

Judaism was the first religious tradition to teach absolute monotheism, the belief that there is only one God: a God who is indivisible, incomparable and the ultimate cause of existence.

In his book 'Laws Concerning Idolatry,' Maimonides gives a summary of the process by which he believed humankind came to the recognition of the truth in One God. He proposes that God was known to Adam, but as the generations passed, humanity wrongly came to believe 'that it would be pleasing to God if they were to venerate the forces of nature which serve Him ... Soon they were erecting temples and altars to the sun and the stars, offering sacrifices and hymns of praise to them, believing all this to be the will of God.'

According to the Talmud, Abraham came to the conclusion that all of existence proceeded from a single source, by a process of elimination. For Jews, the belief in the Oneness of God is the foundation of their faith. The first of the Ten Commandments tells them that they are forbidden to worship any other gods. They are also constantly reminded of the Oneness of God every morning and evening when they recite the prayer known as the Shema: its opening line is 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is One Lord.' (Deuteronomy 6:4) If God, as they believe, is the ultimate cause of existence, then everything that they encounter in nature becomes an encounter with God.

Any discussion about the nature and characteristics of God is bound to be a complex one, since we are dealing with the concept of a supreme being that is an external force which exists beyond human experience. Maimonides famously insisted that only God's actions can be known, and even these only tell us what God is not like, not what God is like. Even the Talmudic rabbis would often preface their anthropomorphisms with the phrase 'as if it were possible' (i.e. to talk about God in these terms).

The first verse in the Jewish scriptures reads: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' (Genesis 1:1). If there is indeed one God as this verse suggests, then it follows that God must be the source of all that is in existence. The Midrash (rabbinic commentary) describes that before creating the world; God opened the Torah scroll and read the beginning of the book of Genesis as though the Torah were an instruction manual.

Jews view creation as a continuous event that only exists whilst God pours creative energy into it, and this is known as the doctrine of perpetual creation.

The belief that God is incorporeal means that God has no physical body or physical substance and therefore has no material existence. The incorporeality of God means that God is not bound by the physical world in any shape or form; this means that the divine being is not restricted to a particular place or time.

If God is incorporeal, and has no physical existence, then it follows that God can be neither male nor female. There are many examples of God being described as 'Father', but this is better understood as a way of attributing a fatherly role of protector. Nevertheless, there are also occasions within Judaism when God is referred to in feminine terms. The Shekinah, referring to the presence of God in the universe, for example, is a feminine word, and denotes a feminine aspect of God's being.

One of the designations of God to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures is El Olam meaning the everlasting or eternal One. Jews believe that God has always existed and always will. This means that God has no beginning and no end. In Genesis 21:33 it tells us that Abraham was aware of this: 'Abraham ... called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.'

Jews believe that God is omnipotent. This implies that God's power has no limits at all. God is totally in control of the universe, and this includes all activities of nature and humans.

'Omniscient' is the term used to describe the belief that God knows all that is happening in creation. Jews also believe that God is there at times of anguish, bringing comfort to the bereaved and the sick; God is all-loving (omnibenevolent). The nature of the covenant that has been made with mankind emphasises the protection that is given to them.

The Hebrew word to express the holiness of God is 'qodesh'. To say that God is holy means that God is completely perfect and utterly separate from all evil and deficiency. Such is God's holiness that the third of the Ten Commandments even forbids Jews to use God's name in the wrong way. Jews therefore think the name of God is holy and should not even be spoken. Instead they use the name Adonai meaning 'Lord'.

Kavod is a word used for the energy that is encountered in moments of awe such as at the revelation on Mount Sinai. It attempts to describe the experience of standing in the presence of God. It literally means 'heavy' or 'weighty', but often denotes honour or glory. Kavod is a means of witnessing the beauty and radiance of God. Maimonides spoke of the kavod in texts such as Exodus 24:16: 'The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai', as 'the created light that God causes to descend in a particular place in order to confer honour on it in a miraculous way.'