Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies

Alan Cooper joined the faculty in 1997 as a professor of Bible, and has served as director of publications, chair of the Bible faculty, and, from 2007 to 2018, provost of JTS. In 1998, he was appointed professor of Bible at the Union Theological Seminary, a nondenominational Christian seminary, becoming the first person to hold concurrent professorships at JTS and Union. Previously, Dr. Cooper was a professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, where for six years he was director of its School of Graduate Studies. He also taught religious studies for ten years at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.
Most recently, Gallup found 81% of Americans expressing belief when asked the simple question, "Do you believe in God?" This was down from 87% in 2017 and a record low for this question first asked in 1944, when 96% believed. It reached a high of 98% in the 1950s and 1960s.
When Americans Say They Believe In God, What Do They Mean?

One-third of U.S. adults believe in a higher power of some kind, but not in God as described in Bible

Do you believe in God or not?

Yes: 80%

- 56% Believe in God as described in the Bible
- 23% Believe in some other higher power/spiritual force

No: 19%

- 33% But do believe in some higher power/spiritual force
- 9% Do not believe in any higher power/spiritual force

Note: Don’t know or unclear responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.
“When Americans Say They Believe In God, What Do They Mean?”
PEW RESEARCH CENTER
God said, let us make a human in our image, according to our likeness.... Then god created the human in his image; created it in the divine image. (Gen 1:26-27)

[9th-century BCE
Akkadian/Aramaic bilingual from North Syria]

The statue (צלם) of Hadad-yis’i, king of Guzan, Sikan, and Azran, for exalting and continuing his throne and for the length of his life, and so that his word might be pleasing to gods and to people, this image (דמות) he made better than before.
The Biblical God (1)

“The Old Testament...believed in a God who was utterly other but who despite this status listened, talked, wept, walked, judged and loved.” Santiago Sia, in *New Blackfriars*, May 1987 (Special Issue: God and Change), p. 220.

I am divine, not human; the Holy amidst you (Hosea 11:9).

Yet—

God moves about in a garden:

[The human couple] heard the sound of YHWH moving about in the garden and the adam and his woman hid from the face of YHWH amid the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:8).

God visits Abraham, who is recovering from his circumcision:

YHWH appeared to [Abraham] while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent by the terebinth of Mamre (Genesis 18:1—YHWH being one of the “men” mentioned in v.2?)
The Biblical God (2)

God wrestles with Jacob:

ויָתְרָה יְשֵׁרָה לֵבָבָה נְאֵבָכָה אִישׁ שָׁמָיִים וֹדֵד בָּלֹא: Jacob remained alone, and a “man” wrestled with him until dawn (Genesis 32:25). [“Man”=God, cf. v.29; or an angel, cf. Hosea 12:5]


God appears as fire:

וּמֶרֶא כְּבָדָה נִצָּבָה אֶלֶּה אֶלֶּה בְּרֵאשֵׁי בְּרָכֵי לְוָיִית בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: The sight of the Glory of YHWH was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop in the sight of the Israelites (Exodus 24:17).

God refuses to show his face:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָא תִרָּאֵת אֵת פָנִי וְלָא יִרָאֵנִי הָאָדָם וּמָה: [God] said [to Moses], you cannot see my face because no human sees my face and lives (Exodus 33:20).
The Biblical God (3)

God reveals his face:

Another prophet did not arise in Israel like Moses who knew YHWH face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10).

God settles his gigantic body on a throne:

In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw YHWH sitting on a high and lofty throne, his skirts filling the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

[On the embodied god in general, see Francesca Stavrakopoulou, God: An Anatomy (2022)]

God enthroned over the cherubim:

YHWH reigns; the nations tremble.

Enthroned on the cherubs; the earth quakes (Psalm 99:1).
In the first instance, God is represented as a king enthroned in heaven, ruling providentially by means of the configuration of the planets that comprise his throne, governing the heavens as appropriate for the exercise of righteousness and justice. Now God is depicted as enthroned on earth abiding over the cherubs, denoting miraculous rulership by means of the angels, his servants who do his will. They are winged like the cherubs. On account of this the earth quakes in terror of the great king abiding in it.

Ahirom sarcophagus (Phoenician, c. 1000)
The Biblical God (4)

God is perceived as the merest whisper:
[God passes by the prophet Elijah. There are great wind and a shattering earthquake, but God is in neither of those.]

And after the earthquake, fire, but YHWH was not in the fire; and after the fire the merest whisper (1 Kings 19:11-12).

God is perceived in the racket of a thunderstorm:
The voice of YHWH is over the waters. The Divine Glory thunders; YHWH over the mighty waters (Psalm 29:3).

God is with me:
Even when I walk through deepest darkness, I do not fear evil for you are with me.

[See Tanya Luhrmann, How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others (2020)]
In U.S., half of adults believe God determines what happens to them most or all of the time

% who believe God determines what happens to them ...

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% who believe God/higher power ...

- Has protected them: 77%
- Has rewarded them: 67%
- Will judge all people on what they’ve done: 61%
- Has punished them: 40%

% who say ...

- They talk to God, God talks to them: 28%
- They talk to God, God does NOT talk to them: 47%
- They do NOT talk to God, God does NOT talk to them: 15%
- Don’t believe in God/higher power/unclear: 10%

Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.
“When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?”
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Maimonides and the Via Negativa (adapted from Kenneth Seeskin, “Maimonides”)

Maimonides offers several proofs for the existence of God, all of which are versions of the cosmological argument (*Guide* 2.1). Rather than begin with a definition of God and try to show that God’s essence implies existence, he begins with a description of the world as we know it and tries to show that it implies the existence of God.

Because the heavenly bodies are always moving, the only thing that can explain that motion is an infinite power. It cannot be corporeal, because then it would be subject to division or change. Seeing that its power is infinite, it cannot derive that power from something else. Thus, the only way to explain the motion of the heavenly bodies is to posit the existence of a being that is neither a body nor a force in a body. **Although Maimonides thinks this argument gives us sufficient grounds for saying *that* God is, he does not think it provides any grounds for saying *what* God is.**

If Maimonides is right, there can be no plurality of faculties, moral dispositions, or essential attributes in God. Even to say that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good is to introduce plurality, if one means thereby that these qualities are separate attributes.
God’s rulership is conveyed to us by spreading word of God’s activities, specifically the act of creation *ex nihilo*. God wanted the written Torah—not just the oral tradition—to attest to this great matter, because belief in creation *ex nihilo* is the grounding for the attainment of knowledge of God on the basis on God’s actions, and that is the greatest possible personal attainment.

Attainment of knowledge of God on the basis of God’s essence and being is impossible, hidden and concealed even from the angels.
The two kinds of knowledge are exemplified by the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 33: “Pray let me know Your ways” in v. 13 refers to the knowable, to which God responds, “I will make all My goodness pass before you” (v. 19). “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” (v. 18) refers to the unknowable, to which God responds, “you cannot see My face” (v. 20). Just as a person is obliged and commanded to refrain from delving into the unattainable [that is, God’s essence], so is it a commandment and an obligation to seek out and delve into that which is knowable, for by this does a servant find favor with the master [cf. 1 Samuel 20:4]. We know God on the basis of God’s actions.

Prime example is Psalm 19:2:

The heavens declare God’s glory; the sky proclaims his handiwork.
Where Do We Find God Now?

*Berakhot* 8a (with Steinsaltz, apud Sefaria): Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple, where the Divine Presence rested in this world, was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only one place in His world where he reveals His presence exclusively; only the four cubits where the study of halakha is undertaken.

Numbers 24:5: How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!

[경신기 1:9]}

미한이 영비이며 영비 오 아미 암이 미咩이

[주의 halakhah might mean “walking” in its plain sense.]
Rashi: Our sages said, from the blessings of the wicked [Balaam] we learn how he had thought to curse [Israel] ... When God reversed his mouth, he blessed them in accordance with the curses he sought to say, as it says in Sanhedrin 105b.

Maharal (beg.): This means that he sought to say that there should be no synagogues (“your tents”). And that the shekhina should not abide over them (“your dwellings”). He sought to curse them such that there would be no synagogues or study houses in order to separate the shekhinah from Israel, God forbid.

[On Sanhedrin 105b, see Rabbi Vered L. Harris, “Distracted by Blessing.”]
As long as there are synagogues and houses of study, the shekhinah is in Israel, as it is said, as long as Israel prays, the shekhinah is among them. So also houses of study: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only four cubits of halakhah. And it says (Avot 3:2), two who sit and exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence rests amongst them, [as is said, “Then the God-fearing conversed with one another, and God listened and heard...” (Malachi 3:16)] ... How do I know that God rewards even an individual who sits and is occupied with the Torah? As it says, "He sits alone in meditative stillness; indeed, he receives [reward] for it" (Lam 3:28).] Balaam’s entire intention, God forbid, was to separate the shekhinah from Israel, but God reversed him so that he blessed them: “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!”
When they said in Berakhot 8a, "Since the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One has only four cubits of halakhah," the meaning was not that God could be confined within a space of four cubits. Even in the Temple, if God were restricted to entering within four cubits, it would have been impossible to enter the Temple! We reject the erring Christians who say that God entered a woman’s belly, which is much narrower than four cubits, and filthy. And also in their opinion, every day God descends on the altar and enters a cup of wine and a cracker. The Most High is far above their notion.
Many will not believe that God is confined in place, God forbid, for as Solomon said, “But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

Their meaning in this midrash was that God’s providence cleaves to those who serve him and call his name in truth and integrity, as it says, “YHWH is near to all who call him; to all who call him faithfully” (Psalm 145:18). And it says, “Wherever I cause mention of my name I shall come to you and bless you” (Exodus 20:21). The place established for this was the Temple. When it was destroyed, there was no remaining [Temple] service and no means of serving God other than Torah study. The shekhinah, viz., individual providence, cleaves to anyone occupied with her.
Even if only a single person occupies four cubits alone, providence cleaves to that person. That is the ultimate purpose of humanity, according to “the righteous one is the foundation of the world” (Proverbs 10:25). Also, according to what they said, “How do I know that God rewards even an individual who sits and is occupied with the Torah? As it says, ‘He sits alone in meditative stillness; indeed, he receives [reward] for it’” (Avot 3:2 quoting Lamentations 3:28). All the aggadot are to be interpreted in this manner. How can they believe in Incarnations when they have been admonished against them? God forbid that they should fall into what they have been admonished against.
More on 4 cubits of *halakhah* (2)

*Shulhan arukh* OH 396:1 (on Sabbath boundaries)

“Let each one stay in place” (Exod 16:29) is taken (*Eruvin* 48a) to refer to the measure of the space a person occupies. Hence, the Sages used it to support the idea that every person occupies four cubits anywhere.
Vitruvius, the architect, says in his architectural work that the measurements of man are in nature distributed in this manner, that is 4 fingers make a palm, 4 palms make a foot, 6 palms make a cubit, 4 cubits make a man, 4 cubits make a footstep, 24 palms make a man and these measures are in his buildings. (Leonardo’s inscription above the image)

Vitruvius was a 1st-century BCE Roman architect and engineer, known for his multi-volume work titled *De architectura*. His discussion of perfect proportion in the human body (*De arch. III.1*) inspired Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” (c.1485).