About Interpretation within the Interplay of Singularity and Duality in Psalm 62:12

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Abstract. Psalm 62:12, a poetic expression in the Hebrew Bible, serves as an eloquent locus for deepening into the interplay of major concepts dealt with in Judaism such as singularity and duality. Through a lens that integrates traditional exegesis (especially the mystical insights of Sefer Yetzirah upon these concepts), the verse unfolds as a tapestry of layers, although a vast majority of its translations might overshadow some particularities of the original text. The investigation begins with the singularity of God's utterance, symbolized by the phrase "One – God has spoken." This could be seen as a reference to the primordial utterance, to the idea that God's speech is not confined to a specific moment in time but encompasses the eternal and ongoing act of creation. The duality encapsulated in "Two – have I heard", which embodies the perspective of the psalmist, invites reflection on the dynamic of revelation and interpretation – a binary dance of divine disclosure and human receptivity, as well as its edges. What role does the idea of interpretation play within the singularity vs duality interplay? Additionally, what perspectives or lenses are implied by the translations predominantly chosen for this verse?[1]

Keywords: singularity, duality, interpretation, translation

About translation and (con)text

"One" and "two" may be construed as numerical figures, linguistic expressions, symbolic representations, conceptual constructs, units, factors, and beyond. This paper invites the examination of the two terms through the lenses provided

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1   A substantial portion of the section *About interpretation* comprises excerpts from the chapter *Compromisul interpretării* (pp. 102, 104) from my doctoral dissertation titled לא – *Despre secvenţa consonantică* Alef–Lamed *în Biblia Ebraică* [On the Alef–Lamed Consonant Sequence in the Hebrew Bible] (translated by me), currently pending publication by Bucharest University Press.

by *Jewish thought*, allowing interpretations from a theological and a mystical point of view.

Psalm 62:12 represents an interesting case study in the diversity of translations and interpretations found within the English versions of the Bible and not only. In most translations, this is the 11th verse, but in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, edited by Rudolf Kittel and published by the German Bible Society of Stuttgart after the Leningrad Codex B19A – which serves as the primary textual reference for this paper –, it is designated as the 12th verse.

One notable difference among translations of Psalm 62:12 is the perspective upon the phrase יִתְּעֲמָע וּז־סִיתַּשׁ סיהֹלֵא רבֵּד תחַא (*ahat dibber Elohim shtaim-zu shamati*). This phrase is translated in various ways across different versions, leading to nuanced differences in meaning and emphasis. We will examine a few instances, including also the first part of the 13th verse,[2] which appears to continue the phrase and the thought initiated in the 12th one.[3] For example, the King James Version (KJV):

God hath spoken **once**; **Twice** have I heard this; That power belongeth unto God. Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy.	סיהֹלֵאֵל זֹע יֵכ יִתְּעֲמָע וּז־סִיתַּשׁ סיהֹלֵא רבֵּד תחַא: דסָחָ ינָדֹאֵ־דִּלוּ

… emphasizes the importance of divine message that requires enhanced attention on the part of the psalmist. It could also address the proper or appropriate behaviour of the righteous in perceiving the divine message. Following the interpretation of Catherine Petrany, "This is not a prayer speech addressed to God, but rather one that asks its plural human audience to reflect on a particular reality and adopt certain empirical behaviours" (deClaissé-Walford 2014: 90).

Contemporary English Version (CEV) translates it as:

I heard God say **two things**: "I am powerful, and I am very kind."	סיהֹלֵאֵל זֹע יֵכ יִתְּעֲמָע וּז־סִיתַּשׁ סיהֹלֵא רבֵּד תחַא: דסָחָ ינָדֹאֵ־דִּלוּ

This translation offers more of a condensed or summarized version of the Hebrew verse. The polarity of one–two cannot be perceived here. As opposed, the *New International Version* (NIV) emphasizes the contrast:

One thing God has said; **two things** I have heard: Strength belongs to God; so too, my Lord, does mercy.	סיהֹלֵאֵל זֹע יֵכ יִתְּעֲמָע וּז־סִיתַּשׁ סיהֹלֵא רבֵּד תחַא: דסָחָ ינָדֹאֵ־דִּלוּ

This version is more precise and literal, being devoted to the Hebrew meaning of the two problematic words, even though it adds the term "thing", which

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2   12th verse in other translations.

3   13th verse in other translations.

does not appear in Hebrew. The last translation that we will consult is Jewish Publication Society (JPS), which renders the verse as:

> G-d hath spoken **once**, **twice** have I heard this: that strength belongeth unto G-d; also unto Thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy.

אַחַת דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים שְׁתַּיִם־זוּ שָׁמָעְתִּי כִּי עֹז לֵאלֹהִים: וּלְךָ־אֲדֹנָי חָסֶד

This one is a lot more similar to the KJV. In fact, most translators preferred the terms "once" and "twice" for אחת (*ahat*) and שְׁתַּיִם (*shtaim*), even though the equivalent or the correspondent Hebrew term for 'once' is פַּעַם (*pa'am*) and for 'twice' is פַּעֲמַיִם (*pa'amaim*). The temporal nuances brought by the terms 'once' and 'twice' highlight the receptive and responsive nature of the psalmist, symbolizing the open-heartedness of the righteous individual, who is ready to receive the one message with twofold attention, but the question here is what the two cardinal numerals, these two abstract numbers, can address in this context.

Acknowledging the difference in nuance of the two terms, I will offer a more literal translation, which will support a Hebrew-centric interpretation of the text. For that matter, I will keep also in a transliterated form the theonyms as they appear in Hebrew. In most translations, אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) appears as 'God' and אֲדֹנָי (*Adonai*) as 'Lord'.

> **One** – has spoken *Elohim*. **Two** – have I heard this. Because power [belongs] to *Elohim*, and to you, *Adonai*, love [belongs]!

אַחַת דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים שְׁתַּיִם־זוּ שָׁמָעְתִּי כִּי עֹז לֵאלֹהִים: וּלְךָ־אֲדֹנָי חָסֶד

To what do the terms 'one' and 'two' allude here? Considering the context of the verse, 'one' is associated with *Elohim* (to divinity), while 'two' is linked to the author of the Psalm.

The entire psalm reflects on the unwavering support and the assurance of divine protection. The psalmist seeks refuge in God's strength, acknowledging divinity as the source of security and deliverance. The 9th verse of the psalm concludes with the word סֶלָה (*Selah*), which has an uncertain etymology and appears preponderantly in the Book of Psalms, serving as a cue for the reader or singer to pause. After *Selah*, the next three verses adopt a different tone – reminiscent of ecclesiastical literature –, reflecting on the notion of futility and weightlessness by using the word הֶבֶל (*hevel*),[4] which is one of the central concepts in the philosophical Book of Koheleth.

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4   Lit. 'vapour', 'breath', 'vanity'.

Men of low degree are **vanity**, and men of high degree are a lie; if they be laid in the balances, they are together lighter than **vanity**. Psalm 62:9 (JPS)

אַ֤ךְ ׀ הֶ֥בֶל בְּנֵֽי־אָדָם֮ כָּזָ֪ב בְּנֵ֫י אִ֥ישׁ בְּמֹאזְנַ֥יִם לַעֲל֑וֹת הֵ֝֗מָּה מֵהֶ֥בֶל יָֽחַד׃

Vanity of **vanities**, saith Koheleth; **vanity** of **vanities**, all is **vanity**. Ecclesiastes 1:2 (JPS)

הֲבֵ֤ל הֲבָלִים֙ אָמַ֣ר קֹהֶ֔לֶת הֲבֵ֥ל הֲבָלִ֖ים הַכֹּ֥ל הָֽבֶל׃

The 12th verse, the one that represents the interest of this paper, has its correspondent or counterpart in Job 33:14. I will offer also for this verse a literal translation, the theonym here being לא (*El*), which appears as 'God' in other translations.

For *El* speaks (in) **one**, and (in) **two** the man perceives it not.

כִּֽי־בְאַחַ֥ת יְדַבֶּר־אֵ֑ל וּ֝בִשְׁתַּ֗יִם לֹ֣א יְשׁוּרֶֽנָּה׃

A first layer in the comparison of the two very similar verses could be the affirmation versus negation, the mastery, or the lack of an appropriate reception of the receiver. The similar themes that we find both in Psalm 62:12 and in Job 33:14 are "one", "two", and "divine speech". How are these concepts perceived in the Jewish traditional exegesis and especially in the mystical perspective?

About singularity

Elliot Wolfson, one of the few scholars who have endeavoured to apply the methods and frameworks of contemporary literary criticism to the study of rabbinic and overall Jewish thought, emphasizes, for example, the contrast between Greek and Jewish theophany, that of the depiction of God through visual imagery versus verbal expression (Wolfson 1994: 13). In the Jewish perspective, the portrayal of the divine through visual representation is forbidden, as it is considered a violation of religious law. This stance is either reinforced by or reinforces the notion of God's singularity and differentiation from all existing entities or phenomena.

The concept of singularity is linked, in Judaism overall, to divinity. If there is one phrase that encapsulates the Jewish faith, it is the שְׁמַע (*Shema*),[5] the verse recited by a Jew every morning and evening of their lives, and the last words to issue from their dying lips. "He [the Jew] is required to stand still, directing his heart heavenward in trepidation and fear, in trembling and reverence, while proclaiming the **oneness** of God: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is **One**!" (Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 1:1; emphasis mine).

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5   Lit. 'hear'.

This is a traditional theological perspective, and it uncovers the supreme attribute of the divine. In the same manner, Moses Maimonides explains in "The Guide of The Perplexed" the notion of "one" and "oneness" when attributed to divinity. "God's being **One** by virtue of a true **Oneness**, so that no composition is to be found in Him and **no possibility of division** in any way" (Maimonides I – 50; emphasis mine). Maimonides also elucidates that the attribute of oneness pertains exclusively to divinity.

> For there is no **oneness** at all except in believing that there is **one simple essence** in which there is no complexity or multiplication of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, **not divided** in any way and by any cause into **two notions**; and you will not find therein any multiplicity either in the thing as it is outside of the mind or as it is in the mind, as shall be demonstrated in this Treatise. (Maimonides I: 51; emphasis mine)

Psalm 62:12 elucidates this entire concept through only a few words and extends further, revealing the inherent limitation of the senses to apprehend the notion of unity in any conceivable manner.

One of the distinctive traits of Judaism is the meticulous attention to every aspect of daily life. In this context, language holds significant importance, as it is believed that God created the world through words. If words are the fundamental building blocks of creation, then letters serve as the elemental imprints that underpin existence and form the essence of all things. The mystical perspectives place greater emphasis on the interpretation of letters and their significance. "Sefer Yeṣira", among the earliest foundational texts of Jewish mysticism, delves into the correlation between the mystery of the act of creation named *ma'ase bereshit* and the Hebrew alphabet. "By means of **thirty-two wondrous paths** of wisdom, Yah, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God, God Almighty, holy and terrible is his name, dwelling for ever, carved out. He created his universe with three types of things (whose names derive from the same root letters – s-p-r): with (*seper*) and numbers (*separ*) and speech (*sippur*)" (Sefer Yeṣira 1: 1; emphasis mine).

The twenty-two wondrous paths correspond to the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, while the remaining ten paths are associated with the ten *sefiroth*[6] (Sefer Yeṣira 1: 2). Gershom Scholem provides, in his book *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbols* a succinct and comprehensive explanation of the mystical understanding of creation, the notion of plurality inherent in the *sefirotic* system, and its connection to the notion of unity.

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6   The ten *sefirot* symbolize the ten divine emanations that form the basis of the created world.

This Kabbalistic world of the *sefiroth* encompasses what philosophers and theologians called the world of the divine attributes. But to the mystics it was divine life itself, insofar as it moves toward Creation. The hidden dynamic of this life fascinated the Kabbalists, who found it reflected in every realm of Creation. But this life as such is not separate from, or subordinate to, the Godhead, rather, it is the revelation of the hidden root, concerning which, since it is never manifested, not even in symbols, nothing can be said, and which the Kabbalists called *en-sof*, the infinite. But this hidden root and the divine emanations are one. (Gershom Scholem 1969: 35; emphasis in the original)

In "Sefer Yeṣira", and not only, the letter associated to divinity is the first letter of the alphabet, א (*Aleph*), being also the origin of all the other letters. "He hewed, as it were, immense columns or colossal pillars, out of the intangible air, and from the empty space. And this is the impress of the whole, twenty-one letters, all from one the **Aleph**" (Sefer Yeṣira 3: 2). However, the creation does not begin with *Aleph* but with *Bet*, which is the second letter of the alphabet. Here we encounter the paradox of origin versus beginning, which is entwined to *Bereshit* 'Genesis'.

About duality

> "Everything is a **duality** except for the creator of all."
> (Abraham Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 32: 4–3)

The concept of duality, and we could overlap here also the concept of plurality, is associated to creation. Maimonides calls it multiplicity – where not in its entirety and not even one part of it is in any way similar to the oneness that is the divine. "God's being One by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever is to be found in Him and no possibility of division in any way whatever – then you must know that He, may He be exalted, has in no way and in no mode any essential attribute, and that just as it is impossible that He should be a body, it is also impossible that He should possess an essential attribute" (Maimonides I – 50).

In Judaism, creation emerges from words – God created the world through speech. The entire creation is carved in and carved by the principle of separation of division, as noted by Wolfson in his exploration of the mystical interpretation with focus on the creation narrative found in another fundamental text for Jewish mysticism – "Sefer HaBahir". "In the beginning is the splitting of the waters, a rupture in the beginning. Thus the beginning is *Beit*, signifying the duplicity brought about through division of the one before all division. Where do we see this divide most wholly? In time, in the beginning, at the beginning—for to

begin, the beginning must have begun, otherwise it is no beginning. What begins, therefore, can only be what has already been what is yet to come" (Wolfson 2006: 131; emphasis in the original).

If divinity is inherently associated with the notion or the attribute of oneness, can there be perceived any connection between divinity and the notion of duality, to which every element of the creation is a subject of? When it comes to the divine, Maimonides views everything that is observed and observable, named or perceived as the manifestation of divine actions. Maimonides divides the attributes of God into positive and negative categories, the first one listing other five subcategories, of which only one is void of any idolatrous aspect: the one relating, as I mentioned earlier, to divine action (Maimonides I: 52).

From this point of view, every divine name is an indicator to divine action, except for the tetragrammaton (YHWH), which uniquely denotes divine essence. *Elohim*, in this regard, the theonym that appears in Psalm 62:12, is the name of God associated to creation, to existence: "YHWH", whose true pronunciation is unknown, consisting as it does of the 'pure, so-called silent letters', is the 'name of the essence' that is 'pure breath', 'pure spirit', or 'pure will without actual conation', whereas 'Elohim' is the 'name of the divine effects', the multifaceted manifestation of that essence, spirit, and will (Wolfson 2006: 36–37).

Every manifestation is plural in its unfolding, being subject to time-space – this means that every manifestation has a beginning. If *Aleph* is the source of all the other letters, and implicitly of all the creation, *Bet* is the beginning of them all. "The letter **Bet** entered and said to Him: 'Master of the Universe, may it please You to create the world with me? Because by me You are blessed in the upper and lower worlds.' The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: 'But, of course, I shall certainly create the world with you. And you shall appear in the beginning of the Creation of the world'" (Zohar 6: 37; emphasis mine).

"Beginning" and "origin" are not interchangeable in this context. "Origin" is associated with oneness, while on the other side we face the insurmountable duality of "beginnings". The concept of duality here is distinct from dualism, which suggests polarity and antinomy, whereas duality implies distinctiveness and separateness.

The idea of unity or singularity is the forever elusive or unattainable concept; where even though the world might have had its beginning in only one letter, *Bet*, the "name" of the letter is composed of three other letters: *Bet*, *Yud*, and *Tav*. The process continues recursively, with each component containing further components: the first *Bet* is composed of another *Bet* and another *Yud* and another *Tav*, and the *Yud* is made of another *Yud* and a *Waw* and a *Daleth*, and *Tav* is made of another *Tav* and another *Yud* and another *Waw*, and so on and so forth. This imagery illustrates multiplicity without implying the notion of antinomy.
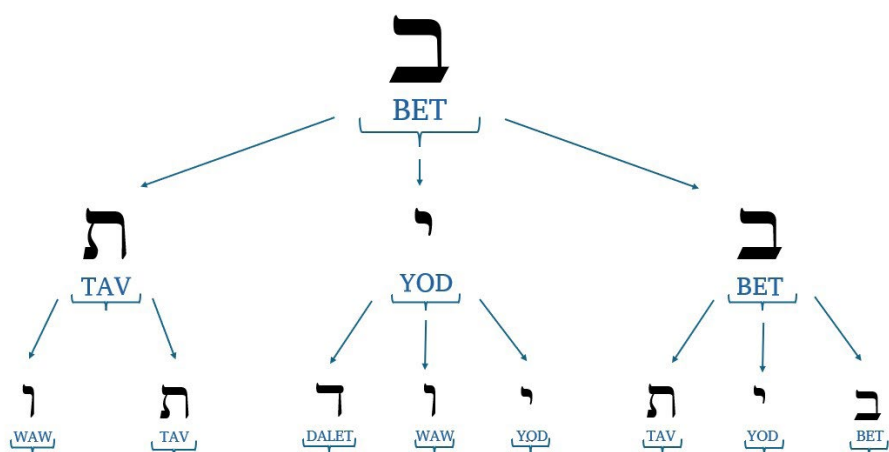
Figure 1. *The components of BET*

A paradox emerges here: the more we engage into division or separation, the more alluring the notion of unity becomes, but the same outcome might be anticipated in the unifying process. Yet, these seemingly opposite processes paradoxically mirror each other, yielding the same effect – plurality. Consider the example of language: every combination of words, although numerous, comprises no more than 22 letters (in Hebrew). However, as we unify these letters, the result is not a reduction but rather an amplification of multiplicity and diversity in meaning and significance. The principle of separation along with the unifying principle both apply in this context to either plurality or duality; the idea of "one" cannot be the subject of either of these two principles.

About interpretation

> "Creation belongs to the realm of the semiological.
> The Universe, as well as the things and events
> crisscrossing history, **signify**."
>
> (Faur 2010: 37)

Following the narrative of the Genesis and its subsequent manifold commentaries, everything in existence has been created through speech. Therefore, everything that is called and has a name signifies and is subject to interpretation. The only one that cannot be interpreted is the divinity here; the only possibility of calling forth divinity is akin to summoning its manifestation.

In Hebrew, the verb 'to name (something or someone)' does not exist, there is only the noun שֵׁם (*shem*) 'name'. The action of naming is expressed by the verb

אָרָק (*qara*), and depending on the preposition preceding the verb, it can express two different meanings: when used with the preposition ...לְ (*le*...) – 'to'/'for', which precedes verbs of motion, אָרָק (*qara*) means 'to call', 'to name'. If used with the preposition ...בְּ·(*be*...) 'in', it means 'to read'. Everything has a name, but it is not named, but called or read. These two senses of the verb אָרָק (*qara*) imply an interpretative faculty of the one who performs the action, the meaning not being "given". "The term *qore* in Hebrew stands for both 'reading' and 'calling forth' for signification of the consonantal text. As it were, the reader 'calls forth the signification'" (José Faur 2010: 19; emphasis in the original).

What does interpretation mean? Let us look together at the term פֵּשֶׁר (*pesher*), which means 'interpretation', as Jose Faur helps us understand the depth of its multifaceted meanings.

> Significance is the function of **interpretation**. The Hebrew term for interpretation, *peter (pitaron)/ pesher*, implies the notion of **compromise**. Interpretation involves the integration of various elements. In Hebrew, it also means "lukewarm." In a sense, "interpretation" may be conceived as blending different elements, as when mixing hot and cold water. Thus "to interpret" is to integrate two or more signs and make a "compromise" which contains them all but is identical with none of them, just as lukewarm water is neither hot nor cold." (José Faur 1986: 28; emphasis mine)

Interpretation implies the notion of compromise, as *beginning* implies the notion of duality, and they both imply the notion of relation. At the same time, interpretation is a notion encompassed within the concept of language, which functions not as a reflection of the created world, the relationship being antipodal. Here, the structure of the created world is a mirror, the reflection of the structure of language through which it is created. "From the standpoint of Jewish thought [...] language is not a phenomenon within being; rather, being is a phenomenon within language" (Patterson 2005: 173).

The inevitability of interpretation is rendered within multiplicity, where by "multiplicity" we understand "the created world"; it is also rendered within the inevitability of interconnection and within the ratio between those that are parts of the multiplicity. Meaning continues to be a function of relation, which in the given context is revealing *something* through diverse manifestations. Compromise exists here by virtue of being of "the parts" and does not exist by virtue of being of "the whole".

Words, as well as things – *hadəvarim*[7] – are vessels of meaning; they can be defined or interpreted as bearing sense, but only together or in relation with other

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7   In Hebrew, the term דָּבָר (*davar*) carries double meaning: 'word' and 'thing'; here the term is articulated in its plural form, הַדְּבָרִים (*hadəvarim*).

words/things, while the meaning, as essence, is (like a mirror) intangible, the ineffable metaphor that each carries within itself and hidden from itself. This, the self, *is* - ינא (ani), and it *is not* - ןיא (ein), receiving meaning only in relation to התא (ata), 'you', where ינא (ani), 'I' becomes התא (ata), 'you' in order to be (when called – qore) and ןיא (ein) in order not to be (when not called), where ןיא (ein) means 'not to be', 'to not exist'. The two words, ינא (ani) and ןיא (ein), are composed of the same three letters, but the order of the last two changes from ינא (ani): *Aleph – Nun – Yud* to ןיא (ein): *Alef – Yud – Nun-sofit*. The letter *Nun* has a different form when placed at the end of a word, called *Nun-sofit* 'final *Nun*', a prolonged, "in-finite" form. The idea of singularity or unity rendered by the first-person singular – ינא (ani) – exists only through its potential to become the second-person singular – התא (ata) or תא (at)[8] – through the potential to be subjected to the compromise of interpretation.

It is similar to the way Martin Buber perceives "presentness", where presence exists solely within the realm of relationship – the existence of everything, the existence of unity only through the in-betweens of the dialogical I and Thou. Bubber perceives the concept of oneness that is through twoness – a presentness which cannot be re-presented, where "nothing individual is real in itself" (Martin Buber 1964: 72; cf. Wolfson 1989: 430).

Compromise is manifested through interpretation, it exists through the interdependent valence of the dual play between homogeneous versus heterogeneous, where neither of the two elements reaches an absolute state. In the context of multiplicity, the notion of the absolute exists only at the ideational level, and through the fact of *being* of interpretation, the world is a compromise in itself.

The meaning resides solely through and from the duality of the beginning; hence, the world signifies under the sign of *Bet*, of 'two'. *Aleph*, representing the idea of 'one', it both *is* and *is not* within creation. It can be clothed in a vowel but lacks its own manifestation (its sound), differing from the other letters, except for *Ayin*, which behaves similarly, although it also used to have a sound. What remains unspoken remains in relation to essence, while what is spoken exists in relation to existence, where speech manifests towards perpetuity, being subject to interpretation.

Conclusions

Psalm 62:12 could be interpreted in a multifaceted manner, as evidenced by the various versions of its translations. The majority of translators preferred to add a temporal valence to the verse, translating the terms for תחַאַ (*ahat*) and םִיַתַּשׁ (*shtaim*) as 'once' and 'twice'. A more literal translation of the verse might reveal a more

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8   התא (ata) means 'you' (second person singular, masculine), and תא (at) means 'you' (second person singular, feminine).

elliptical meaning, reverberating a different level of intricacy in comprehending and interpreting the verse.

The notion of "one", being associated in Judaism with divinity, represents the source of everything, the origin, while the notion of "two" represents the beginning of everything, being the primordial elemental imprint of creation.

The act of interpretation in this context is inevitable within the essential framework of duality, and, as such, it is inevitably delineated by its (co)incidence with the notion of compromise.

While the psalmist could emphasize, in Psalm 62:12, the importance of divine message, or the appropriate behaviour of the righteous in the revelatory state, he may also refer to the inability of "two" to apprehend "one" or to the precondition of אַחַת (ahat) being perceived only through the two lenses of שְׁתַּיִם (shtaim).

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