared to Moses between the cherubim of the ark of the covenant?' Whereupon Rabbi Meir took two mirrors, one large and the other small, and placed them before the interrogator. 'Look into this glass,' he said, 'and into that. Does not your figure seem different in one than in the other? How much more will the majesty of God, who has neither figure nor form, be reflected differently in the minds of men! To one it will appear according to his narrow view of life, and to the other in accordance with his larger mental horizon.'"²

In like manner Rabbi Joshua ben Hanania, when asked sarcastically by the Emperor Hadrian to show him his God, replied: "Come and look at the sun which now shines in the full splendor of noonday! Behold, thou art dazzled. How, then, canst thou see without bewilderment the majesty of Him from whom emanates both sun and stars?"³ This rejoinder, which was familiar to the Greeks also, is excelled by the one of Rabban Gamaliel II to a heathen who asked him "Where does the God dwell to whom you daily pray?" "Tell me first," he answered, "where does your soul dwell, which is so close to thee? Thou canst not tell. How, then, can I inform thee concerning Him who dwells in heaven, and whose throne is separated from the earth by a journey of 3500 years?" "Then do we not do better to pray to gods who are near at hand, and whom we can see with our eyes?"

¹ Gen. R. XXVII; Mek. Ex. XV; Pes. d. R. K. 109 b; Tanh. to Ex. XXII, 16; Schechter, l. c., 43 f.

² Gen. R. IV, 3; comp. Pes. d. R. K. 2 b; Schechter, l. c., 29 f.

³ Hul. 59, 60; Sanh. 39 a; Philo: De Abrahamo, 16.

continued the heathen, whereupon the sage struck home, "Well, you may see your gods, but they neither see nor help you, while our God, Himself unseen, yet sees and protects us constantly."¹ The comparison of the invisible soul to God, the invisible spirit of the universe, is worked out further in the Midrash to Psalm CIII.

8. From the foregoing it is clear that, while Judaism insists on the Deity's transcending all finite and sensory limitations, it never lost the sense of the close relationship between man and his Maker. Notwithstanding Christian theologians to the contrary, the Jewish God was never a mere abstraction.² The words, "I am the Lord thy God," betoken the intimate relation between the redeemed and the heavenly Redeemer, and the song of triumph at the Red Sea, "This is my God, I will extol Him," testifies — according to the Midrash — that even the humblest of God's chosen people were filled with the feeling of His nearness.³ In the same way the warm breath of union with God breathes through all the writings, the prayers, and the whole history of Judaism. "For what great nation is there that hath God so nigh unto them as the Lord our God is, whenever we call upon Him?" exclaims Moses in Deuteronomy, and the rabbis, commenting upon the plural form used here, *Kerobim*, = "nigh," remark: "God is nigh to everyone in accordance with his special needs."⁴

9. Probably the rabbis were at their most profound mood in their saying, "God's greatness lies in His condescension, as may be learned from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. To quote only Isaiah also: 'Thus saith the High and

¹ Mid. Teh. Ps. CIII, 1; Sanh. 39 a.

² See Weber, l. c., 149 f., 157; Bousset, l. c., 302, 313; von Hartman: *Das religiöse Bewusstsein*. Against this Schreiner, l. c., 49-58, and Schechter, *Aspects*, 33 f.

³ Mek. and Tanh. to Ex. XV, 11.

⁴ Deut. IV, 7; Yer. Ber. IX, 13 a.

Lofty One, I dwell in high and holy places, with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit."¹ For this reason God selected as the place of His revelation the humble Sinai and the lowly thornbush."² In fact, the absence of any mediator in Judaism necessitates the doctrine that God — with all His transcendent majesty — is at the same time "an ever present helper in trouble,"³ and that His omnipotence includes care for the greatest and the smallest beings of creation.⁴

10. The doctrine that God is above and beyond the universe, transcending all created things, as well as time and space, might lead logically to the view of the deist that He stands outside of the world, and does not work from within. But this inference has never been made even by the boldest of Jewish thinkers. The Psalmist said, "Who is like the Lord our God, that hath His seat on high, that humbleth Himself to behold what is in heaven and on earth?"⁵ — words which express the deepest and the loftiest thought of Judaism. Beside the all-encompassing Deity no other divine power or personality can find a place. God is in all; He is over all; He is both immanent and transcendent. His creation was not merely setting into motion the wheels of the cosmic fabric, after which He withdrew from the world. The Jew praises Him for every scent and sight of nature or of human life, for the beauty of the sea and the rainbow, for every flash of lightning that illumines the darkened clouds and every peal of thunder that shakes the earth. On every such occasion the Jew utters praise to "Him who daily renews the work of creation," or "Him who in everlasting faithfulness keepeth His covenant with mankind." Such is the teaching of the men of the Great Synagogue,⁶ and the charge of the Jewish

¹ Isa. LVII, 15. See also Deut. X, 17-18; Ps. LXXXVI, 5-6. Comp. R. Johanan, Meg. 31 a.

² Ex. R. II, 9; Mid. Teh. Ps. LXVIII, 7.

³ Ab. Zar. 3 b.

⁴ Ber. 60 b. Singer's *Prayerbook*, 291.

⁵ Ps. XLVI, 2.

⁶ Ps. CXIII, 5, 6.

God idea being a barren and abstract transcendentalism can be urged only by the blindness of bigotry.¹

11. The interweaving of the ideas of God's immanence and transcendency is shown especially in two poems embodied in the songs of the Synagogue, Ibn Gabirol's "Crown of Royalty" and the "Songs of Unity" for each day of the week, composed by Samuel ben Kalonymos, the father of Judah the Pious of Regensburg. Here occur such sentences as these: "All is in God and God is in all"; "Sufficient unto Himself and self-determining, He is the ever-living and self-conscious Mind, the all-permeating, all-impelling, and all-accomplishing Will"; "The universe is the emanation of the plenitude of God, each part the light of His infinite light, flame of His eternal empyrean"; "The universe is the garment, the covering of God, and He the all-penetrating Soul."² All these ideas were borrowed from neo-Platonism, and found a conspicuous place in Ibn Gabirol's philosophy, later influencing the Cabbalah.

Similarly the appellation, *Makom*, "Space," is explained by both Philo and the rabbis as denoting "Him who encompasses the world, but whom the world cannot encompass."³ An utterance such as this, well-nigh pantheistic in tone, leads directly to theories like those of Spinoza or of David Nieto, the well-known London Rabbi, who was largely under Spinozistic influence⁴ and who still was in accord with Jewish thought. Certainly, as long as Jewish monotheism conceives of God as self-conscious Intellect and freely acting Will, it can easily accept the principle of divine immanence.

12. We accept, then, the fact that man, child-like, invests God with human qualities, — a view advanced by Abraham

¹ On pantheism in Judaism see Seligman, l. c.

² See Sachs: *D. religioese Poesie d. Juden. in Spanien*, 225-228; Kaufmann: *Stud. u. Solomon Ibn Gabirol*.

³ See Siegfried: *Philo*, 199-203, 292; Gen. R. LXVIII, 10; comp. Geiger: *Zeitschr.*, XI, 218; Hamburger: *R. W. B.*, II, 986.

⁴ See Graetz: *G. d. J.*, X, 319.

ben David of Posquieres in opposition to Maimonides.¹ Still, the thinkers of Judaism have ever labored to divest the Deity of every vestige of sensuousness, of likeness to man, in fact, of every limitation to action or to free will. Every conception which merges God into the world or identifies Him with it and thus makes Him subject to necessity, is incompatible with the Jewish idea of God, which enthrones Him above the universe as its free and sovereign Master. "Am I a God near at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth?"² "To whom will you liken Me, that I should be equal?"³

¹ See Maimonides: *H. Teshubah*, III, 7 and R. A. B. D., notes.

² Jer. XXIII, 23.

³ Isa. XL, 25.