

## B. THE IDEA OF GOD IN JUDAISM

## CHAPTER IX

## GOD AND THE GODS

1. Judaism centers upon its sublime and simple conception of God. This lifts it above all other religions and satisfies in unique measure the longing for truth and inner peace amidst the futility and incessant changes of earthly existence. This very conception of God is in striking contrast to that of most other religions. The God of Judaism is not one god among many, nor one of many powers of life, but is *the One* and holy God beyond all comparison. In Him is concentrated all power and the essence of all things; He is the Author of all existence, the Ruler of life, who lays down the laws by which man shall live. As the prophet says to the heathen world: "The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, these shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. . . . Not like these is the portion of Jacob; for He is the Former of all things. . . . The Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King; at His wrath the earth trembleth, and the nations are not able to abide His indignation."<sup>1</sup>

2. This lofty conception of the Deity forms the essence of Judaism and was its shield and buckler in its lifelong contest with the varying forms of heathenism. From the very first the God of Judaism declared war against them all, whether at

<sup>1</sup> Jer. X, 11; 16 and 10.

any special time the prevailing form was the worship of many gods, or the worship of God in the shape of man, the perversion of the purity of God by sensual concepts, or the division of His unity into different parts or personalities. The Talmudic saying is most striking: "From Sinai, the Mount of revelation of the only God, there came forth *Sinah*, the hostility of the nations toward the Jew as the banner-bearer of the pure idea of God."<sup>1</sup> Just as day and night form a natural contrast, divinely ordained, so do the monotheism of Israel and the polytheism of the nations constitute a spiritual contrast which can never be reconciled.

3. The pagan gods, and to some extent the triune God of the Christian Church, semi-pagan in origin also, are the outcome of the human spirit's going astray in its search for God. Instead of leading man upwards to an ideal which will encompass all material and moral life and lift it to the highest stage of holiness, paganism led to depravity and discord. The unrelenting zeal displayed by prophet and law-giver against idolatry had its chief cause in the immoral and inhuman practices of the pagan nations — Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon — in the worship of their deities.<sup>2</sup> The deification of the forces of nature brutalized the moral sense of the pagan world; no vice seemed too horrible, no sacrifice too atrocious for their cults. Baal, or Moloch, the god of heaven, demanded in times of distress the sacrifice of a son by the father. Astarte, the goddess of fecundity, required the "hallowing" of life's origin, and this was done by the most terrible of sexual orgies. Such abominations exerted their seductive influence upon the shepherd tribes of Israel in their new home in Canaan, and thus aroused the fiercest indignation of prophet and law-giver, who hurled their vials of wrath against those shocking rites, those lewd idols, and those who

<sup>1</sup> Shab. 89 b.

<sup>2</sup> Lev. XVIII, 2, 27 f.; Num. XXV, 3-8; Hos. IV, 10; V, 4.

"whored after them."<sup>1</sup> If Israel was to be trained to be the priest people of the Only One in such an environment, tolerance of such practices was out of the question. Thus in the Sinaitic law God is spoken of as "the jealous God"<sup>2</sup> who punishes unrelentingly every violation of His laws of purity and holiness.

4. The same sharp contrast of Jewish ethical and spiritual monotheism remained also when it came in contact with the Græco-Syrian and Roman culture. Here, too, the myths and customs of the cult and the popular religion offended by their gross sensuality the chaste spirit of the Jewish people. Indeed, these were all the more dangerous to the purity of social life, as they were garbed with the alluring beauty of art and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The Jew then felt all the more the imperative duty to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Judaism with its chaste and imageless worship and the lascivious, immoral life of paganism.

5. This wide gulf which yawned between Israel's One and holy God and the divinities of the nations was not bridged over by the Christian Church when it appeared on the stage of history and obtained world-dominion. For Christianity in its turn succeeded by again dragging the Deity into the world of the senses, adopting the pagan myths of the birth and death of the gods, and sanctioning image worship. In this way it actually created a Christian plurality of gods in place of the Græco-Roman pantheon; indeed, it presented a divine family after the model of the Egyptian and Babylonian religions,<sup>4</sup> and thus pushed the ever-living God and Father of mankind into the background. This tendency has never been

<sup>1</sup> Num. XV, 39; Ex. XXIII, 24; Deut. XX, 18; Sanh. XII, 5; X, 4-6; Ab. Zar. II-IV; Sanh. 106 a: "Israel's God hates lewdness."

<sup>2</sup> Ex. XX, 5; Deut. IV, 24; VI, 15.

<sup>3</sup> See Philo: *De Humanitate*; Doellinger: *Heidenthum u. Judenthum*, 682, 700 f.; I. H. Weiss: *Dor Dor we Doreshav*, II, 19 f.

<sup>4</sup> See J. E., art. Christianity.

explained away, even by the attempts of certain high-minded thinkers among the Church fathers. Judaism, however, insists, as ever, upon the words of the Decalogue which condemn all attempts to depict the Deity in human or sensual form, and through all its teachings there is echoed forth the voice of Him who spoke through the seer of the Exile: "I am the Lord, that is My name, and My glory will I not give to another, neither My praise to graven images."<sup>1</sup>

6. When Moses came to Pharaoh saying, "Thus speaketh JHVH the God of Israel, send off My people that they may serve Me," Pharaoh — so the Midrash tells — took his list of deities to hand, looked it over, and said, "Behold, here are enumerated the gods of the nations, but I cannot find thy God among them." To this Moses replied, "All the gods known and familiar to thee are mortal, as thou art; they die, and their tomb is shown. The God of Israel has nothing in common with them. He is the living, true, and eternal God who created heaven and earth; no people can withstand His wrath."<sup>2</sup> This passage states strikingly the difference between the God of Judaism and the gods of heathendom. The latter are but deified powers of nature, and being parts of the world, themselves at one with nature, they are subject to the power of time and fate. Israel's God is enthroned above the world as its moral and spiritual Ruler, the only Being whom we can conceive as self-existent, as indivisible as truth itself.

7. As long as the pagan conception prevailed, by which the world was divided into many divine powers, there could be no conception of the idea of a moral government of the universe, of an all-encompassing purpose of life. Consequently

<sup>1</sup> Isa. XLII, 8. Scripture always emphasizes the contrast between Israel's God and the heathen gods. See Ex. XII, 12; XV, 11; XVIII, 11; Deut. X, 17; also in the prophets, Isa. XL; XLIV, 9; Jer. X; and the Psalms, XCVI, CXV, CXXXV. Absolute monotheism was a slow growth from this basis.

<sup>2</sup> See Ex. R. V, 18.

the great thinkers and moralists of heathendom were forced to deny the deities, before they could assert either the unity of the cosmos or a design in life. On the other hand, it was precisely this recognition of the moral nature of God, as manifested both in human life and in the cosmic sphere, which brought the Jewish prophets and sages to their pure monotheism, in which they will ultimately be met by the great thinkers of all lands and ages. The unity of God brings harmony into the intellectual and moral world; the division of the godhead into different powers or personalities leads to discord and spiritual bondage. Such is the lesson of history, that in polytheism, dualism, or trinitarianism one of the powers must necessarily limit or obscure another. In this manner the Christian Trinity led mankind in many ways to the lowering of the supreme standard of truth, to an infringement on justice, and to inhumanity to other creeds, and therefore Judaism could regard it only as a compromise with heathenism.

8. Judaism assumed, then, toward paganism an attitude of rigid exclusion and opposition which could easily be taken for hostility. This prevailed especially in the legal systems of the Bible and the rabbis, and was intended primarily to guard the monotheistic belief from pagan pollution and to keep it intact. Neither in the Deuteronomic law nor in the late codes of Maimonides and Joseph Caro is there any toleration for idolatrous practices, for instruments of idol-worship, or for idolaters.<sup>1</sup> This attitude gave the enemies of the Jew sufficient occasion for speaking of the Jewish God as hating the world, as if only national conceit underlay the earnest rigor of Jewish monotheism.

9. As a matter of fact, since the time of the prophets Judaism has had no national God in any exclusive sense. While the Law insists upon the exclusive worship of the one God of

<sup>1</sup> Deut. VII; XVII, 2 f.; XX, 16; Maimonides: *H. Akkum*, II-VII; *Melakim*, VI, 4; *Yoreh Deah*, CXII-XLVIII.

Israel, the narratives of the beginnings in the Bible have a different tenor. They take the lofty standpoint that the heathen world, while worshiping its many divinities, had merely lost sight of the true God after whom the heart ever longs and searches. This implies that a kernel of true piety underlies all the error and delusion of paganism, which, rightly guided, will lead back to the God from whom mankind had strayed. The Godhead, divided into gods — as is hinted even in the Biblical name, *Elohim* — must again become the one God of humanity. Thus the Jew holds that all worship foreshadows the search for the true God, and that all humanity shall at one time acknowledge Him for whom they have so long been searching. Surely the Psalms express, not national narrowness, but ardent love for humanity when they hail the God of Israel, the Maker of heaven and earth, as the world's great King, and tell how He will judge the nations in justice, while the gods of the nations will be rejected as "vanities."<sup>1</sup> Nor does the divine service of the Jew bear the stamp of clannishness. For more than two thousand years the central point in the Synagogue liturgy every morning and evening has been the battle-cry, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." And so does the conclusion of every service, the *Alenu*, the solemn prayer of adoration, voice the grand hope of the Jew for the future, that the time may speedily come when "before the kingdom of Almighty all idolatry shall vanish, and all the inhabitants of the earth perceive that unto Him alone every knee must bend, and all flesh recognize Him alone as God and King."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps. XCVI-XCIX.

<sup>2</sup> See Singer's *Prayerbook*, p. 76-77, and J. E., art. *Alenu*.