

Introduction to Judaism

A. Part One: An Overview: What is Theology?

What makes something a Jewish Theology? What questions does a theology normally tackle?

B. Part Two: Four Thousand Years of Theology

1. The Biblical God
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Part One: An Overview: What is Theology?

Definition: Theology is the “study of God” just as “biology” is the study of life.

But that basic dictionary definition is not normally what we mean. When we speak of a “theology” we tend to have a number of subjects or concerns that are folded into that.

Areas of Inquiry that a Theology Traditionally Must Address

1. **The nature of God/God’s Existence:** What is God’s nature—what is the essence or “being” of God? Is God a spirit? A force? A “person”—meaning in philosophical terms an entity with agency. A human invention or fiction?
2. **God’s Name:** Does God have a name? If so, what does that name tell us of God’s nature? How might we come to know God’s name? Do different religions that have different names for God therefore pray to the same God?
3. **Singularity of God:** Is God singular, meaning monotheistic? Are there more than one god? Is there an evil antithetical being to God, such as some conceptions of Satan present, or as is a fundamental tenet of Zoroastrianism, which is actually an older religion than Judaism?
4. **Knowing God:** By what means can one come to know God? Is God knowable at all (immanent) or fully transcendent? (see 5)

5. **Divine Authority and Relationship with the World:** Is God the Creator? Does God act in/over the world through history or the miraculous? Or is God distant and uninvolved (non-intervening)?
6. **Theodicy—Evil and God:** If God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent (all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good) why is there evil in the world? If God is lacking on one or more of these categories, what makes God worthy of worship?
7. **God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob:** Does God have a special or unique relationship with the Jewish people? What is the nature of that *brit*, that covenant if any?
8. **Human Duties to God:** Do humans in general or Jews in particular have a set of responsibilities or obedience to God? Are the *mitzvot* or commandments divine or human in origin?
9. **Relational/Intercessional/Personal God:** Is God aware of and attentive to human needs, through prayer or other means? Does petitionary prayer work, and if so, how does it function?

Part Two: Four Thousand Years of Theology

1. The Biblical Depiction—Knowing God

Exodus 20:4-5

I am Adonay your God, who brought you up from Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves statues or physical representation, of anything in the sky or sea or the earth. You shall not bow to them nor serve them. For I am Adonay your God, a zealous/jealous God, who visits the sins of the fathers on the sons until the third or fourth generation of those that hate me.

Exodus 24:9

Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel;¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness.

Covenant and Human Obligations to God

Devarim 4:12-16

12 Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. **13** And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. **14** And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. **15** "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, **16** beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

2. God of the Sages: Talmudic and Rabbinic Depictions of the Holy One

RABBINIC NAMES FOR GOD

HAMAKOM
SHAMAYIM
HA-KADOSH BARUKH HU
RAHMANA
SHEKHINAH

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BERAKHOT 7A

“Rav Zutra bar Tuvia said in the name of Rav: “May it be My will that My mercies overpower My anger, and that My mercies be revealed over My attribute of justice, and that I should act towards My children with the attribute of mercy, and receive them beyond the measure of strict justice.”

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BERAKHOT 60A

A person must bless God for evil – In what kind of situation? For example, if a flood swept over his land. Even though it will be a good thing for him [in the end] because the land will have acquired [extra] sediment and be more rich - for the moment it is still evil.

Just as they bless God for good – In what kind of situation? For example, if a person finds something valuable. Even though it will be a bad thing for him [in the end] because if the king hears about it, he will take it – for the moment it is still good.

And if a man's wife is pregnant, and he says, "May God grant that my wife give birth to a boy" – this is a prayer in vain.

3. A Greek God in Jewish Clothes: Maimonides Vision

Corporeality and the Bibles use of "God's finger, hand, God saw, etc."

Mishneh Torah, Da'at, Yesodot, 1:9

All these expressions are adapted to the mental capacity of the majority of humanity who have a clear perception of physical bodies only. The Torah speaks in the language of humans. All these phrases are metaphorical.

Knowing God

Mishneh Torah, Da'at, Yesodot, 1:9

God's essence as it really is, the human mind does not understand and is incapable of grasping or investigating.

The cosmological argument – the unmoved mover

Guide to the Perplexed, II, I

It is as if you say: this stone, which was in motion, was moved by a staff; the staff was moved by a hand; the hand by tendons; the tendons by muscles; the muscles by nerves; the nerves by natural heat; and the natural heat by the form that subsists therein, this form being undoubtedly the first mover.

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah 1-6

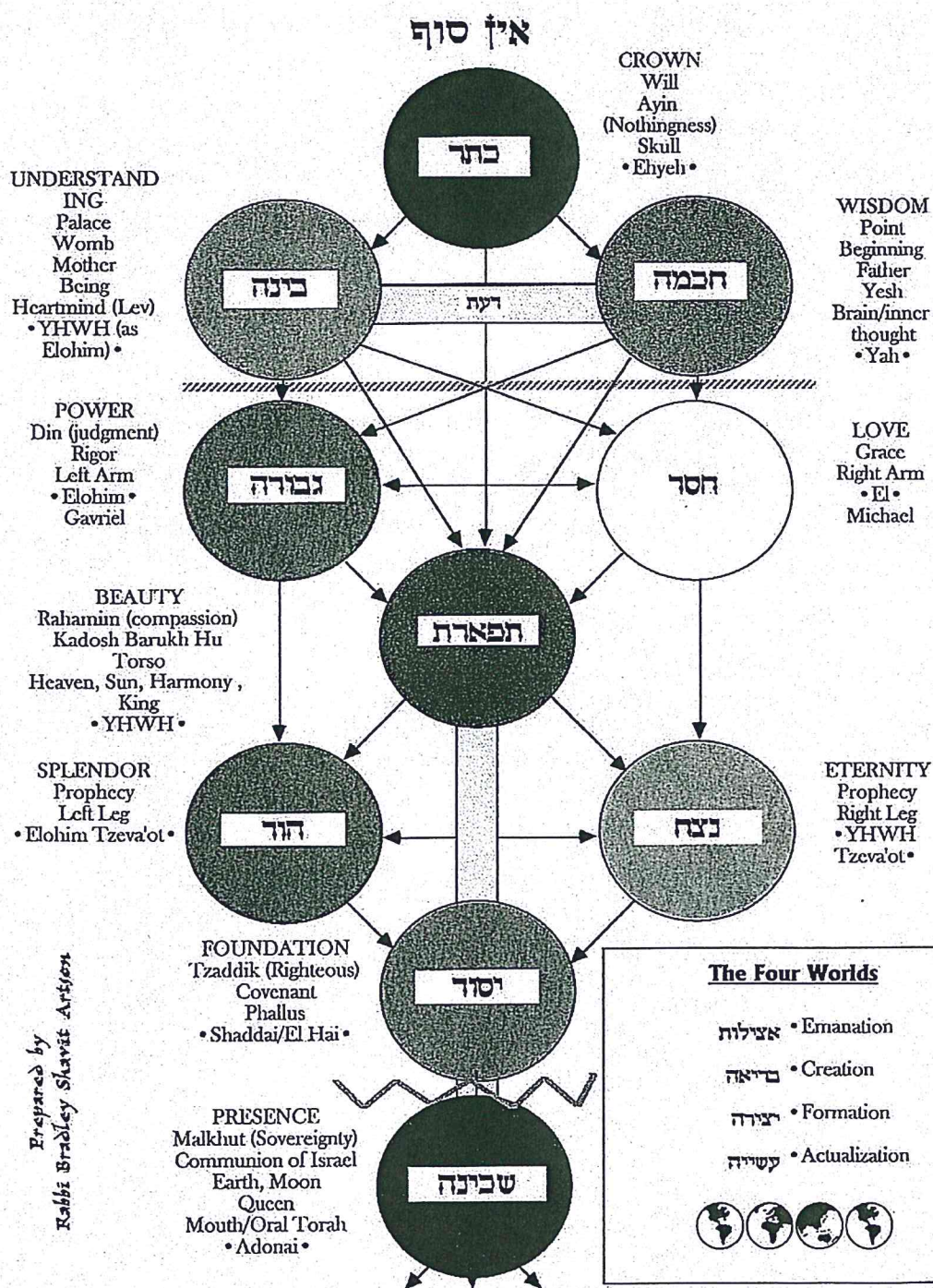
The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to be aware of the fact that there is a First Existent, who brought all existence into being. And everything that exists – heaven and earth and everything in between – only came into existence because of the actuality of His being.

Should one imagine that He does not exist – nothing else would be capable of existing.

4. Lurianic Kabbalah and the God of 10 Pieces

THE CLASSICAL DIAGRAM OF KABBALISTIC EMANATION

5.



Modern Theologies

Buber and the Transactional/Dialogic Divide

I-It

I-Thou

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The question breaks forth with the realization that it is man who is the problem; that more than God is a problem to man, man is a problem to God. The question: Is there a personal God? is a symptom of the uncertainty: Is there a personal man?

In moments in which the soul undergoes the unmitigated realization of the mystery that vibrates between its precarious existence and its inscrutable meaning, we find it unbearably absurd to define the essence of man by what he knows or by what he is able to bring about. To the sense of the ineffable the essence of man lies in his being a means of higher expression, in his being an intimation of ineffable meaning.

Judith Plaskow: Standing Again at Sinai

The need for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition. Half of Jews have been women, but men have been defined as normative Jews, while women's voices and experiences are largely invisible in the record of Jewish belief and experience that has come down to us. Women have lived Jewish history and carried its burdens, but women's perceptions and questions have not given form to scripture, shaped the direction of Jewish law, or found expression in liturgy. Confronting this silence raises disturbing questions and stirs the impulse toward far-reaching change. What in the tradition is ours? What can we claim that has not also wounded us? What would have been different had the great silence been filled?