

Monotheism and the Bible

by [Paul Sumner](#)

This survey encourages readers of Scripture to distinguish both the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh, Old Testament) and the New Testament from the two traditional monotheistic views articulated by Judaism and Christianity, and in part Islam.

This is not an easy region to navigate.

What you find is that Judaism and Christianity offer two competing maps of the same "country." Neither one, however, provides a thorough and accurate depiction of what you encounter when actually trekking the country of Scripture yourself.

Judaism and Christianity, as we know them today, are **Diaspora religions**. They developed outside Israel, away from where the original biblical events took place and the divine revelations were given.

Both religions have evolved, partly in response to each other. And neither of them depends solely on their Scriptures for authority in teaching and observance. Both have bodies of interpretation and authoritative precedence upon which they draw to define themselves.

Both faiths affirm belief in **Monotheism** [Greek: mono+theos, "one God"]. But the word has different meanings to each faith, so we must not assume "monotheism" is a coin with universal value. The word itself was coined in 1660 and introduced into the field of biblical studies by Enlightenment scholars.

[A PDF version of his article is available [HERE](#)]

[\[Top\]](#)

Jewish Models of Deity

In Modern Judaism monotheism refers to a form of exclusive **unitarianism** articulated primarily by **Rabbi Maimonides (1135–1204)** in medieval Spain and Egypt—a form upheld ever since by most branches of Orthodox Judaism.

In his attempts to interpret biblical teachings about God in light of the philosophy of Aristotle, Maimonides (aka Rambam) rejected the anthropomorphic language and imagery of the Bible.

As such, he said there is only one supernatural being, God himself. Other gods, demons, or spirits mentioned in the Tanakh are figments

of human imagination. He said angels are actually "attributes" of God, not independent heavenly beings. He also taught that the "Messiah" (contra Christian doctrine) is not divine, but merely a man.

Regarding Rambam's rationalistic views, the Jewish historian **Shaye Cohen** draws other conclusions. Based on his studies in pre-Talmudic, pre-Rabbinic Judaism, Cohen says, "this radical monotheism of Maimonides was rare even in the Middle Ages, and is unattested in antiquity" (*From The Maccabees to the Mishnah* [1987], p. 85).

In other words, the medieval Maimonidean definition of monotheism is a post-biblical—and post-New Testament—revisionist innovation. His Aristotelian and anti-Christian model is not what **all Jews everywhere, always** held to be true.

[\[Top \]](#)

Historian **Peter Hayman** draws a similar conclusion about evolved rabbinic concepts of God:

"From the Book of Daniel on, nearly every variety of Judaism maintained the pattern of the supreme God plus his vice-regent/vizier, or some similar agency who relates Israel to God.... Hardly any variety of Judaism seems to have been able to manage with just one divine entity.... For most Jews, God is the sole object of worship, but he is not the only divine being. In particular, there is always a prominent number two in the hierarchy.

[From: "Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 1-15, esp. 11, 15]

[\[Top\]](#)

Many texts substantiate Hayman's survey. Some include Isaiah 7:13-16; 9:6-7 [Heb vv. 5-6]; 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 53; 61:1-3; Ezekiel 1:26, 28; Daniel 7:9-13; and Psalms 2:6-9; 80:17; 89:20-37; and 110, and many more.

Additionally, variants in several Hebrew and Greek manuscripts indicate that some Jewish scribes were either altering or simply omitting "messianic" readings that aren't found in later standardized Masoretic editions of the Hebrew Bible.

For example:

1) The second century BCE Alexandrian Greek Bible (the Septuagint or LXX), says the messianic child in **Isaiah 9:5** (v. 6 in English Bibles) will be called "the Messenger of the Great Council" [*megales boules angelos*].

In the NT, Yeshua is the messenger-apostle who had resided "in the bosom of God," then was "sent" by God to "speak the word of God" (Heb 3:1, John 1:18, 3:34). The imagery of God surrounded by agents in his heavenly council permeates the Tanakh and the New Testament (Ps 89:5-7, Dan 7:9-14, Matt 22:41-45, Rev 5:9-14). Yeshua is the

monogenes or unique Agent–Son of God (John 3:18).

[See [The Heavenly Council in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.](#)]

2) The Septuagint version of **Psalm 109:3** [110:3 in Hebrew & English Bibles] states that the "Lord" (Grk. *kurios* = Heb. *adon*) who sits next to God had been **begotten** [*egennesa*] by God "among the splendors of the holy ones...from the womb of the dawn." Here, "dawn" [*heosphoros*] signifies the morning star, an image of first or new creation. In the NT "morning star" (*phosphoros*) seems to allude to new birth/creation rising in human hearts (2 Pet 1:19).

This reading implies that the *begotten Lord* existed at the dawn of creation.

Several Hebrew scrolls have this alternate LXX–Ps109:3 reading that God begat the unnamed *kurios/adon* (see text variants in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*). But in most medieval Masoretic texts (and thus modern Bible translations) verse 3 is so garbled grammatically as to be unintelligible—perhaps deliberately so to obscure the ancient reading. (This is David Flusser's opinion, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* [1988], p. 192).

[[Top](#)]

3) The Qumran text "**The Messianic Rule**" (1Q28a) has the line: "when God begets the Messiah." "**The Aramaic Apocalypse**" (4Q246), contains the line: "The son of God he shall be called, and son of the Most High he shall be surnamed." In "**Elect of God**" (4Q534) we read: "He is the Elect One of God. His birth and the exhalation of his breath [are from God]...his plans will last for ever." [See "[Messianic](#)" [Texts at Qumran.](#)]

4) Documents in the post–biblical **Pseudepigrapha** collection refer to someone in God's presence as his Son, Chosen One, Messiah, and Lord (e.g., **1 Enoch**, **4 Ezra**, **Psalms of Solomon**).

One text says this Someone was "hidden...before the creation of the world"; "from the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him" (**1 En** 48:6; 62:7). **4 Ezra** 13 refers to a "man" (God's "son") "whom the Most High has been keeping for many ages." In the **Psalms of Solomon** 17, the "son of David" whom God "made powerful in the holy spirit" is called "the Lord Messiah."

[[Top](#)]

Eventually, the imagery of God and Someone Else in the heavenly court became anathema in Rabbinic Judaism, primarily after the rabbis had encounters with Yeshua's Jewish disciples.

Around AD 200, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 refers to "heretics" [*minim*, believers] who say "there are many powers [*harbeh reshuyot*] in heaven" (cf. Talmud Bavli, Sanh 38a–38b). Another document reads: "He who says there are Two Powers in heaven is answered: Has it not elsewhere been said: 'And there is no God with me' " (Sifre on Deuteronomy 379). [A. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven (Early Rabbinic Reports*

About Christianity and Gnosticism (Brill, 1977).]

The value of these historical insights is that they mirror the basic New Testament gospel: "For us there is but one God and one Lord" (1 Cor 8:6, John 17:3, Rev 22:1).

The ancient rabbinic arguments against the doctrine of Two Powers have continued to this day. However, after the 4th or 5th Christian centuries their target became what we might call the "Trinitarian Doctrine of Three Powers."

In summary: Orthodox Rabbinic Jewish "Monotheism" in the 21st century is neither Biblical nor Ancient.

[\[Top \]](#)

Christian Models of Deity

Most varieties of Christianity (except for sects) define monotheism in terms of the Trinitarian paradigms summarized in the 4th and 5th century [Nicean, Athanasian, and Chalcedonian creeds](#), and in the writings of the Church Fathers, and then in the works of systematic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin or Karl Barth.

Elements of their theoretical constructs of the Godhead were taken from the New Testament, then processed through, what historians call, the grid of Greek philosophy, primarily **Neoplatonism**.

One result of a Neoplatonic view of the Godhead is that the Son of God cannot occupy a rung on the "**Ladder of Being**" lower than God the Father. He cannot be subordinate, lest his deity be of another, lesser species.

One way to create conceptual equality to "God the Father" (a biblical phrase; Gal 1:1, 1 Pet 1:2, James 1:1), was to coin the phrase "God the Son." To complete the conceptual triangle, theologians eventually coined the phrase "God the Holy Spirit."

[\[Top\]](#)

The NT contains no express Doctrine of the Trinity, if we mean by that the philosophical logic and language of the 4th and 5th century creeds and later summaries. Compare the NT with the opening words of the Athanasian Creed:

"Whoever will be saved, before all things,
it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith:
Which Faith, except everyone do keep whole and
undefiled, without doubt, shall perish everlastingly.
And the Catholic Faith is this:
that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity."

The NT doctrine of "God" is built upon the Hebrew imagery of God and his heavenly Vice-regent. **Psalm 110:1** is the most often cited Hebrew text in the NT: "The LORD [YHVH] said to my Lord [Adon], 'Sit at my

right hand' " (Matt 22:41–45, Acts 2:34–35, Col 3:1, Heb 1:3). [David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand (Psalm 110 in Early Christianity)* (1973), p. 15]

Significantly, what later rabbis condemned as heresy in the teaching of Yeshua's disciples (belief in "two powers"—not three) reflects what the NT actually portrays. (Review the pattern in [The Heavenly Council](#).)

[\[Top\]](#)

New Testament Imagery

New Testament "monotheism" consists of one God and his divine Son, Lord and Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth, and their shared "Spirit." As with the Hebrew *Ruach*, the Greek *Pneuma*, spirit, has a spectrum of uses in the NT and it can denote God's and/or Yeshua's presence, power, and holy nature.

In contrast to post-biblical Christian liturgy and some current worship patterns, humans and angels do not pray to or worship the Spirit. [Nor did Yeshua pray to the Spirit](#); only to his father (Matt 11:25, John 11:41). In Revelation, angels and martyrs praise only God ("Him who sits on the throne") and Yeshua, "the Lamb" (Rev 5:13, 7:10, 11:15).

The phrases "one God" or "only God" rarely occur in the NT (Eph 4:6, Rom 16:27, Jude 25). When they do, they denote the Father of Yeshua. They don't image a compound unity of three divine essences that make up "God." Yeshua praised his Father as "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt 11:25) even calling him "the only true God" (*ton monon alethinon theon*, John 17:3). The Spirit is "absent" from Yeshua's lips.

[\[Top\]](#)

The NT *does* affirm that "God was in Messiah reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19), and that Yeshua manifested the presence of YHVH on earth (Rom 10:12–14). Like all sons of a father, he mirrored his Father's "nature" (Heb 1:3), and could, thus, be called "the image of God" or simply "God" (2 Cor 2:4, John 1:1–2). As the pre-human Son he was also the mediating agent "through whom" God created all things (John 1:3, Col 1:16, Heb 1:2).

And yet, throughout the NT, there remains that ever-present **line of distinction** between "God" and Yeshua. A thorough reading of the NT bears this out.

[\[Top\]](#)

As doctrinal evolution took place in the Church, the Hebrew imagery of **God-and-his-Lord** was essentially discarded because it depicted Yeshua as distinguished from and subordinate to God. To theologians such a view of the Son contradicted their settled theory of a co-equal, co-eternal, monotheistic (triadic) Godhead.

Some within the Church knew their philosophical model of God did not have explicit support in the New Testament. In response, some scribes

bolstered the NT witness to the Trinity paradigm by altering their Greek NT manuscripts in order to give theologians prooftexts they needed for their doctrinal instruction. A few key altered texts include **John 1:18, 1 Timothy 3:16, 1 John 5:7**. (Most Christian Bibles note these in their marginal notes.)

With the invention of the printing press (1440), English Bible translations disseminated other forms of bias meant to promote clearer divine status to the Holy Spirit, about which the Old and New Testaments were viewed as inadequate. These imposed biases included capitalization of certain nouns and inconsistent translations, as seen in the distinction between "holy spirit" and "Holy Ghost."

(See [From holy spirit to Holy Ghost](#).)

In summary: Orthodox Creedal Christian "Monotheism" in the 21st century is neither Biblical nor Ancient.

[\[Top\]](#)

Islam's Complex Models of Its Godhead

The Qur'an strongly rejects the biblical imagery of Yeshua (Isa, Jesus) sitting beside God as co-ruling Son, as if they are two divine powers. For in Islam, only Allah is "God."

- 1) "Whosoever associates an Equal with Allah will have Paradise denied to him by Allah, and his abode shall be Hell.... Disbelievers say, 'God is the third of the trinity.' [Those] among them who persist in disbelief will suffer painful punishment." [Maidah/The Food 5:72, 73]
- 2) "Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah....May Allah destroy them!"
[At-Taubah/Repentance 9:30]
- 3) "All praise is due to Allah, Who has neither begotten a son, and Who has not a partner in his kingdom." [Bani Isra'il/Children of Israel 17:111]

Islam's "monotheism," however, isn't without paradoxes. Throughout the Qur'an, Allah (God) refers to himself as "Us."

[\[Top\]](#)

In Surah 2 (Baqarah/The Cow), he says to the Israelites: "Remember, O children of Israel, the favours I bestowed on you." Then he lists a few favours: "We saved you from the Pharaoh's people... We parted the sea and saved you... We communed with Moses... We pardoned you" (49–52).

The plural pronoun may refer to Allah and his angels, not necessarily to another deity. But it isn't clear.

In another passage, **the Qur'an suggests that Allah fathered**

Yeshua: "Marium [Mary] said, When shall I have a boy and no mortal has yet touched me, nor have I been unchaste? [Allah] said: Even so; your Lord says: It is easy to me.... So she conceived him."
[Marium/Mary 19:20–22]

In another place, **the Christian Trinity appears to consist of God, Yeshua and Mary:** "And when Allah will say: O Isa son of Marium! Did you say to men, "Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah?" He [Yeshua] will say: "Glory be to you, it did not befit me that I should say what I had no right to say." [Maidah/The Food 5:116]

Muhammad's understanding of the Trinity may come from the influence of his Ebionite uncle, and his own negative reaction to Eastern Orthodox Christianity's widespread adoration of the Blessed Virgin and Mediatrix, Mary, Yeshua's mother.

[\[Top\]](#)

The Three Great "Monotheistic" Religions

So we have before us a paradoxical irony: the spiritual leaders of the three well-known monotheistic religions have joined in ignoring or outright rejecting the biblical testimony to the "one God" (the Father of Yeshua) and the "one Lord" (God's divine Son: Messiah Yeshua).

To repeat my opening premise: monotheism isn't so simple a subject to discuss, as though everyone knows and agrees on what the word means.

Even if agreement is reached, the New Testament reminds us that belief in "one God" (as defined by Scripture) is not a guaranteed passport into the Kingdom of God: "You believe that God is one. You do well. The demons also believe and they shudder" (James 2:19).

It's evident that if we want to discern the Bible's unique teachings about God, we should meticulously study the Bible itself with clear eyes, trying not to read it through the contradictory lenses of Diaspora Jewish and Christian traditions, nor those of Arabian Islamic beliefs.

I believe in going back to the texts of Scripture and digging below the accumulated sediments of evolved religious thought. This will enable us, I believe, to distinguish *What Is* from *What Was*, and to discover what actually exists in the Country.

Pristine conditions, like pure water, are liberating.

• [Paul Sumner](#)

[\[Top\]](#)

[Directory](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Monotheism](#)
[Hebrew Bible Studies](#) | [Ruach Studies](#)
[The Trinity Paradigm](#)

hebrew-streams.org

