

Theme 2A: Religious concepts and religious life – Beliefs about the nature of God/ concept of God

Key words

Incorporeal

El Olam

Omnipotent

Omniscient

Omnibenevolent

Kavod

Shekinah

Key concepts

A belief in the Oneness of God is at the foundation of the Jewish faith as indicated by the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3), as well as the opening line of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4).

God is the **creator**, as established in the first verse of Jewish scripture (Genesis 1:1). What follows describes six days of creation, followed by a day of rest on the seventh day. Many Jews imitate God by resting on shabbat, the seventh day. God is also **incorporeal**, meaning that God is not bound by the physical world. Finally, God is **neither male nor female** and is **eternal** (El Olam).

God is described as being **omnipotent** (there are no limits to God's power), **omniscient** (knowing all that is happening in creation), **omnibenevolent** (having absolute goodness), **holy and perfect**, and **just and merciful**.

However, these characteristics raise issues such as the problem of evil.

There are two terms used to describe God's presence: 'kavod' – denoting the energy that is encountered in moments of awe and revelation, and 'shekinah' – the divine presence of God in the world. An example of kavod can be found in Isaiah 6:1, and shekinah is evident in the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt when God's presence was visible in guiding the exiles as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Maimonides, however, was unhappy about describing God using the positive attributes that are found in the Torah. In *The Thirteen Principles of Faith*, he proposed that only God's actions can be known, and even these only tell us what God is *not* like, not what God *is* like. He concluded that one of the ways in which a person can come to know God is through study of the Torah and by engaging the intellect in the search.

Key quotes

'You shall have no other gods before me.' (Exodus 20:3)

'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is One Lord.' (Deuteronomy 6:4)

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' (Genesis 1:1)

'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.' (Exodus 20:8)

'I Am who I Am.' (Exodus 3:14)

'... the Lord is a God who knows.' (I Samuel 2:3)

'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.' (Isaiah 6:1)

'The Torah speaks in the language of man.' (Maimonides)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

Is it possible to know God?

Is it possible to fully understand the nature of something which cannot be known through our human understanding of the world? We need to accept that a human being's understanding of God will always be limited, and that one doesn't necessarily need a full understanding of something in order to experience it. A person can come to know God through spiritual awareness.

Are God's characteristics meaningful today?

Only those characteristics of God which are closer to human experiences are meaningful today. Scientific discovery means that we no longer need to rely on a belief in God to explain how the world came into existence. We are more likely to question what appear to be contradictions in God's characteristics today. The holiness of God will always be meaningful to observant Jews. Many Jews would accept that God's characteristics are such that they set God apart from humankind.