

JUDAISM
AND
THEOLOGY

ESSAYS ON THE JEWISH RELIGION



LOUIS JACOBS

JUDAISM AND THEOLOGY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Essays on the Jewish Religion

LOUIS JACOBS



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For my granddaughter Paula
and her
husband David Ward

Introduction

All these essays (with the exception of the last) have been previously published. Diverse though they are, they have a common theme, that of Jewish theology and topics arising from this, especially of a comparative nature. The essays, having been published at various times, are bound to be somewhat different in emphasis and may even seem to contradict one another here and there. I have also treated these themes in my books on Jewish theology, so there is a degree of repetition. Nevertheless, I have thought fit to present them to the interested reader for discussion and perhaps as a stimulus.

Here is a short run-through of the essays.

Chapter 1 is a contribution I was invited to make to the journal *Twentieth Century*. The previous issue of this journal had been devoted to pornography. This had aroused the ire of some readers and, perhaps in repentance, the next issue bore the heading *Where is God?* This opened with a comical dialogue between Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, as the well-known characters Pete and Dud, in which the two discussed how to discover the truth of religion. This was followed by a number of writers from different traditions. I was invited to write on the Jewish attitude. In the circumstances I was obliged to be more subjective than objective in trying to describe *the* Jewish view.

Chapter 2 takes up the mystical approach to the divine as seen by two near contemporaries.

Chapter 3 is similarly comparative in nature, as is Chapter 4 on the Jewish response to Kierkegaard.

Chapter 5 deals with this universal question from the point of view found in Jewish sources.

Chapter 6 explores the Jewish point of view of the idea of tradition as developed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Chapter 7 is also comparative, and appeared in a work devoted to the general question of the use of the body in worship.

Chapter 8 turns towards Christianity and Chapter 9 towards heretical sermonizing.

Chapters 10 and 11 consider theological aspects of Hasidism.

Chapter 12 examines what Jewish thinkers had to say on the legitimacy of praying to God to harm or destroy the wicked.

Chapter 13 deals with the comprehensive theological essay by Rabbi Aryeh Laib Heller, important and interesting in that Rabbi Heller was known chiefly as a distinguished Halakhist.

Chapter 14 discusses Rabbi Meir Simhah, another famed Halakhist who devoted part of his work to theological investigation.

From Chapter 15 onwards the turn is towards modern life and thought from a number of theological aspects. Chapter 15 concerns the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Zionist movement.

Chapter 16 addresses the concept of sanctity as applied to human life, and Chapter 17 the concept of power in Jewish tradition. Chapter 18 was originally contributed to a work on the contemporary religious scene.

In Chapter 19 I consider the semi-amusing question of whether angels are male or female or both. This is a theological jaunt with which to finish the book and not to be treated too seriously.

The following notes the original home of each chapter.

Chapter 1: *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 174, No. 1027, Autumn 1965, pp. 7–10.

Chapter 2 (full title 'The *Via Negativa* in Jewish and Christian Thought: The Zohar and the *Cloud of Unknowing* Compared'): Annual Sachs Lecture, Essex University, Colchester, 1997.

Chapter 3: Carmen Blacker and Michael Lowe (eds), *Ancient Cosmologies*, George Allen and Unwin, 1975, pp. 66–86.

Chapter 4: Richard L. Perkins (ed.), *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1981, pp. 1–9.

Chapter 5: *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, Spring 1984, pp. 4–16.

Chapter 6: Frank Whaling (ed.), *The World's Religious Traditions*, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1984.

Chapter 7: Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

Chapter 8: Zeev W. Falk (ed.) *Gevurath Haromah*, Jewish studies addressed at the eightieth birthday of Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. xvii–xxxi.

Chapter 9: Abraham Karp, Louis Jacobs and Chaim Zalman Dimitrovsky (eds), *Three Score Years and Ten: Essays in Honour of Rabbi Seymour G. Cohen*, Ktav, Hoboken, NJ, 1991, pp. 133–41.

Chapter 10: Ada Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 1996, pp. 208–13.

Chapter 11: Nathaniel Stampfer (ed.), *The Solomon Goldman Lecture*, Vol. 2, Chicago, IL, 1979, pp. 19–27.

Chapter 12: *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 2, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1982, pp. 297–310.

Chapter 13: *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, pp. 184–216.

Chapter 14: Memorial address for Rabbi Salzberger, London, 1978.

Chapter 15: *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America*, New York, 1982, pp. 56–63.

Chapter 16: *Fifteen Years of Catholic–Jewish Dialogue*, Vatican, Rome, 1988, pp. 191–6.

Chapter 17: *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, Winter 1980, pp. 16–28.

Chapter 18: Ian Harris, Stuart Mews, Paul Morris and John Shepherd (eds), *Contemporary Religion: A World Guide*, Longmans Group, Lancaster, 1997, pp. 31–8.

The Jewish Approach to God

A famous eighteenth-century Rabbi was the author of a slim volume on God which became a classic of Jewish devotional literature running into many editions. One of his colleagues on reading the book remarked: 'What an achievement to contain such a big God within the covers of such a little book!'

Anyone who writes on this theme must be painfully aware of the absurdity inherent in an attempt at describing the source of all being in a few thousand or even in many hundreds of thousands of words. Here it is certainly true that the more one knows the less one is able to speak. Moses, observed a Jewish teacher, is said to have been 'slow of speech' precisely for this reason. Wittgenstein's 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' is surely correct. From one point of view all theology is indeed a futile enterprise.

On the other hand there must be some talk of Deity in any vital form of religion. Unless *something* can be uttered there can be no prayer and no worship. The way out of the dilemma, as seen by many notable Jewish thinkers, including the greatest Jew of the Middle Ages, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), is to draw a distinction between God in His essence and God in manifestation. Of God as He is in Himself, as the Neo-Platonists say, nothing can be said. The nature of the Divine Being can only be known to Himself. But the religious life is not concerned with this at all but with God as He is revealed to mankind and with the relationship man can have with him. Judaism teaches that it is God's power which moves the stars. His voice is heard in the storm and tempest. The heavens declare His glory and the earth is filled with it. His is the force giving life to the beasts of the field, causing the rain to descend and the grass to grow. Moreover man can approach Him

in personal relationship. The urge to worship in the human breast is seen as a reaching out for the Infinite which can alone fully satisfy it. God is described in the Bible as compassionate, just and merciful to imply that by pursuing justice and loving mercy man can become God-like, near to his creator.

In this way a good deal of Jewish teaching affirms both the nearness of God and His remoteness. God is very near – ‘closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet’ – because all things owe their existence to Him and because man can walk in His ways, imitating Him in working righteousness. God is very near so that it is not unfitting to address Him as Father. And yet, Judaism teaches, God is remote. His true nature is utterly beyond man’s comprehension. And one of the ways in which Judaism asserts this remoteness is in its uncompromising refusal to permit any plastic image of God. The Romans called the Jews ‘atheists’ because they worshipped an invisible God. The mental image, implied in various Biblical descriptions of God in human terms, is as far as Judaism is prepared to allow its adherents to go and even here, it urges, there must be a constant mental reservation that what is spoken of does not represent the reality. Pictorial representation is forbidden because its concrete form renders such qualification impossible. Idolatry is the worship of that which is finite, and hence not God, as if it were God.

For the same reason Judaism rejects utterly the claim that God ever took on human flesh. It treats the very suggestion as blasphemous. Theoretically such a stern and utter rejection of every form of imagery of the divine might have resulted in a coldly abstract faith, starkly unemotional and over-intellectualized, a philosophy rather than a religion. In practice the result has been otherwise, as Pascal saw when he contrasted the ‘God of the philosophers’ with the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. The God of the Hebrew Bible and of subsequent Judaism, of whom no image may be made, is the ‘living God’ obedience to whose will is man’s greatest privilege and deepest joy.

The very emphasis in Judaism on the remoteness of God’s essence has made for greater awareness of His manifestations in the concrete universe by which alone He can be apprehended. If God can only be known in the world He has brought into being then holiness is not to be thought of as something apart from the world. This is why there is no simple answer to the question whether Judaism is this- or other-worldly. It is both. To be sure it

teaches that the death of the body is not the end of life and that man can enjoy God's goodness for ever. But it is in this life that man learns to grow in spirituality and he does so by engaging in worldly matters in a spirit of consecration. It is only when Jews have been influenced by Greek notions of a dichotomy between flesh and spirit that they are tempted to think of a God at war with His creation so that, somehow, losing the world becomes the inescapable price one has to pay for gaining one's soul. Celibacy, for instance, was hardly ever considered particularly virtuous in Judaism. The Jewish ideal is of the consecration of human life in obedience to the laws of justice and equity in family and social relationships. Marriage is a religious duty, the first command issued by God to man according to the Rabbis. Children are a blessing. Kierkegaard accused the Christians of his day of Judaizing when they celebrated their weddings with joy and Judaism looks upon this as a compliment. Extreme no doubt, but typical of a definite tendency in Judaism, is the saying of one of the teachers of the Talmud that on judgment day man will be obliged to give an account before the heavenly throne for every legitimate pleasure he denied himself.

On the psychological level man's rebellion against God is all too frequently due to the suggestion, fostered unfortunately by a good deal of religious teaching, that the very idea of God is anti-life. Religion is seen as being rather like the Victorian mother who says to the nanny: 'Go and see what the children are doing and tell them not to.' While not a few Jewish teachers have expressed themselves in ways which do little to remove the suspicion, the basic philosophy of Judaism that God is the Creator of the world who saw all that He had made and pronounced it good, acts as a brake on that religious outlook which would turn the world grey. The Rabbis were no world-haters or life-haters when they taught that it is the task of man to become a co-partner with God in building a just and righteous world. The old tale is told of a Rabbi who rebuked for being a deserter a miserly rich man he observed reciting Psalms with devotion. Why a deserter? he was asked. Because, he replied, the infantryman who goes over to the cavalry without his superior officer's permission is a shirker and by the same token the man blessed with worldly goods can best sing God's praises by doing something towards the alleviation of suffering.

Whatever he may think about some of the other ideas of the Bishop of Woolwich, the believing Jew can respond wholeheartedly

to the chapter in *Honest to God* entitled: "Worldly Holiness", for this is pure Judaism. It is odd that the Bishop, in this chapter, seems to imply that this way of looking at religion is foreign to Judaism. In that little gem of Rabbinic wisdom and spirituality *Ethics of the Fathers*, a Rabbi is reported as saying that while one hour of spiritual bliss in the Hereafter is worth more than the whole of this life, yet one hour of good deeds in this life is better than the whole of the Hereafter. The Bishop also seems to be unaware that the saying of Jesus regarding the Sabbath being made for man, not man for the Sabbath, is sound Rabbinic teaching and is found as such in the Talmud.

The Jewish declaration of faith, known, after its opening Hebrew word, as the *Shema*, is the verse in Deuteronomy: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One' (Deut. 6:4). The verse is recited twice daily by the devout Jew. It is mouthed by those around the deathbed of a Jew as he breathes his last. It is taught to Jewish infants as soon as they learn to speak. It is the great affirmation of ethical monotheism.

The Jewish doctrine of God as one meant, in the first instance, a total rejection of polytheism. The question much debated by Biblical scholars whether the doctrine erupted spontaneously, as it were, or evolved gradually from henotheism is beside the point for a theological appraisal. The facts are that, whatever its origin, the doctrine that there is only one God and that He loves righteousness and that He is on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors, eventually came like a breath of fresh air into the murky world of gods and goddesses fighting among themselves and greedy for man's propitiation. Baal, Marduk and the rest came to be called *elilim*, a Hebrew word meaning 'non-entities'. For all the colossal temples erected to them and the elaborate worship offered they were mere figments of the human imagination. It took much insight to become aware of this and believing Jews see it all as part of God's self-revelation through their ancestors. A recent Israeli scholar has gone so far as to put forward the view that the complicated pagan mythologies were so foreign to the Biblical authors that they were ignorant of their nature, describing idolatry in terms of simple fetish worship. Certainly the Bible is silent on the myths of the gods and, although this may be purely fortuitous, there is no Hebrew word for goddess which has survived in the Bible. Even in speaking of God, the creation myth with which the Bible opens spends no time at all in describing what took place before creation but

comes down immediately to earth: *'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth...'*

With the rise of dualistic theories about the universe, that there are two gods, one evil the other good, the 'One' of the *Shema* was made to yield the thought that God is Lord of all, that He creates darkness as well as light, that evil, too, is subordinate to Him and that those who fight it are doing His work. The problem of how the All-good can tolerate evil in his creation has always been a problem for Theism from, on the Jewish scene, the massive probings of the book of Job to the Rabbi who declared that it is beyond our power to explain the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. The standard theistic reply that a world in which evil was unknown could not serve, in Keats's words, as a vale of soul-making, that without a choice between good and evil there could be no meaning in the free choice of the good which makes man God-like, satisfies some minds but fails to satisfy others completely. Many Jews have preferred to walk by faith. What no representative Jewish thinker ever did was to fall back on theories suggesting that while God is a supreme Artist He is indifferent to the sufferings of His creatures. Judaism has always stood firmly on the belief in the goodness of God. Even when the figure of Satan came into Judaism, probably under the influence of Zoroastrianism, he was always seen as being completely subordinate to God. God is One and there is no power in heaven or earth beside Him. In the words of the great prophet of exile, almost certainly directed against early Persian dualism: 'I form light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the Lord, that doeth all these things' (Isaiah 45:7).

From the rejection of polytheism and dualism the deeper meaning of the *Shema* was developed to suggest far more than that God is one and not two or more. The Hebrew word for 'One' can also mean 'unique'. The idea, its roots in the Bible but stressed particularly under the influence of philosophical thinking in the Middle Ages, gradually came to the fore that God is 'wholly other', different entirely from anything in His creation. God came to be thought of as the source of goodness and of being in general but with His true nature altogether incomprehensible to man. A well-known Jewish hymn declares:

*They told of Thee, but not as Thou must be,
Since from Thy work they tried to body Thee.*

*To countless visions did their pictures run,
Behold, through all the visions Thou art one.*

Hence the distinction we have noted between God as He is in Himself and God in His manifestations. With highly questionable exegetical licence but with deep insight in this matter, the Jewish mystics interpret the verse: 'Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these' (Isaiah 40:26) to mean that behind the visible manifestations of His wisdom in the wonders of creation there is the hidden and unknown God. 'Who' (= God in His essence, of whom only the question: 'Who is He?' can be asked without an answer being forthcoming) has created 'these' (= the visible manifestations of His power and glory).

This is not to say that Judaism has never known inferior notions of Deity. There were not lacking, for instance, in the Middle Ages Jewish scholars who took the anthropomorphisms in Bible and Talmud quite literally, thinking of God as a being among others, elevated on a throne in heaven surrounded by the ministering angels. One of them even used the bizarre illustration of a wizard who can change himself into a hare, arguing that God can assume many guises, appearing, for example, to the Biblical heroes in the form of a man. These men dubbed thinkers like Maimonides heretics for daring to spiritualize the God concept. The significant thing for Judaism is, however, that it was men like Maimonides whose views won out, so much so that it can safely be said that no thinking Jew today would look upon the location of God 'up there' in outer space as anything but grotesque in the extreme and heretical to boot.

In the eighteenth century Baron von Holbach advanced as an argument for atheism the view that if God exists He would surely make His existence known to man in such a way as to preclude the possibility of doubt. It is interesting that a Jewish contemporary of Holbach, the founder of the Hasidic movement, also raised the question of the purpose of atheism. Why does God allow men to doubt His existence? His answer was that if God were immediately evident to all then faith in Him would be so powerful as effectively to preclude any endeavours on behalf of others. The psychological phenomenon of doubt is allowed to exist that a certain lack of faith might be brought into play where the needs of others are concerned. To have faith that God will provide for one's own needs is laudable. To have this kind of faith on behalf of

others is no virtue at all. Unless this were so all charity, all kindness and sympathy would lose their meaning.

This is no doubt a rather naïve way of expressing a great truth seen by Judaism. There is no Prometheus legend in Judaism. Far from being jealous of man's creativity, God endows man with the capacity for adapting the world to his needs. God gives man freedom of choice so that he can freely choose the good rather than have it given to him as a gift. It is man's glory that he can become God-like in making the good his own without any kind of divine coercion. It follows that there must be an ebb and flow in the life of faith, creative tensions stemming from the nearness of God at certain times and His remoteness at others. When God hides Himself, said a Hasidic master, it is to be compared to a father who plays hide and seek with his little child. The harder it is for the child to find his father the greater the joy when the discovery is made. 'Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near' (Isaiah 55:6). The Rabbis conclude from this verse that there are times when God is especially near, especially to be found by those who seek Him. And they suggest that one of these times is the period of self-examination which traditionally ushers in the Jewish new year. On the wider level this means that Judaism has evolved a whole range of observances, such as the Sabbath and the dietary laws, which have as their avowed aim the discovery of God and His revelation in human lives. These observances are not flights of poetic ritual undertaken in isolation from the world. They have to do with eating and drinking and the world of men and women of flesh and blood. It is in normal human life in society that the hidden God becomes revealed.

The most misunderstood aspect of the Jewish God concept is the Jewish claim that God has chosen the Jews. The choice appears odd, as the old jingle has it, because of the incongruity of universal truth being the preserve of a tiny group.

The first thing to be noted is that the doctrine of the chosen people is not tribal. A choosing God is the exact opposite of a tribal god. The fortunes of a tribal god depend on those of his tribe. When the tribe is vanquished he is conquered with it. A choosing God can only make the choice because He is the God of all. It is not without significance that when reference is made in the Bible to the choice of Israel there is generally a reference to God's universal reign. 'Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My

covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples *for all the earth is Mine*' (Exodus 19:5).

The second aspect of this whole matter to be noted is implied in the above verse. God chooses Israel because Israel chooses God. The relationship is reciprocal. The whole idea, historically considered, arose out of the recognition by the seers and prophets of Israel that Israel was, at the time when the doctrine was first put forward, the only people which acknowledged the one God as Lord of the universe. They felt that God would remain unknown to mankind unless His truth was kept alive in Israel. Right from the beginning, therefore, particularism was itself a form of universalism. It cannot be denied, however, that there were times, especially when Jews suffered from discrimination and oppression, when the particularistic aspects were over-stressed. Some Jewish thinkers have spoken as if there were a qualitative difference between the souls of Jews and non-Jews. But a living faith is no simple uncomplicated matter not open to abuse. The fruitful idea of a group dedicated to God and His truth is in danger when interpreted in a narrow fashion. Yet it has produced creative tensions and in the best Jewish thinking the idea of Israel's dedication is for the sake of mankind.

In discussing the Jewish concept of God it must be noted, too, that Judaism has never had a central authority to regulate belief. Maimonides, it is true, did draw up thirteen articles of faith, five of them having to do specifically with the doctrine of God. Whatever authority they enjoy among Jews today is due to the emergence of a consensus of opinion over the centuries that these represent Jewish teaching. One of Maimonides's principles, for instance, is that of the incorporeality of God. For Maimonides any Jew who believes that God has image or form is a heretic. But other teachers did not share Maimonides's view. Now no Synod or Council was ever summoned (apart from other considerations this would have been physically impossible until modern times) representing the Jews of the world to determine whether Maimonides or his opponents were right and to define the true faith. Maimonides's view won out because it seemed right to the majority of Jews, more in accordance with the general tendency in Jewish thinking from the earliest times and through the centuries.

All this has made for a certain elasticity in Judaism in matters of dogma. When this becomes, as it sometimes does, an excuse for avoiding entirely theological considerations and a preoccupation

with observances without reference to their spiritual meaning it is harmful to the religious life. But in itself the absence of hard, clearly defined statement of what a Jew must believe is no bad thing. For it has produced the realization that the divine cannot be contained in a formula, that behind the affirmation that there is a Supreme Being there lies a mystery too deep for man's comprehension. This in turn has produced among Jews what a modern Jewish theologian has called 'normal mysticism'. 'Normal mysticism' implies an attitude of reverence towards the sheer wonder of an existence permeated by the divine, an attitude capable of inspiring men towards the realisation of their spiritual natures without either removing them from the world of our daily concerns or allowing them to become lost in the obscurities of abstruse theological speculation.

This, then, is the Jewish concept of God. That there is a Supreme Being, All-good and All-powerful. That He is the ground of all there is and that the way to Him is by the pursuit of justice, mercy and holiness. That the people of Israel have their role to play in making these ideals common to mankind. The faith of Israel has been on earth a long time. It has won notable successes and has also suffered serious reversals. Jews believe that their faith is true and that one day it will win over the hearts and minds of all men. Jews believe that when that day comes, to use the language of tradition, the Kingdom of heaven, with us now even if we do not see it, will be firmly established upon earth.