CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

One God?

AMONG THE MOST POPULAR clichés not only in Jewish and Christian theology but also in popular religious belief is the assumption that Judaism is the classic religion of monotheism, and if Judaism did not in fact invent monotheism, then it at least ultimately asserted it.[1] Nothing summarizes this basic assumption better than the affirmation in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one." As the *Shema' Yisrael*, it became the solemn daily prayer, with which many Jewish martyrs went to their death. Christianity, as this narrative continues, adopted this Jewish monotheism, but quickly expanded it with the idea of the incarnation of God's son, the Logos, and finally watered it down entirely with the doctrine of three divine persons, the Trinity. In this view, Judaism was thus compelled to limit itself even more to the abstract concept of the one and only God. This God could then easily degenerate into the caricature of the Old Covenant's God, who receded ever farther into the distance and against whom the message of the New Covenant could set itself apart with all the more radiance. Judaism, according to this narrative, had no alternative but to assume its assigned role, as there was never a serious, much less balanced dialogue between mother and daughter religion.

We know today that pretty much none of this ideal picture stands up to historical review.[2] Some potential objections have meanwhile become generally accepted, while others are still extremely

controversial and the subject of heated discussion. With respect to biblical monotheism, today it can be read in all the related handbooks that this tends to be an ideal type in religious history rather than a historically verifiable reality.[3] The term "monotheism" is a modern coinage, first documented in 1660 by the English philosopher Henry More, who used it to characterize the ideal pinnacle of faith in God. Well into the twentieth century the term continued to play a key role in two opposing models of development of religions: either monotheism was considered the unsurpassable end point in a long chain of religions, which at the dawn of time began with all kinds of "primitive" forms, in order then to be spiritualized in increasingly "pure" forms (the evolutionary model), or on the contrary, it was the original ideal form of religion, which over time continued to degenerate and ultimately lost itself in polytheistic diversity (the decadence model). Both models have long since become obsolete in religious history. Monotheism is neither at the beginning of "religion" nor does it represent the final apex of a linear development. What makes more sense is a dynamic model that dispenses with value judgments, and moves between the two poles of "monotheism" and "polytheism," including numerous configurations and combinations that crystallized at different times and in different geographic regions.

This also means that Jewish monotheism was not "achieved" at a certain point in time in the history of the Hebrew Bible,* in order thereafter only to be defended against attacks from "the outside." This linear developmental model is also outdated. Bible scholars today paint a multifaceted picture of the idea of God in ancient Israel, in which various gods stand side by side and compete with one another. Israel's own God YHWH** had to assert

* The term "Hebrew Bible" refers to the Jewish canon of biblical books as opposed to the Christian canon of the "Old Testament."

** The four consonants (the tetragrammaton) forming the name of God, which cannot be uttered.

himself not only against numerous powerful spirits and demons but especially also against the deities of the Ugaritic and Canaanite pantheon, headed by the old god El and his subordinate, the young war god Ba'al. The strategy of the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible to let competing gods be subsumed in YHWH was not always successful.[4] Ba'al worshippers proved to be particularly resistant to this, as shown by the confrontation of the prophet Elijah against the cult of Ba'al, as demanded by King Ahab in the ninth century BCE (1 Kings 18). The prophet Hosea still felt compelled in the eighth century BCE to take action against the Ba'al worship at the land's high places (Hos. 2).

The ideal of biblical monotheism becomes utterly problematic if we take into account how easily a consort was long associated with the biblical God. The inscriptions of Kuntillet Ajrud near the road from Gaza to Eilat, from the time of the Kingdom of Judah, mention YHWH as the God of Israel together with his Asherah.[5] This Asherah is a well-known Canaanite goddess, also documented in the Bible as the wife of Ba'al (1 Kings 18:19). Her cultic image was worshipped in the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and was even displayed by King Manasseh in the YHWH Temple in Jerusalem.[6] The biblical narratives that report triumphantly of the successful destruction of these idols cannot conceal the fact that this cult continued to be widespread, and was revived time and again. Even regarding the fifth century BCE, we hear of Jewish mercenaries who settled in the Egyptian border fortress Elephantine and not only built their own temple there (despite the allegedly one-and-only sanctuary in Jerusalem) but in addition to their God Yahu (YHW), also worshipped two goddesses—and this continued for more than two hundred years without the Temple congregation in Jerusalem being able or inclined to take action against it.

The conflict between a theology that wished to acknowledge only YHWH as God and a religious tradition with many goddesses and gods came to a head in the crisis triggered by the Babylonian exile. While the "angel of the Lord" (Exod. 23:20–33), who

is in competition with YHWH and would play a large role in rabbinic commentaries, has been placed by Bible scholarship in an earlier layer in the Hebrew Bible, the indefinite plural in the first story of creation—"Then God said, 'Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26)—is part of the priestly account, which was probably written during the exile. For this reason, the priestly account of creation may well imply a "monotheistic confession,"[7] despite the use of a plural from the mouth of the same God, but this confession, as the rabbis experienced during the confrontation with their Christian, Gnostic, or also inner-Jewish opponents, was anything but uncontested. The same is true for the apocalyptic as well as the wisdom literature of postexilic Judaism of the Second Temple, both belonging to the canonical and especially also noncanonical literature, which will be the subject of the first part of this book. This is not simply a matter of an angelology, which places itself, as a "buffer" as it were, between the ostensible "distance of a God becoming increasingly transcendent" and his earthly people, Israel,[8] yet more directly and tangibly, it is about the return of not many but at least two gods in the Jewish heaven.

No less problematic about the ideal picture sketched above are the roles assigned to Christianity and the rabbinic Judaism* that was becoming established at the same time. There is no doubt that the Christianity of the New Testament and the early church fathers of the first centuries CE adopted Jewish monotheism—however, it was not a "pure" monotheism matured to eternal perfection but rather the "monotheism" that had developed in the postexilic period in the later canonical literature of the Hebrew Bible and noncanonical writings, the so-called apocrypha** and

*Rabbinic Judaism is the form of Judaism that developed under the leadership of the rabbis after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and continued up to the Arab conquest of Palestine in the first half of the seventh century.

**Apocrypha are books that were not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament.

pseudepigrapha.* The New Testament took up these traditions that existed in Judaism, and did not reinvent but instead expanded and deepened them. The elevation of Jesus of Nazareth as the firstborn before all creation, the God incarnate, Son of God, Son of Man, the Messiah: all these basic Christological premises are not pagan or other kinds of aberrations; they are rooted in Second Temple Judaism, regardless of their specifically Christian character. This is not changed by the fact that the divine duality of father and son led, far beyond the New Testament, to the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which would then be codified in the First Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE).

The Christological and then also the Trinitarian intensification of the concept of God in Christianity by no means implies that rabbinic Judaism forgot or repressed its own roots in Second Temple Judaism. Quite to the contrary. Recent research shows with increasing clarity that the Judaism of the first century CE did not ossify in lonely isolation and self-sufficiency; rather, only through constant discourse with the evolving Christianity did it become what we refer to today as rabbinic Judaism and the Judaism of early Jewish mysticism. Just as Christianity emerged through recourse to and controversy with Judaism, so too the Judaism of the period following the destruction of the Second Temple was not a Judaism identical to that of its early precursors but instead developed in dialogue and controversy with Christianity. Therefore, I prefer to define the relationship between Judaism and Christianity not as linear from the mother to the daughter religion but rather as a dynamic, lively exchange between two sister religions—a process in which the delimitation tendencies steadily grew, leading ultimately to the separation of the two religions. The second part of this book is devoted to this dialectic process of exchange and delimitation.

*Pseudepigrapha are noncanonical writings that were (falsely) attributed to a biblical author in order to guarantee or increase their authority.

The title of this examination, *Two Gods in Heaven*, is pointedly based on the rabbinic phrase "two powers in heaven" (*shetei rashuyyot*), which clearly implies two divine authorities side by side. This does not refer to two gods who fight each other in a dualistic sense ("good god" versus "evil god"), as we are familiar with primarily from Gnosticism, but rather two gods who rule side by side and together—in different degrees of agreement and correlation. Scholarship has developed the term "binitarian" to describe this juxtaposition of two powers or gods, analogous to the term "trinitarian" associated with Christian dogma.[9]

The theme of two divine authorities in the Jewish heaven is not new. Almost all pertinent studies follow the key rabbinic concept of "two powers," concentrating on the period of classical rabbinic Judaism. After the pioneering work of R. Travers Herford, the revised dissertation of Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, is considered a milestone in more recent research.[10] Despite their indisputable merits, however, both works set out from the premise that the rabbis, in their polemics against "two powers," were referring to clearly identifiable "heretic sects" that were beginning to break off from "orthodox" Judaism. For Herford, it was overwhelmingly Christianity that incurred the wrath of the rabbis, whereas Segal attempted to address an entire spectrum of pagans, Christians, Jewish Christians, and Gnostics. But ultimately, even Segal's *Two Powers in Heaven* remains caught in the methodological straitjacket of dogmatically established "religions" that defended themselves against "sects" and "heresies."

Since then, the binitarian traditions of ancient Judaism have increasingly moved into the spotlight of research, though with different premises for early and rabbinic Judaism. Research in the field of Jewish studies continues to concentrate primarily on the rabbinic Judaism that was gradually emerging and its confrontation with nascent Christianity. The programmatic works of Daniel Boyarin have pride of place here. With his book *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*[11] and an impressive series of articles,[12] Boyarin attempted to break down the rigid fronts

of "Christianity" versus "Judaism" and "orthodoxy" versus "heresy" in favor of a more differentiated picture, according to which the rabbis were not (yet) fighting against external enemies, but were arguing primarily with opponents within their own rabbinic movement. I have joined the discussion with my books *Die Geburt des Judentums aus dem Geist des Christentums* (The Birth of Judaism out of the Spirit of Christianity) and *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other*, and in recent years, this conversation has been carried on predominantly between Boyarin and myself.[13] In 2012 and 2013, Menahem Kister added two articles to the debate that are as significant as they are comprehensive, but that unfortunately exist up to now only in Hebrew.[14] Kister again invokes the old static model of "Judaism" and "Christianity" as two religions that were permanently separated early on, claiming that in contrast to the Christians, who were driven by theological questions, the rabbis were concerned "only" with solving exegetical problems that arose from contradictory Bible verses. Accordingly, binitarian ideas in Judaism were a construct of modern research and thus never considered by the rabbis.

Early Judaism—that is, the period *prior* to rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament—has up to now been examined predominantly by Christian New Testament scholars. With his seminal contribution on the Son of God, Martin Hengel opened up an entire field of research that has since gained considerable influence especially in Anglo-Saxon research under the heading of "High Christology."[15] "High Christology" is understood as referring to the Christology of the New Testament that specifically addresses the divinity of Jesus, in contrast to "Low Christology," which is primarily concerned with Jesus's human nature. If the writings of the New Testament—that is, long before the later dogmatic statements by the church fathers—already speak of the idea of Jesus's divinity and his being worshipped as a second God next to God the Father (which is generally affirmed), how does this relate to the supposed biblical and early Jewish monotheism?

Diverse research literature has meanwhile emerged on this, covering the range between these two poles:[16] from, on the one hand, advocates of an exclusive monotheism who view early Judaism as bearing witness only to a strict belief in the one and only God, through, on the other hand, all possible stages of an inclusive and fluid monotheism up to authors who recognize authentic early Judaism in the idea of two Gods side by side.[17] The assessment of the divinity of Jesus then results from its relation to the varying degrees of early Jewish monotheism: almost all authors, including the exclusive monotheists, meanwhile concede that numerous mediator figures (angels, patriarchs, personified divine attributes, etc.) were known to early Judaism, but they remain at the level of divine agents and do not explain the undisputed divinity of Jesus. The latter results, as Larry Hurtado has stated with particular emphasis, exclusively from the cultic worship and veneration of Jesus, which is what comprises the "binitarian mutation" in Jewish monotheism that is characteristic of early Christianity. According to Richard Bauckham, a contemporary ally of Hurtado, the ostensibly strict early Jewish monotheism can only be overcome when Jesus becomes identical with the one and only Jewish God.[18] The messiah Jesus is not a second semidivine figure but instead God himself. This is without doubt the most radical deduction from an extreme Jewish monotheism.[19]

A few years ago, Boyarin attempted with his book *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* to supplement his works on rabbinic Judaism by including early Jewish literature from the Hebrew Bible up to New Testament Christianity.[20] In my review of this book, I drew attention to the copious postexilic literature on our topic, which has not yet received sufficient attention, not even by Boyarin.[21] With the present book, I would like to venture to bring together the two eras and for the first time focus on ancient Judaism in its entirety from the Hebrew Bible to the end of the rabbinic period—that is, the Second Temple period or early Judaism *and* rabbinic Judaism. In doing this, I expressly do not wish to get involved in the sophisticated New Testament discus-

sion on the divinity of Jesus and its roots in early Judaism, but it will certainly not hurt if my considerations from a strictly Jewish studies perspective are heard in this to some degree very heated debate.[22] My integration of early Jewish mysticism on equal terms with classical rabbinic Judaism gives this book a particular focus.

Accordingly, the book is divided into two parts. The first part, on "Second Temple Judaism," starts with the Son of Man in the Book of Daniel, which determines a great share of the subsequent discussion. He can likely be interpreted as the angel Michael, the divine representative of the people Israel, who anticipates in heaven the expected earthly victory of Israel over the pagan nations. With him, for the first time an angel enters the scene who is elevated to quasi godlike status, and in this capacity, represents in heaven the interests of God's earthly people. This is followed by a chapter on the wisdom literature, as reflected in the canonical Proverbs and noncanonical books Jesus Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon (Sapientia Salomonis). Here two competing strands of tradition become visible—namely, first a strand that is traditionally biblical, according to which wisdom was created as a child (more precisely, a daughter) of God prior to the creation of the world, initially enthroned with God in heaven, and then sent as his envoy to humankind (more precisely, the people Israel) on earth. The second strand, which is largely influenced by Platonic philosophy, regards wisdom as the archetype of divine perfection that imparts divine strength to the earthly world in various stages of emanation. In Judaism, this became the Torah; in Christianity, it became the personified Logos.

The next two chapters deal with two texts of the Qumran community, both of which further develop the theme of the divinization of an angel or human being, as laid out in Daniel. Whereas Daniel does not clarify the origin of the "Son of Man," in the first text, the so-called self-glorification hymn, for the first time it is clearly a human being who appears and is elevated to heaven in a previously unheard-of manner, and is then enthroned there as a divine-messianic figure among and above the angels. The second

text, the so-called Apocryphon of Daniel, is an interpretation of the biblical Book of Daniel. It raises the "Son of Man" of Daniel 7 to the "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High," expecting from him the eschatological redemption of the people Israel.

Two chapters follow on key themes of the so-called Pseudepigrapha of the Hebrew Bible. The first is dedicated to the Similitudes of the Ethiopian Book of Enoch, in which the Son of Man, who is seated on the throne of God's glory as an eschatological judge, is none other than Enoch, the human being elevated into heaven. The second deals with the Fourth Book of Ezra's Son of Man, who is equated with the Messiah, and thus will conquer the pagan nations at the end of time and reveal himself to be the "Son of God." We can observe in these texts the two opposing—or more precisely, the constantly overlapping—lines from an angel who is elevated to a divine or semidivine figure, and who will appear at the end of time as the redeemer of Israel, and that of an immortal human being who ascends into heaven, and once there, transformed into an angel, takes his place as a virtually godlike figure of redemption.

The two final chapters in the first part pursue the philosophically informed theme of the wisdom literature. In the Prayer of Joseph, the highest angel Israel, as the firstborn before all creation, is identical with the human Jacob, patriarch of Israel. The highest angel in heaven is hence in reality a human being, who as the sole creature was with God in heaven prior to all creation. The role of wisdom in the canonical and noncanonical books of the Bible is now assumed by a human being who, however, does not need to be transformed into an angel, but from the very beginning is equated with a human being: the angel is a human being, and the human being is an angel. The parallels to the godlike Jesus Christ, who as the firstborn before all creation was always with God, but who had to assume human form in order to complete the divine work of redemption, are obvious. For the Jewish philosopher Philo, it is the Logos, the creative power of God, who is not only characterized as the firstborn before all creation and highest among

the angels but also as the archetypal human being created in the image of God. It is virtually impossible to get any closer to the idea of two gods in heaven, and it is hardly surprising that Philo's later Christian followers elevated him to the status of the church fathers.

The second part of the book, "Rabbinic Judaism and Early Jewish Mysticism," offers for the first time an analysis of the different strands of classical rabbinic literature in a narrower sense and early Jewish mysticism in a combined context. Striking differences become apparent between rabbinic Judaism in Palestine, on the one hand, and Babylonian rabbinic Judaism and Jewish mysticism, on the other. The first chapter, devoted to the continuation of the Son of Man tradition in rabbinic Judaism, comes to the conclusion that the Son of Man is virtually irrelevant among the rabbis of Palestine, in contrast to the Second Temple period. Essentially, only one Palestinian midrash* is cited in research (a commentary to the Bible verse Exod. 20:2), in which the different guises of God as an older and younger God are discussed. Since the Bible verse Daniel 7:9, which plays a central role in the Babylonian Talmud (see chapter 9), appears in the context of this discussion, some scholars regard this midrash as early evidence for the continuation of binitarian traditions in Palestinian rabbinic Judaism. My analysis of the midrash comes to a different conclusion. I do not see any evidence in the sources of Palestinian Judaism for the Son of God as a second deity next to the biblical God of creation, and I presume that the usurpation of the Jewish Son of Man by the New Testament—Jesus as the Son of Man who will come with the clouds of heaven and is enthroned at the right hand of God[23]—served to prevent the reception and further development of this originally elementary Jewish idea in the Judaism of the increasingly Christianizing Palestine.

*"Midrash" (plural "midrashim") is the technical term for both individual interpretations of the Hebrew Bible in classical rabbinic literature and the collected works devoted to the respective books of the Bible.

The situation is different with respect to Babylonian Judaism (see chapter 10). There, Christianity played only a subordinate role, and it was precisely there that binitarian ideas survived. It is the Babylonian Talmud (and not a Palestinian source) that identifies the Messiah-King David with the Son of Man of Daniel and lets him sit on a throne next to God. And it is none other than Rabbi Aqiva, one of the heroes of both rabbinic Judaism and early Jewish mysticism,[24] who is said to have uttered this equation—and is immediately and passionately contradicted by his rabbinic colleagues. Here we are encountering for the first time a pattern that will pass through almost all relevant sources of this epoch: namely, the renewal of bold binitarian thoughts in certain *Jewish* circles in Babylonia and the refutation of these ideas as well as harsh polemics against them in mainstream rabbinic Jewish society. While the Babylonian Talmud presents the elevation of David as a divinized Son of Man only together with polemics against it, the Hekhalot literature, the literature of early Jewish mysticism,* is much more impartial: for the David Apocalypse, which appears only in the Hekhalot literature, it is completely undisputed that David is the Messiah-King who was elevated into heaven and enthroned next to God. Christian parallels in the Apocalypse of John (Revelation) in the New Testament as well as those expressed by the church fathers Ephrem the Syrian and John Chrysostom show why most Babylonian rabbis reacted so aversely to the elevation of David as a godlike Son of Man and Messiah-King.

Precisely this pattern can also be observed in the traditions surrounding the patriarch Enoch, which were also taken up and

* Hekhalot literature refers to the sources dealing with the *hekhalot*, the heavenly "halls" or "palaces" that mystics pass through on their journey to heaven, in order to reach the divine throne (*merkavah*) in the seventh "palace"; these "halls" or "palaces" can also be equated with the seven heavens. The term *hekhal* in the singular originally comes from the architecture of the earthly Temple, where it is used specifically for the main sanctuary in front of the Holy of Holies. The mystic who embarks on the heavenly ascent is paradoxically called *yored merkavah*, which literally means the one who "descends" to the Merkavah.

further pursued in rabbinic Judaism and early Jewish mysticism (see chapter 11). Here too, similar to the Son of Man, it is striking that the Palestinian rabbinic sources are reserved and tend to express a negative connotation, whereas the Babylonian rabbinic sources and the Hekhalot literature again reveal the ambivalence of adoption and rejection. After a short survey of the figure of Enoch—the only antediluvian patriarch who did not die a natural death but instead was received alive in heaven—in the Hebrew Bible and the apocryphal Books of Enoch, I will analyze the only Palestinian midrash that discusses Enoch's fate. Only here do we encounter a rejection of Enoch's ascension to heaven in a polemic whose harshness is virtually unparalleled. The Palestinian rabbis, in marked contrast to their early Jewish colleagues during the Second Temple period, considered Enoch evil. They felt not only that he died a natural death but also that he deserved it. Looking at the contemporary Christian sources that take up the pre-Christian Jewish line of tradition and reinterpret it in a Christian sense, it becomes immediately obvious why the Palestinian rabbis reacted as they did.

Early Jewish mysticism responded in a very different way. In the Third Book of Enoch, the latest of the Hekhalot literature, the human Enoch is transformed into the highest angel Metatron and given the honorific title "Younger" or "Lesser God" (*YHWH ha-qatan*). This represents the pinnacle of binitarian traditions in late antique Judaism. How dangerous these thoughts could be viewed is demonstrated in the midrash on the ascent of Elisha ben Avuyah to the seventh heaven, where he sees Metatron sitting on a divine throne and concludes from this that there must be "two powers" in heaven, God and Metatron—an insight that is interpreted as heresy, bringing with it the immediate punishment of both the rabbi and Metatron. Here too the tone in the Hekhalot literature is much more reserved than in the parallel account in the Babylonian Talmud.

The same applies to the complex of traditions surrounding Akatriel, an angel who is identical with Metatron. Whereas in the

Hekhalot literature it is not the rabbi but rather God himself who becomes the protagonist of a second divine being at his side, it is once again the Babylonian Talmud that adjusts the standards in a parallel version, reestablishing the "pure doctrine" of the one and only God. This pattern is repeated in the final source on Rav Idith and Metatron. In a midrash that appears only in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbi and an unknown heretic argue over Metatron; the rabbi imprudently admits that Metatron has the same name as God, thereby inadvertently representing the notion of a second God—which the horrified rabbi then awkwardly denies. Thus the Talmud again attempts to use polemics to defuse the binitarian idea. Here too, texts from the Hekhalot literature that have been largely neglected up to now offer evidence that within the circles of Jewish mystics, the idea of two Gods in heaven had become established, which is why it was so harshly opposed by the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud.

This completes the outline of the notion of two Gods in the Jewish heaven, from the biblical Book of Daniel to rabbinic Judaism and the Jewish mysticism of late antiquity. In terms of methodology, I have chosen not to put forward any general overview or lofty theories but instead to develop my ideas from the respective sources. Thus I ask readers to bear with me in my interpretation of some key texts, as there is no other credible way for me to approach this difficult subject with such far-reaching consequences. Essentially, I assert nothing less than that the idea of a triumphant monotheism cannot be maintained for postexilic Judaism after Daniel, let alone for post–New Testament Judaism. Late antique Judaism was itself susceptible to binitarian thought, regardless of all efforts to separate it from Christianity. This applies first and foremost to the protagonists of early Jewish mysticism, who were by no means confined to hermetically sealed and obscure circles, but made their way into the center of Babylonian rabbinic Judaism. Despite the usurpation of binitarian ideas by New Testament Christology and early Christian authors, rabbinic Judaism and the Judaism of the early mystics held firm to these

ideas. By reviving the idea of two Gods in the Jewish heaven, late antique Judaism was also responding to Christianity's claims, but this response was in essence genuinely Jewish, and as such, not only defensive and delimiting, but affirmative as well. To this extent, early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were also competing for the second God beside God the Creator.

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Index compiled by Scott P. Smiley.